

HOW CAN FACTS TRUMP IDEOLOGY?

BY GLEB TSIPURSKY

ABSTRACT: Arguing with people can be fun, but is it beneficial at changing people's minds? Somewhat counterintuitively, the psychology research suggests that arguments do not change the opinions of most people. Arguments may in fact backfire, meaning make people stick more strongly to their previous opinions, regardless of how inaccurate those opinions may be. To actually get people to update their beliefs in spite of their ideological commitments, we need to pursue more effective communication strategies. This article outlines some examples of such communication strategies, and provides case studies where conservative radio show hosts changed their minds based on new information.

KEYWORDS: FACTS; IDEOLOGY; COMMUNICATION; DEBATE; BACKFIRE EFFECT; PSYCHOLOGY

Introduction

I'm good at arguments, always have been. As a teenager, I remember myself being one of the best in my school at debates. Hanging out with other intellectually oriented kids in the math team, otherwise known as the "nerd club," we argued constantly. It was our way of competing, establishing dominance, and feeling good about ourselves. We took IQ tests and competed with each other for the highest score. We showed off in class by trying to give the best answers and nitpicking the answers given by other students. Sure, we got beaten up after school by the jocks, but we beat them in class and the teachers loved us. We weren't as cool as the jocks, but we were much smarter, and that's what really counted, right?

My experience matches that of many others who found pride and meaning in their high intelligence and debate skills. Yet how often do debates really convince people? I know that there were so many debates that I "won" by out-arguing the other person. However, it didn't result in that person changing their mind. My transformation came when I began reading the research on how to actually convince people to change their minds, which is when I started to realize the problem with debates. After reading the research, and practicing research-based strategies to convey information effectively, I got much better at helping people update their beliefs toward the truth. In fact, I've gone on talk shows with conservatives, and convinced them to change their minds on key issues, as this article describes.

Why We Believe In Lies

First, let's discuss why we believe in lies, before talking about how to get people oriented toward the truth. Donald Trump dropped a political bombshell by announcing his decision to dismiss James Comey on May 9, 2017. Trump explained the firing by saying that Comey was an incompetent leader of the FBI, who did a poor job in investigating Hillary Clinton's email scandal, and was undermining morale at the FBI as an agency through showboating. Democratic leaders, in turn, claimed that Trump fired Comey to prevent the FBI from digging deeper into how Trump and his associates might have colluded with Russia to subvert the US presidential election.

My interest lies less in the specifics of the accusation than with how people respond to such claims, and how one gets them to orient toward a more accurate evaluation of reality, which is the topic of this piece. It's so frustrating when you can't convince those you engage with to believe the facts, instead of sticking to false beliefs based on their ideology. This piece describes some of the reasons why people tend to believe in falsehoods, and how to use research-based strategies to get them to update their beliefs toward the truth.

How do you think Republicans would respond to Trump's explanations for firing Comey compared to the general population's responses? What percent would believe Trump's narrative, vs. the narrative of the Democrats, immediately after the firing, when no further information for the cause of the firing is available? Take a guess before reading further.

Now, read onward! A poll taken on May 10-11, 2017 by YouGov, a credible polling agency, shows that only 24 percent of Republicans believed that Trump's actions had to do with the FBI's investigation, compared to 47 percent of the total poll respondents. Most of you were probably not surprised, it's pretty intuitive that Republicans would give Trump more benefit of the doubt.

However, extensive evidence emerged over the following two weeks that Trump first pressured and then fired FBI Director James Comey to block the FBI's investigation of Trump's administration over possible collusion with Russia. Another poll by a credible agency, Rasmussen Reports, was released after these events. Take a guess at the changed percentage figures both for Republicans and the general population before reading onward.

The general population had a significant update, with 60 percent of all who took the poll now believing that the firing had to do with Comey's investigation of the administration. So we have about a 25 percent increase, from 47 percent to 60 percent, toward where the truth lies, according to the evidence. However, the same poll showed that still only 24 percent of Republicans believe that this firing had to do with Comey's investigation of the administration.

The evidence that emerged over these two weeks moved the general population to update their perspective to see Trump's actions as stemming from a desire to hinder the FBI's investigation. Why did the evidence fail to shift Republicans, and can we do anything to help truth trump politics?

