Systematic, Epistemically Rigorous Reasoning is Required for Determining Political Information Source Reliability. Heuristics & Open Vigilance Mechanisms Leave Us Vulnerable to Disinformation from Sources We Trust.

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Introduction

Many political issues are sufficiently complex that it is necessary to seek information (evidence, opinions, and arguments) from outside sources before reaching conclusions. However, the processes most use in determining information source reliability, including honesty, objectivity, and accuracy; are highly subject to error. Herein, it is argued that:

1. Judgment heuristics and three distinct open vigilance mechanisms have limited utility for determining the reliability of sources providing information regarding complex political issues.
2. All four approaches are highly subject to cognitive biases and to other forms of "mis-thinking."
3. People remain highly susceptible to misinformation and disinformation from sources providing information that aligns with one's existing political beliefs, and from sources that are trusted by one's associates.

Background

A rigorous, systematic, epistemically rational approach for determining which politicians and media organizations to trust for political information would include:

1. Continuously reminding oneself of the potential for one's own cognitively-biased thinking, and that the sources one pays attention to are not honest, objective, and accurate just because they reinforce one's existing political beliefs
2. Vetting sources by objectively and open-mindedly comparing the information provided by sources that reinforce one's existing views with the information provided by sources that do not, and by carefully comparing the issues and events each side covers in the first place
3. Reaching conclusions about source reliability that are treated as working hypotheses, as opposed to firmly established facts
4. Regularly re-evaluating source reliability, since source reliability can change

These steps rarely occur. Instead, most use:

1. Judgment heuristics, such as intuitions, "common sense," and "gut feelings"
2. Open vigilance mechanisms*, such as
   • *plausibility checking,* comparison of information provided to one's pre-existing views and knowledge
   • assessment of feedback on past performance
   • determination of goal alignment between one's goals and one's source's goals

* Many have directly or indirectly argued that humans are naturally proficient at determining whom to trust. For example, Mercier (*Not Born Yesterday,* 2020) has posited that people have multiple *open vigilance mechanisms* that allow them to accurately discern source reliability.

Argument

Judgment heuristics, plausibility checking, feedback assessment, and goal alignment determination are considered one at a time, in the context of five common complex political questions that all require evidence, opinions, and arguments from third party information sources to facilitate the drawing of accurate and objective conclusions:

1. Is a particular political leader guilty of the crime of which they are accused?
2. Will a proposed or implemented policy or law result in its intended benefit?
3. Which political party is most responsible for the state of the nation's economy?
4. Is a particular leader's claims about a scientific issue (such as climate change, or vaccine efficacy or safety) valid?
5. Is a particular military action, or support of a military action, justified?

Judgment Heuristics

Limitations associated with utilization of judgment heuristics for drawing conclusions (beliefs) regarding the reliability of information sources include:

1. Cognitive biases
   a. Myside bias (the tendency to base one's beliefs on one's existing political convictions, including party alignment)
   b. The tendency to base one's beliefs on the beliefs of one's associates.
2. Backward thinking (selection of evidence and arguments *after* belief formation)
3. Refusal to consider conflicting information

When judgment heuristics are utilized, assessments of source reliability are generally based on 1) the degree to which the source provides information that meshes well with one's existing political convictions and that supports one's favored political party, and 2) the degree to which the source is favored by one's associates.

Plausibility checking

The comparison of newly-provided information to one's existing beliefs and knowledge works well for the determination of information source reliability when one's existing beliefs and knowledge consist of verifiable facts. Generally, these issues are non-political, or if political, simple – such as receiving directions to a restaurant, when one already knows the restaurant's general vicinity.

However, when the existing beliefs and knowledge to which newly-provided information is compared consist of political beliefs, convictions, worldview, and political ideology, the utility of plausibility checking breaks down. Plausibility checking also breaks down when new information is tested against "facts and knowledge" that were themselves formed under the influence of cognitive biases.

