

Social media help you to believe what you want to believe

Description

default watermark

The Scottish referendum on independence has helped expose something we knew all along about what it is to have an opinion. Some of us are good at filtering out the evidence we would rather not see, and accepting only what supports our beliefs.

In an article in *The Times* yesterday, journalist Hugo Rifkind identified the current mood of the so-called â??cybernatsâ?• (i.e the Internet savvy nationalist campaigners) who apparently over estimated the support for independence amongst their fellow citizens: â??Via Facebook and Twitter we select the news we want to hear and ignore what we donâ??t, hardening our certainties under the carapace of certainties borrowed from others.â?•

Iâ??m the opposite of a cybernat, but in this past intense few weeks, with so much at stake, and rising anxiety, I too censored my information streams. You can do it easily with online sources. Admittedly with reluctance, I de-friended at least one friend on Facebook to arrest the flow of links to news clips that kept reminding me of the inevitability and good sense of separation from the UK. Fortunately I only discovered the tag #indyref on Twitter the day of the voting. I would have had to switch to a different hash tag to see the world as I wanted to see it.



How does opinion happen?

Lots of people have admitted to being persuaded by arguments for or against independence. But persuasion seems to depend on factors other than arguing around facts. Commentators have said you can divide the voters between those who went with their heads and those who listened to their hearts, i.e. those who submitted to logic (usually economic logic), and those who formed their opinions on the basis of how they felt.

But just about everything Iâ??ve been reading this past few years on emotion suggests this dichotomy is false. Logic doesnâ??t provide the best model for opinion formation. Neither does emotion.

Flaws in pure logic as the basis of opinion have been well aired. What of emotion? Rather than assume the absolute reality of emotional states I find it helpful now to think of the way we use emotional words as

- part of our armour for self validation
- a currency for negotiating solidarity within a group
- verbal offerings to persuade and cajole others into our camp
- weapons to cast others into outer darkness.

default watermark

Emotion words are potent. Where one party thinks to point out *risk* and *uncertainty* the other side sees an attempt to sow *fear*, or at least either party chooses their emotion words to deliver the effect they want. We use words like *risk*, *fear*, *certainty*, *freedom*, *hope*, *pride*, and *loyalty* as tools to build and test a view of the world as we think we would like to see it.

If we need to know how opinions are formed and circulated then we could do worse than consider the way language communities operate, on and offline.



default watermark

Notes

- Also see blog post: Emotional words and Accentuate the negative.
- Perhaps social media users can regulate their moods by altering their Facebook news feeds after all. See post Emotional contagion.
- The tagline of Rifkindâ??s opinion piece in *The Times* is â??The online Yes fanatics sought out only like-minded opinions â?? and refused to believe they could be heading for defeat.â?•
- Updating the standard lexicon of emotion words we would have to include â??gutted.â?•
- The first picture above is of the visitor centre (Gareth Hoskins Architects) on the site of the Battle of Culloden (1746) near Inverness.

Bibliography

- Lutz, Catherine. 1998. *Unnatural Emotions: Everyday Sentiments on a Micronesian Atoll and their Challenge to Western Theory*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press
- McFarland, K.T. 2014. Independence for Scotland? Itâ??s my heart vs. my head. *Fox News*, (17 September) http://www.foxnews.com/opinion/2014/09/17/independence-for-scotland-it-my-heart-vs-my-head/.
- Rifkind, Hugo. 2014. Sad cybernats are brought crashing to earth. *Times*, (September 20) http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/opinion/columnists/article4212612.ece, 24.

Category

1. Culture

Tags

1. emotion
2. mood

Date Created
September 21, 2014
Author
rcoyne99

default watermark