Rational Choices
About Who To Trust

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Abstract

Online and offline we navigate complex worlds, where information is uncertain and insufficient to support choice strategies which aren't vulnerable to systematic error or exploitation. Within psychology, the "heuristics and biases" research programme has studied the psychological strategies that the human mind deploys to make choices under these conditions. I will argue that this research programme can only be properly understood if we rethink what rationality means. A bonus is that some seemingly perverse choices people make when deciding who to trust become easier to understand, and potentially easier to address.

At “Truth and Trust Online”, London 4-5 October 2019
https://truthandtrustonline.com/
W. Phillips Davison, “The Third-Person Effect in Communication,”
### Signal detection theory

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Claim:</th>
<th>You judge:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>True</td>
<td>“True”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>HIT!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>False</td>
<td>“False”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Miss</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>False alarm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Correct Rejection</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

See also
Why don’t we trust the experts?
http://tomstafford.staff.shef.ac.uk/?p=447

Brownfield site at James Watt Dock
cc-by-sa/2.0 - © Thomas Nugent - geograph.org.uk/p/4789305
Trust: targets + components

- Scientists: Expertise
- Local government: Perception Bias
- Property developers: Communication Bias
- Residents: Openness
- Friends & Family: Shared Values
- Local Media
Mean = 4.06
Predictors of trust

Even scientists aren’t trusted by everyone

....why?
### YouGov Survey Results

**Sample Size:** 1656 GB Adults  
**Fieldwork:** 13th - 14th June 2016

Thinking about the EU referendum, how much do you trust what the following types of people say whether we should leave or remain in the European Union?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>People from well-known businesses</th>
<th>Remain Supporters</th>
<th>Leave Supporters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>Do Not Trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People from well-known businesses</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academics</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People from well-known charities</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economists</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People from the Bank of England</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Think tanks (e.g. the IFS)</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Well known sportspeople</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Well known actors and entertainers</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People from international organisations (like the UN and IMF)</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior religious figures</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspaper journalists</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politicians from Britain</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political leaders of other countries</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Every rational reason has a bias
Irrational choices about trust?
Direct survey on advertising and personalisation

Aug 2018

~200 Facebook users & students

Part of ongoing work with

Dr Kate Dommett, University of Sheffield

and WhoTargetsMe

Asked about **general trust** in:

- Facebook
- Advertisers
- Political parties
- Civil service

Asked **specific trust** in:

- Keeping data secure
- Transparency
- Promoting public interest
- Promoting your interests
- How well regulated
Direct survey on advertising and personalisation
Russian trolls 'spreading discord' over vaccine safety online

Study discovered several accounts, now known to belong to the same Russian trolls who interfered in the US election, tweeting about vaccines

User-research / ethnography, June-August 2018
With parents of <6 years old, London
Who had received vaccine information online
Expressed some degree of “vaccine thoughtfulness”
~20 parents, 30 hours of audio, “digital diaries” observing social media use
Small qualitative study, unverified profiles
Users...actively research issues

Please do careful research on this. There are lots of side effects and efficacy seems very iffy.

I researched this:

My Daughter's year was the first year given this, so that made me very cautious.

I decided that she wasn't having sex at 12 years old, so I would wait and see how the introduction went.

I then read enough to think I'd made the right decision.

Wendy knew of a reaction in her Daughter's school.

Good luck - it's a difficult decision xx

I've done AT LEAST one hour of research a day for nine months after my Daughter's reactions to her 18 month shots. And then, an hour or so a week for 7 months after that, but that is only because I had a baby and didn't have the time that I used to.
Users...evaluate evidence quality

“This is the most accurate because it literally shows what can happen if you don’t vaccinate your children.”

“I don’t trust this as it is graphical and not factual.”
Mainstream parenting groups

Natural groups

Natural parenting groups

Users...navigate information socially

Health information travels as part of ‘identity packages’ on social media e.g. joining a group about natural birth increases the likelihood of seeing information about vaccine

“I am member of over 150 Facebook groups. A lot of them are selling and buying sites for kids clothes. Others are for gentle parenting or breastfeeding. The latter often includes posts about health issues.” Sylvia

“If you want to have a natural birth and join a group on Facebook to find out about it, you will probably see people in the group who are anti-vaccine. It’s like a pact, it all goes together. If you want to know about one thing, you will probably have to know about all the rest.” Irena
People online

Information seekers actively searching / researching weighing evidence / cues to reliability biased to see social context of information have *reasons* for accepting / rejecting information
Biases are unavoidable, universal, deal with risk, reasonable. Factcheckers should be optimistic, create clear signals, create consistent signals.

The Paradox of American Farmers and Climate Change

Greg Schlemmer, left, farmer near Fromberg, Mont., worked with Krist Walstad, NRCS district conservationist at the Joliet field office, on his no-till sugar beet cropping system and irrigation water management. Carbon County, Montana. June 2017.

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