

online sports betting pa

Information Overload

Cognitive biases greatly worsen the problem. In a set of groundbreaking studies in 1932, psychologist Frederic Bartlett told volunteers a Native American legend about a young man who hears war cries and, pursuing them, enters a dreamlike battle that eventually leads to his real death. Bartlett asked the volunteers, who were non-Native, to recall the rather confusing story at increasing intervals, from minutes to years later. He found that as time passed, the rememberers tended to distort the tale's culturally unfamiliar parts such that they were either lost to memory or transformed into more familiar things. We now know that our minds do this all the time: they adjust our understanding of new information so that it fits in with what we already know. One consequence of this so-called confirmation bias is that people often seek out, recall and understand information that best confirms what they already believe.

Making matters worse, search engines and social media platforms provide personalized recommendations based on the vast amounts of data they have about users' past preferences. They prioritize information in our feeds that we are most likely to agree with—no matter how fringe—and shield us from information that might change our minds. This makes us easy targets for polarization. Nir Grinberg and his co-workers at Northeastern University showed in 2019 that conservatives in the U.S. are more receptive to misinformation. But our own analysis of consumption of low-quality information on Twitter shows that the vulnerability applies to both sides of the political spectrum, and no one can fully avoid it. Even our ability to detect online manipulation is affected by our political bias, though not symmetrically: Republican users are more likely to mistake bots promoting conservative ideas for humans, whereas Democrats are more likely to mistake conservative human users for bots.

Such social conformity is pervasive. In a fascinating 2006 study involving 14,000 Web-based volunteers, Matthew Salganik, then at Columbia University, and his colleagues found that when people can see what music others are downloading, they end up downloading similar songs. Moreover, when people were isolated into "social" groups, in which they could see the preferences of others in their circle but had no information about outsiders, the choices of individual groups rapidly diverged. But the preferences of "nonsocial" groups, where no one knew about others' choices, stayed relatively stable. In other words, social groups create a pressure toward conformity so powerful that it can overcome individual preferences, and by amplifying random early differences, it can cause segregated groups to diverge to extremes.