Research on behavioral science shows that we prefer to believe whatever matches our ideological perspective, regardless of the facts (Kunda, 1990). For instance, when presented with accurate information that contradicts their current political perspective, people tend to reject this information and actually feel more affixed to their current political beliefs, a phenomenon known as the backfire effect (Nyhan & Reifler 2010). As a scholar of behavioral science and advocate for truth and reason, I have been working on developing research-based strategies to help people whose ideological motivations push them to believe falsehoods to instead update their beliefs toward the truth.

Strategies to Help Facts Trump Ideology

To test and refine these research-based strategies, I have gone on radio shows with radio hosts to talk about controversial topics. As an example, two days after Donald Trump fired FBI Director James Comey, I went on the conservative radio network 700WLW to have an interview with the well-known radio show host Scott Sloan (Interview 1). Sloan is known as a strong proponent of Christian and conservative values, and he had a friendly chat with Trump on his show during the election campaign.

Trump made a series of claims about why he chose to fire Comey, generally boiling down to Trump trying to ensure competent leadership of the FBI and concerns about what Trump alleged as Comey's incompetence in handling the investigation of Hillary Clinton's email server. By contrast, the Democratic leadership claimed that Trump fired Comey to prevent the latter from digging deeper into Trump's potential connections with Russia and to thwart allegations of collusion with Russia on hacking the US presidential election.

Instead of jumping into the thick of the Comey-Trump debate, at the start of our discussion I established a shared sense of goals for both of us. I noted that we all want our top investigative bodies to be headed by competent officials, and we also all want to ensure that these officials can freely investigate other branches of the government – including the presidential administration – without fear of retribution or obstruction of these investigations. Sloan agreed, establishing that common bond between us, making us allies trying to solve a common problem instead of potential enemies.

Following that, I appealed to his identity and emotions by establishing both of us as truth-oriented individuals. To do so, I talked about how all people are vulnerable to a thinking error known as the confirmation bias, a tendency of our minds to interpret new information in accordance with our past beliefs (Nickerson 1998). Indeed, only 24 percent of Republicans believe that Trump fired Comey in part to disrupt the Russia investigation, while 75 percent of Democrats believed that. Then I talked about how since Sloan and I had mutual shared goals both of ensuring competent leadership and of preventing obstruction, we needed to figure out effective ways of addressing the confirmation bias. One effective way to fight confirmation biases involves evaluating the opinions of people who have the most information as well as the political motivations to support one side, but who fail to do so or even support the other side. Sloan agreed that this seemed a reasonable way to address the confirmation bias.

Next, I pointed out that pretty much all Democratic members of Congress and a number of prominent Republicans expressed concerns over Comey's firing, such as Senator John McCain. Sloan countered that McCain is known as a maverick who occasionally breaks ranks, and is part of a broader group of Republicans who are not fond of Trump. In my response, I highlighted that plenty of other Republicans who generally toe the party line and even supported Trump actually came out to express concerns. For example, Senate Intelligence Chairman Richard Burr, a North Carolina Republican who heads the Senate's Russia investigation, stated that he was "troubled by the timing and reasoning" of Comey's firing, which "confuses an already difficult investigation for the Committee." So did a number of other influential Republican Senators, such as Bob Corker. He chairs the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and stated in response to Trump firing Comey that "It is essential that ongoing investigations are fulsome and free of political interference until their completion."

Altogether about 40 Republican members of Congress expressed concerns over Comey's firing, while virtually every Democrat called for an independent commission or special prosecutor to evaluate Comey's firing. This data on many of those in the know - federal lawmakers who had clear political motivations to align with Trump firing Comey and who instead broke ranks - provided strong evidence that the decision to fire Comey, more than anything else, was less about incompetence and more about the Russia investigation. After some further conversation, Sloan acknowledged the validity of this behavioral science-informed perspective and accepted that the evidence pointed against Trump's narrative.

When I share such conversations, many wonder whether they are a fluke, a one-time incident. Not so. In a previous conversation with Sloan, I used similar tactics to talk about the terrorist attack at Ohio State, where I teach (Interview 2). In that terrorist attack on November 2016, a Somali Muslim, Abdul Razak Ali Artan, rammed his car into a crowd of students and then knifed several people before being shot dead by a university policeman.

