

Pre-bunking

The First Line of Defence?

‘Your defences must therefore be as flexible and inventive as the arts you seek to undo.’

It's not every day that a Fellow from Churchill College quotes Severus Snape when discussing their work, but for Dr Sander van der Linden, Fellow in Psychological and Behavioural Sciences at Churchill College, it is entirely apt.

Sander came to Cambridge from Yale where he first became interested in the concept of disinformation. Before Donald Trump became president and took the phrase ‘fake news’ into the mainstream, disinformation was being used by many industries. We've all seen those 1950s adverts stating that ‘More Doctors Smoke Camels than any other cigarette’, with the assumption being that if the doctor, with all of his expertise, chose to smoke a particular brand, then it must be safe.

But it was the epidemic of fake news online that led Sander to ask, “what is the effect of misinformation on people's attitudes, and if it's harmful, what can we do to help prevent the spread of fake news?”

Alongside Jon Roozenbeek, a By-Fellow at Churchill College, Sander told us how they looked at epidemiology models of how a virus spreads, and saw that the way disinformation spreads on social networks was incredibly similar. ‘So it's not that much of a stretch to suggest that if people were inoculated it would halt the spread of disinformation more quickly. It would be more difficult to take hold, and it would be more difficult for the virus to replicate so to speak. Our big idea was that we need to move away from specific issues and inoculate people against the techniques that underlie all fake news.’

Over the course of a year, they looked at commonalities in fake news and identified a number of techniques used, such as polarising people, conspiratorial types of narrative, the use of emotion to persuade people, discrediting others, trolling and impersonation. Armed with his knowledge, they needed to test whether inoculation against a general technique could

give people the tools to identify fake news and become resistant to it.

But in what format could a vaccine against fake news even exist? The answer is in Bad News, an online game developed with Dutch media collective DROG, and design agency Gusmanson, that worked like a ‘vaccine’, increasing scepticism of fake news by giving people a ‘weak dose’ of the methods behind disinformation.

To date, half a million users have played the game, and more than 30,000 of those opted into the research. Recognisable as a well known social media site, players had to earn six badges, each reflecting a common strategy used by purveyors of fake news: impersonation, conspiracy, polarisation, discrediting sources, trolling and emotionally provocative content. They were required to stoke anger and fear by manipulating news and social media within the simulation: deploying twitter bots, photo-shopping evidence, and inciting conspiracy theories to attract followers – all while maintaining a ‘credibility score’ for persuasiveness. The results were positive: ‘We found that the game works regardless of age, education and ideology. We're hopeful that no matter what side someone is on, they can spot fake news more easily once they know about the techniques. Importantly, those who are the most susceptible seem to benefit the most from intervention.’

The success of the game and its results have further surprised Sander. Working with the UK Foreign Office, Bad News has already been translated into many languages, and WhatsApp have commissioned the researchers to create a new game for the messaging platform. Governments are taking the idea of a fake news vaccine seriously.

As the interview wraps up, we ask Sander if his work has made him more or less optimistic about the future. Can we really undo the harm that has already been done?



‘We're feeling positive based on these results. The post-truth era will require a multi-layered defence system. If you can, pre-bunk. If that's not possible, the second line of defence is real-time fact checking. If that doesn't work you can still debunk. There are multiple options.’

But pre-bunking should be the first line of defence. If people are immune to fake news, the virus can't spread.’

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