

The Power of Repetition Combined with Reward

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Introduction

Most of our habits and beliefs reveal the significance of repetition in human behavior. We are programmed to embed at both the physical and mental levels what we experience on a repeated basis. There are great advantages to this predisposition, and there are some very real disadvantages.

We all depend on the efficiency that routine provides. We do not have to search every time we encounter a situation or statement for the appropriate movements or thoughts in order to respond. Instead we go on automatic or at least semi-automatic. And a great deal of our lives are lived through these automatic responses – our ingrained habits and beliefs.

Research has shown that something in the neighborhood of 65 repetitions of the same thought or activity over a relatively short period of time is sufficient to move that idea or movement into the “automatic” or embedded category. And if we are “rewarded” physically or socially for our commitment to that idea or action, the embedding is that much more rapid and firm. Watch parents rewarding their children as they learn to walk, or throw a ball, or associate particular words with particular meanings. Repetition and reward are essential components in the learning/embedding process.

Most embedded actions/habits bring positive personal and social consequences, and most embedded ideas/beliefs reveal and confirm the socially approved “truth.” Our worldviews are composed of just such sets of embedded reactions and ideas. In large part, they define our interactive reality. And all it takes is sufficient repetition with related reward to activate and complete this process.

What Is the Problem?

Different groups within complex societies promote different actions and ideas as “normative,” “correct,” “real,” and “truthful.” The result is that the worldviews of these groups can compete with one another and provide the basis for argument, conflict, and violence. As a whole, a society can ascribe to the values of honesty, integrity and the rule of law. But for the subgroups of the poor or disadvantaged, lying and stealing can be “normative.” Gangs can replace the function of families and encourage killing members of other gangs merely as an initiation ritual. And between and among different complex societies, the

worldview differences can be so great that conflict leads to warfare. Worldview/belief differences among groups is one of the most significant social “diseases” affecting modern complex society – internally and externally. And repetition with reward is the main process that instills these mostly unexamined differences.

Unfortunately, conflicts among groups based on competing worldview/beliefs has become much more prevalent in the modern arena of the internet and uncontrolled social media. Rumors and their potential negative effects have been with humanity for a very long time, and authoritarian propaganda and institutional religion have successfully functioned to control and manipulate the beliefs and actions of citizens in complex societies since the origination of these societies. But the negative input of unregulated social media has vastly expanded the problem. Now it is possible to construct and introduce instantaneously and at global scale totally bogus claims that are targeted to specific groups and to see these claims go viral and be repeated millions of times within a few hours. Moreover, as the initial false claim spreads, it is easy for it to become greatly elaborated with the claims of additional supporting “facts.” In a short time, a full-blown conspiracy theory can be successfully introduced and promoted to and accepted by groups with weak critical thinking skills and/or underlying belief systems that accommodate the conspiracy based claims. And social media’s echo reward chamber favors rapid radicalization.

There is no better current example of this disinformation process than Trump’s “Big Lie” surrounding the 2020 U.S. Presidential election. Before the “Lie,” Trump had established the successful use of social media through Twitter and Facebook to control his conservative base, which the Republican Party came to rely upon. In addition, Trump’s control of the base together with his use of social media to target his “enemies” resulted in his control of the Republican Party. Using these social media tools, conspiracy mongering, and his control of the Party, Trump had successfully defeated two attempts to convict him after being impeached. So, long before the Big Lie Trump had successfully employed social media to deny accusations and to promote conspiracy theories to both defend himself and to obscure his pursuit of his personal interests.

For many months before the 2020 presidential election, Trump repeatedly claimed that if he did not win, the election had to have been rigged. As a populist politician, Trump employed repetition, repetition, repetition in making emotional appeals to a vulnerable group of citizens – the base – who were looking for a simple “answer” and who were frustrated by a pandemic, a long time “stalled” economy, and a “do nothing” government that was gridlocked in partisan politics. The powder keg was in place; it just needed to be lit.

So, when Trump lost to Biden, Trump refused to concede and hyped his claims of the election being illegitimate in his daily Twitter feed and before his rally crowds – repetition, repetition, repetition. The result was that a large proportion of the American population who had voted for Trump accepted his claim of election fraud, and they saw Trump – like themselves – as being a victim of a corrupt system. All of this was picked up and amplified by the conservative media, talk shows, blogs, and through the major social media platforms [Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, etc.]. Soon all kinds of other conspiracy elements were attached to Trump’s claim of a fraudulent election – especially the combination of pedophile Democrats and a vast deep state cabal consisting of any officials who were critical of Trump. In spite of all 60+ of his election fraud lawsuits being rejected by the state and federal courts for lack of evidence, Trump continued and continues to this day his claim that he won the 2020 election and that he expects to be reinstated as the legitimate President in the near future. And with his ongoing control of the Republican Party, Trump has managed to get away with promoting an insurrection at the nation’s capital before leaving office and to encourage highly dubious/unlawful audits of state election results supported by Republican dominated state legislatures. Instead of fading into the past, the Big Lie continues, surrounded by a large cluster of big and small lies and liars.

It seems that Trump has dwelt for so long in his own repeated fantasy of having won the 2020 election that he has convinced himself of his own claim. And with the Republican Party paralyzed by Trump’s command of their “base,” the Big Lie has metastasized to the point of potentially encouraging another insurrection and ultimately endangering American representative democracy itself.

Conclusion

Repetition is a source of positive commitment to ideas and actions upon which all humans and their societies depend. But repetition combined with in-group, social media, echo chamber approval/reward can also be a source of extremely negative social impacts. The Trump Big Lie phenomenon, which depends fundamentally on the embedding effects of repetition, exemplifies the fact that modern uncontrolled social media can be used to initiate, consolidate, direct and confirm false beliefs for a large group of ideologically and emotionally vulnerable citizens. In addition and very importantly, as occurred in this case, extremists among these believers can be encouraged to engage in actions – insurrection – that put society itself in jeopardy.

“What you see is what you get.” And repetition significantly influences what we see – for good and for ill. Uncontrolled social media is a vehicle for both results. The ultimate question is whether the benefits outweigh the risks. I think “Not.”