Predictably, conservatives reacted by condemning Muslims. For instance, the State Treasurer of Ohio and current Senate candidate, Josh Mandel, tweeted, lacking any evidence, "Looks like Radical Islamic terror came to my alma mater today." What we know is that Artan expressed fear of Islamophobia in an August interview with the Ohio State student newspaper. He also expressed anger in a Facebook post right before the attack, saying "I am sick and tired of seeing my fellow Muslim brothers and sisters being killed and tortured EVERYWHERE... I can't take it anymore." These statements were not characteristic of "Radical Islamic terror," but reflected fear and anger over the treatment of Muslims.

Like many conservatives, Sloan associated Muslims with terrorism and wanted to persecute them. I approached the ensuing discussion by considering his emotions and goals, meeting him where he was as opposed to where I would have liked him to be. Research suggests that conservatives value safety and security first and foremost, and their negative feelings toward Muslims result from perceptions of Muslims as threats to safety and security (Haidt 2012). As we began talking, I started by validating the host's emotions, saying it was natural and intuitive to feel anger and fear toward Muslims, and that I felt such emotions myself after the attack, thus creating an emotional bond between us. Then I talked about how research shows that sometimes such gut reactions lead us astray in pursuing safety and security (Arntz et al., 1995). For instance, our brains are wired to take shortcuts by stereotyping groups negatively based on the actions of one member of the group, a thinking error known as the Horns Effect (Burton et al., 2015).

We discussed how in 2015 there were seven terrorist acts in the United States, committed by a total of nine terrorists. Six of the nine were motivated, in some part, by Islamic beliefs. A 2011 Pew Research Center survey estimated that the United States had 1.8 million Muslim adults. Dividing this number by the six who committed terrorist acts gives you a one-in-300,000 chance that any Muslim you see would commit a terrorist act in a given year. That's like picking out a terrorist from the number of people in several football stadiums. So using "Muslim" as a filter for "terrorist" actually, wastes our precious resources dedicated to safety and security, and lets the real terrorists commit attacks.

I then discussed with Sloan how if we persecute Muslims, for instance through creating a Muslim registry or through heavy policing of Muslim neighborhoods, Muslim communities would be much less likely to help us root out potential terrorists in their midst. I concluded that, for the sake of making us safer, we shouldn't antagonize Muslim communities, which so far have been quite cooperative in addressing terror concerns, according to the FBI. Finally, I discussed how rhetoric critical of Muslims and anti-Muslim policies will prod more Muslims to become terrorists. For instance, BBC reports that terrorist groups have used Trump's rhetoric in their recruitment tapes. I also pointed out the specific comments made by Artan as evidence for this point.

This quite clearly makes us less safe and secure, I told Sloan, and so despite any negative feelings we may have toward Muslims, it's unwise to act on them. Just like if we hear criticism from our boss and want to scream in his or her face, it may not be the rational thing to do if we value our jobs. Just like we may want to take a second piece of chocolate cake, it may not be the rational thing to do if we value our health. We shouldn't go with our gut on policies and rhetoric toward Muslims if we value our security. In the end, Sloan agreed with my points and updated his views on Muslims - not because he felt like being nice and generous and kind toward Muslims, but because he valued his security and safety.

None of this implies that religion isn't a part of the problem. In addition to the six Muslims who committed terrorist acts in the United States in 2015, three terrorists were motivated by radical Christian and right-wing beliefs, especially the November 2015 shooting at a Planned Parenthood clinic in Colorado. Today, there are more radicals in Islam than in other religions, but the focus needs to be on radical behavior as much as religion itself.

Of course, I could have chosen to bring up my conviction that religion itself is an "alternative fact," both as a whole, and in its specific details. However, would this have been a productive use of my time on Sloan's show? It was my third interview with him, and I've had another since that conversation. By building a rapport, and not touching topics that would prevent me from being invited back on his show, I'm able to retain my channel to his conservative audience. Similarly, readers of this article may also want to consider which topics they should discuss with those who don't share their values in order to change hearts and minds—and what topics are better left for later, after more low-hanging fruits are picked.