Comparison of newly-provided information regarding each of the above five political questions with one's existing beliefs and knowledge, when such beliefs and knowledge include political beliefs, convictions (including party alignment), worldview, and political ideology; is essentially the definition of myside bias. Our determinations of source reliability utilizing plausibility checking are therefore highly subject to *myside bias.* They are also highly susceptible to the *tendency to base one's beliefs on the beliefs of one's associates.*

Feedback assessment

As people go about their daily lives and interact with others around them, they rapidly learn whose information and opinions they should trust and whose they should not, as well as who is honest and who is dishonest, based on rapid feedback. As an example, if you go to the bank to cash a $500 check, and the bank teller gives you five $100 bills, you receive immediate feedback that allows you to determine the reliability of the bank teller. However, for many matters that are not directly related to one's daily life and *that cannot be independently verified,* such as answers to the five complex political questions described above, useful feedback is limited by 1) time delay, and 2) same-source verification.

Time delay. When the outcome of a new policy or criminal investigation, or the validity of a claim (i.e. the answer to one of the five questions above) is only known years later, meaningful feedback often does not occur. By the time an outcome is known, the issue may be forgotten, since the media has in the interim provided hundreds of new issues to consider. In addition, one's original position on the issue may not be accurately remembered.

Same source verification. If in determining the reliability of a source providing political information that cannot be independently verified, one solicits feedback by later seeking information from the source that provided the original information (or from a separate source that almost always provide information that is substantially identical to that provided by the original source and that has a similar political bias), useful feedback has not been obtained. For example, if an information source that tends to favor a particular party states that a leader of the opposite party is likely guilty of a crime of which they are accused, and after an investigation, the same source or a source with similar political bias confirms guilt, legitimate feedback regarding source reliability has not occurred. As another example, if an information source that tends to favor a particular political party states that a policy proposed by the favored party will likely be effective, and the same source later states that the policy was, in fact, effective, useful feedback regarding source reliability again has not been procured.

The limitations associated with verifying source reliability by comparing information provided by the same source at two different points in time is readily apparent. Here, source reliability is generally inferred, based on the extent to which the source provides information that meshes with one's existing political leanings, and/or the extent to which one's associates deem the source reliable. Such source reliability judgments are therefore heavily influenced by cognitive biases such as myside bias, as well as the tendency to base one's beliefs on the beliefs of one's associates.

Goal alignment determination

If one's sole goal is truth discovery and a politician's goals in delivering information include 1) reelection, 2) supporting their party's agenda, and 3) advancing an ideological vision, goals are not in full alignment.

If one's sole goal is truth discovery and a media entity's goals include 1) building and maintaining a viewer base, 2) building and maintaining an advertiser base, and 3) furthering the general business interests, ideological objectives, and political objectives of the usually highly wealthy and powerful people who own and / or control it, goals are again not in alignment.

Few consider who owns and/or controls the sources they turn to for political information, and what their favored sources' goals are. In addition, the true goals of those controlling one's favored information sources are extremely difficult to discern.

Judgment heuristics are generally utilized, rendering determination of goal alignment highly susceptible to cognitive biases. Goal alignment is often inferred, and the person or entity that controls the information source is assumed to be "hands off" when a viewer is provided information that meshes with their existing political convictions, worldview and ideology; and when their associates turn to and trust the same sources.

Conclusion

• For complex political issues that require utilization of outside sources for the drawing of accurate conclusions, few use a rigorous, systematic, epistemically rational approach for verifying information source reliability (honesty, objectivity, and accuracy), such as the approach outlined in the Introduction. However, source reliability assessments utilizing judgment heuristics, plausibility checking, feedback assessment, and goal alignment determination all lead to cognitively biased reasoning.
• Source reliability is generally inferred, based on the extent to which sources deliver information that is coherent with one's existing political beliefs, convictions, worldview, and political ideology; based on the extent to which the information delivered is coherent with the beliefs of one's associates; and based on the extent to which one's associates consider the source reliable.
• We remain highly susceptible to misinformation and disinformation from sources providing information that aligns with our existing political beliefs, as well as from sources that are trusted by our associates.

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