

The Hidden Brain: How Our Unconscious Minds Elect Presidents, Control Markets, Wage Wars, and Save Our Lives

By Shankar Vedantam

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A Book Review by

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What gives us the split second reactions we need to survive driving our bike through city traffic or condemn us to death in a fire by driving us to follow the crowd through congested exits? Why would we sentence a black man with a dark complexion to death when we would give a black man with a lighter complexion life? *The Hidden Brain* looks at how emotional responses and cognitive processes outside our conscious awareness can control how we behave and react, if we live or die, if we are racist or not.

A national correspondent and columnist for the *Washington Post* Shankar Vedantam presents a collection of real life scenarios tied to research that illuminates unexpected behaviours. The strength of the book is in its exposition of interesting research contextualized through a rich narrative.

In the context of research and study in propaganda, this book ties directly to unconscious bias, “situations where peoples actions are at odds with their intentions” (2010: 4), and elucidates a number of scenarios in which propaganda and propagandists could manipulate behaviour based on underlying and unconscious attitudes, perceptions or neural physiology to reach desired outcomes. Relevant literature on unconscious bias tends to focus on endemic racism, the wage inequity of women or preferential/discriminatory hiring practices. This book covers those topics but also provides insight into other behaviours that are of significance to the study of propaganda.

Traditional discussion of unconscious bias is usually in the context of pervasive inculcation over time. This book provides examples of behaviours that exist outside this context. This is relevant to the study of propaganda as it characterizes a set of evolved behaviours that are hardwired in our brains and cut through higher-level cognitive processes. One telling experiment details that the honesty of individuals increases when a set of watching eyes is prominent on a poster hanging on the wall. Research has shown that the brain can unconsciously perceive watching eyes and cause people to behave in ways that they otherwise would not. Another example is that the infant brain is hardwired and is, by design, biased; it instinctively latches onto faces as a survival mechanism and as we age, the fusiform facial area of the brain becomes adept at interpreting facial data as social information.

The brain has difficulty quantitatively assessing the scope of large-scale events like massacres and genocides. It has instead evolved towards adapting to events that are local in scope and more personal, such as our children, a puppy, or the immediacy of someone drowning. These unconscious decisions can be perplexing if they are not in line with societal expectations:

[W]e assumed that fact-checking tall claims of politicians would set the record straight, and we were sure that good laws produced good behaviour. . . . We believed that if you educated people, and provided them with accurate information, and offered them the right incentives, and threatened them with suitable punishments . . . the errors would vanish. Bad outcomes had to be the product of stupidity, ignorance and bad judgment.

(2010: 5)

The book deals with portions of the Obama campaign for presidency and is revealing about related propaganda. It shows how the aim of motivating people led to very specific actions that sought to maximize the impact of messaging to swing voters. Experts worked proactively to disarm racial bias with the use of targeted television commercials to remind voters that the issue was not race but the quality of the candidate. From the perspective of propaganda, these specific messages dealt not with the political issues but instead with the framework people were using to make their voting decisions. Racial bias faced by the campaign was countered indirectly, by substituting an alternative, non-racial framework in its place. Organizers had to take into account the idea that racial bias is implicitly built into the minds of white voters on topics of unemployment, welfare, and families as whites were more likely to perceive blacks as being primary recipients of welfare, unemployment and having dysfunctional families. This meant that *any* message on welfare, unemployment and family, while it might be split from race on a conscious level, would still be intimately tied at an unconscious level.

To engineer a successful election of a Democratic candidate for president, the vote breakdown required the Obama campaign to win the black vote and split the white vote with the Republicans. Obama had to be seen as non-confrontational and non-threatening. An angry or confrontational black man would have alienated the white swing voters as it would have activated some of the voters' unconscious racial bias and would have jeopardized the election. The Obama campaign had to keep explicit discussions of race and bias out of the campaign, to the chagrin of people who felt that discussion of black civil rights and black history should have been more front and centre. To win the presidency the Obama campaign effectively steered a path through the inherent minefield of election engineering in such a way as to maximize propaganda impact. It actively reframed the debate to an advantageous position and avoided implicitly triggering frames that would not have been beneficial. The influence of linguist and cognitive scientist George Lakoff, is apparent here, with his insights into metaphors, framing, and the unconscious.

Other examples relevant to the study of propaganda and unconscious behaviours reinforced through inculcation and institutions are included. Vedantam shows how a combination of events like a woman losing her nagging doubts in the comforts of her church, and a police investigation which does not challenge the victim's assumptions, end in the false conviction of an innocent man. He walks us through how terrorists and cults use small group dynamics to ensure intense loyalty and fidelity through the meticulous use of social barriers. Long apprenticeships are used to enforce self-selection. Those with doubts or misgivings are self-

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selected over time in a process that excludes all but the most willing and dedicated. Large group dynamics is discussed in the context of the 9/11 events; how quickly people reacted to situations depended on the size of the group they were part of. The implicit need to build consensus fatally delayed the taking of action; only one person interviewed ran as soon as the plane hit the building.

This book contains references to interesting research and has poignant narratives; it provides a rich sampling of information and discussion on unconscious bias that would be of interest to those who study propaganda, its mode of influence, and its efficacy.

About the Reviewer

Fotis Xipolitakis (M.Sc. Computer Science, McGill University) has been working in the telecommunications field for 15 years. Fotis is interested in the study of media, journalism, propaganda and politics.

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