Notably, Sloan retained information from our conversations and integrated them into his later commentary. For instance, in a subsequent show Sloan discussed how, statistically speaking, any given Muslim has an infinitesimally small chance of being a terrorist. Neither did Sloan feel that our conversation was a "gotcha" game, as he invited me to his show four times already.

Sloan is far from unique: A known Trump supporter (who has had Trump on his show) is prominent talk show host Bill Cunningham, ranked 27 among "Most Important Radio Show Talk Hosts" in America by Talkers Magazine, Cunningham's show invited me to talk about Trump's allegations that Barack Obama wiretapped Trump Tower in the 2016 presidential election (Interview 3).

While I intended to first connect emotionally and establish shared goals, unfortunately Cunningham did not offer me the time to do so. The show started off with a question that was somewhat unexpected for me: Cunningham asked me if it is true that the NSA tracks keywords that might cause it to passively surveil people. Certainly, I replied, based on my knowledge of the NSA's surveillance. Cunningham then asked whether Trump might then be accurate in his claim that he had been surveilled. Thinking fast, I replied that if Trump had claimed that the NSA passively surveilled him, Trump might well be correct - but that this would not be newsworthy as it was not what he said.

Specifically, I cited the details of Trump's tweets, such as "Terrible! Just found out that Obama had my 'wires tapped' in Trump Tower just before the victory. Nothing found. This is McCarthyism!" and also "How low has President Obama gone to tapp [sic] my phones during the very sacred election process. This is Nixon/Watergate. Bad (or sick) guy!" With the specific details of these tweets as the center of our discussion, I highlighted that Trump specifically called out Obama personally for wiretapping Trump Tower, and compared the situation to McCarthyism and Watergate. I pointed out to Cunningham that these comparisons and the active placing of blame on Obama resulted in the storm of media coverage, and Cunningham concurred.

I then used a strategy from behavioral science known as consider the alternative (Hirt & Markman 1995). I asked if Trump truly had evidence of Obama ordering Trump Tower wiretapped, would Trump have simply tweeted about it as he did, without providing that evidence? He is the president, after all, and can have access to any information he wants. Next, I asked Cunningham to imagine himself in Trump's place: what would he do if he suspected Obama wiretapped his headquarters in the election? Having thought about it, Cunningham stated that he would have gathered the FBI and NSA directors in his office, and get them to give any information they had about this matter. He would not have simply tweeted about it, and then provided no further information. Thus, by the end of the interview, although it got off to a rocky start, these behavioral science strategies resulted in Cunningham acknowledging that Trump behaved inappropriately in tweeting his allegations about Obama without providing any evidence. In all cases, it is highly likely that our conversation on these radio shows swayed some of their conservative audience to change their perspectives, as well, due to the credibility of Sloan and Cunningham among their listeners.

A Shared Orientation Toward the Truth: The Pro-Truth Pledge

You can use these same strategies in your everyday conversation with conservatives or liberals who let their ideological perspectives cloud their evaluation of reality. What it takes is establishing shared goals with the other person, engaging emotionally by calling for a mutual orientation toward truth, and incorporating into conversations information about how our minds are likely to lead us astray, and how to address these problems.

An excellent way to encourage a mutual orientation toward the truth and bridge the political divide is to get all participants in a conversation to take the Pro-Truth Pledge at ProTruthPledge.org, a recent behavioral science instrument that I and a group of other behavioral scientists helped create designed to reverse the tide of lies in our public sphere. Taking the

pledge is an especially effective mechanism of helping show that you yourself are oriented toward the truth above all. You can consider, as part of your own conversations, to tell the people you are talking with that you took the pledge, and invite them to take it as well, prior to talking about the topic at hand. You can also use the pledge situationally: suggest that the 12 behaviors of the pledge can guide a specific conversation, without asking the person to take the pledge. Here is what the pledge entails, and note that you are committing to earnest efforts to follow these 12 behaviors, rather than perfection: no one is perfect, but everyone can try.

I Pledge My Earnest Efforts To:

Share truth

- Verify: fact-check information to confirm it is true before accepting and sharing it;
- Balance: share the whole truth, even if some aspects do not support my opinion;
- Cite: share my sources so that others can verify my information; and
- Clarify: distinguish between my opinion and the facts.

Honor truth

- Acknowledge: acknowledge when others share true information, even when we disagree otherwise;
- Reevaluate: reevaluate if my information is challenged, retract it if I cannot verify it;
- Defend: defend others when they come under attack for sharing true information, even when we disagree otherwise; and
- Align: align my opinions and my actions with true information.

Encourage truth

- Fix: ask people to retract information that reliable sources have disproved even if they are my allies;
- Educate: compassionately inform those around me to stop using unreliable sources even if these sources support my opinion;
- Defer: recognize the opinions of experts as more likely to be accurate when the facts are disputed; and
- Celebrate: celebrate those who retract incorrect statements and update their beliefs toward the truth.

I had interviews on both conservative and liberal shows where the hosts took the pledge. Doing so then shaped our conversations in a highly productive manner oriented toward an accurate evaluation of reality (Interview 4 & Interview 5). Likewise, a number of pledge-takers have also exhibited more truth-oriented behavior as a result of taking the pledge.

For example, Michael Smith, a liberal candidate for Congress in Idaho who took the Pro-Truth Pledge, posted on his Facebook wall a screenshot of a tweet by Trump criticizing minority and disabled children. After being questioned on whether this was an actual tweet or photoshopped one, the candidate searched Trump's feed. He could not find the original tweet, and while Trump may have deleted that tweet, the candidate edited his own Facebook post to say that "Due to a Truth Pledge I have taken I have to say I have not been able to verify this post." He indicated that he would be more careful with future postings.

A US Army veteran, a member of the Special Operations community and advocate for reason, John Kirbow, took the pledge. He then wrote a blog post about how it impacted him. He noted

that “I’ve verbally or digitally passed on bad information numerous times, I am fairly sure, as a result of honest mistakes or lack of vigorous fact checking.” He described how after taking the pledge, he felt “an open commitment to a certain attitude” and, as a result, “think hard when I want to play an article or statistic which I’m not completely sold on.” Having taken it, he found that the Pro-Truth Pledge “really does seem to change one’s habits” and helped push him both to correct his own mistakes with an “attitude of humility and skepticism, and of honesty and moral sincerity.” He also encouraged “friends and peers to do so as well.”

I hope these strategies, together with taking and following the Pro-Truth Pledge at ProTruthPledge.org, empower you to help facts trump ideology.

Dr. Gleb Tsipursky is passionate about promoting truth-oriented behavior, rational thinking, and wise decision-making. He researches these topics as a professor at Ohio State University, and serves as the President of Intentional Insights, a nonprofit devoted to popularizing these topics. Its main current focus is the Pro-Truth Pledge, a project that aims to reverse the tide of lies and promote truth in public discourse through combining behavioral science and crowdsourcing. He authored a number of books, most notably The Truth Seeker’s Handbook: A Science-Based Guide and Find Your Purpose Using Science, and has a new book forthcoming in 2018, The Alternative to Alternative Facts: Fighting Post-Truth Politics with Behavioral Science. Pieces by him regularly come out in prominent venues such as Time, Scientific American, Psychology Today, The Conversation, Salon, Truthout, The Huffington Post and reason-oriented venues such as The Human Prospect, The Humanist, Skeptical Inquirer, Free Inquiry, American Atheist Magazine, Secular World, and Patheos. He has appeared as a guest on network TV, including affiliates of Fox and ABC, and radio stations such as NPR, WBAI (New York City), KGO (San Francisco), 700WLW (Cincinnati), KLRD (Dallas), AM980 (Canada), as well as reason-oriented podcasts, such as Ra-Men Podcast, The Scathing Atheist, Serious Inquiries Only, Sensibly Speaking, and The Humanist Hour. He is available to speak to reason-oriented groups through the American Humanist Association and Center for Inquiry Speakers’ Bureaus. To learn more, visit his website, GlebTsipursky.com, and email him at gleb (at) intentionalinsights (dot) org.

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Interview 5: http://www.spreaker.com/user/gleb_tsipursky/the-scathing-truth