

EDITORIAL

World on edge as America's Last Horror Movie reaches climax

IT was supposed to be an American version of Game of Thrones: The House of Clinton versus the House of Bush, a presidential race in which two political dynasties would compete in a lively but civilised election campaign, focusing on government spending, tax rates, and the minimum wage. Boring (yawn).

Former secretary of state, New York senator and first lady Hillary Clinton did eventually win the Democratic presidential nomination, but only after a bitter primary fight with a 75-year-old self-proclaimed socialist, whose populist positions on issues such as trade were embraced by members of the party's progressive wing. And poor Jeb Bush, the former Florida governor and the son and brother of two recent presidents, had no chance of winning the GOP presidential nomination. He and other candidates who had enjoyed the support of their party's leaders and donors weren't able to withstand the political onslaught by Republican voters, angry at the political and economic elites. They discovered their champion in an unlikely choice: a billionaire and real estate magnate from New York who has never held public office and whose views on many issues ran contrary to traditional Republican positions.

There is no doubt that the meteoric rise of Donald J Trump – dismissed earlier by most pundits and politicians – would be recalled as one of the most stunning developments in American political history. At the minimum, it transformed the entire 2016 presidential race from the Game of Thrones into the Last Horror Movie; think Chucky versus Cruella. The entry of the former TV reality show host into the presidential race helped turn both the primaries and the general election into global media spectacles in which allegations of sexual harassment against Mr Trump and of political corruption against Mrs Clinton ended up dominating the agenda until the last days of the campaign, with most voters telling pollsters that they dislike both candidates and regard them as dishonest.

At the same time, the populist and nationalist positions advanced by Mr Trump amounted to a historic challenge to Washington's bi-partisan internationalist consensus, sending shock waves among America's allies around the world.

Mr Trump's electoral success as well as Senator Bernie Sanders' campaign should be placed in a wider political context. It's important to recognise that many Americans – following the 2008 financial crisis and the ensuing Great Recession, massive flows of immigration and growing economic-social inequalities – do want to revamp America's trade and immigration policies and to reassess its geo-strategic posture. That explains why the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement may not be approved by Congress.

Until a few days ago, most pollsters were predicting that Mrs Clinton would win the race and the hope in Washington and many world capitals was that the former secretary of state who is identified with the political establishment would defeat the rebellious Mr Trump. But now it seems that the race has been tightening and that Mrs Clinton could lose. The final decision would have to be made by Americans – and America's friends around the world can only hope that they would make the right choice. After all, the outcome of the election would have an impact not only on US interests but also on the state of the entire world.

THE BUSINESS TIMES

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SPH 6319-6319 | BT 6319-5360 | FAX: 6319-8278
Customer service: 6388-3838
www.business-times.com.sg
Press releases: btnews@sph.com.sg
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Online reviews: Trick that sways consumers

Research reveals how brain works to trust the advice from total strangers. BY GEMMA CALVERT

ONLINE reviews are now more important than ever before. According to a survey by search marketing company BrightLocal, 88 per cent of consumers trust online reviews as much as a personal recommendation and an astonishing 90 per cent state that they influence their buying decisions – despite the fact that most online reviews are posted by complete strangers.

In a new consumer research study, Ali Faraj-Rad, a fellow of the Institute on Asian Consumer Insight and assistant professor of marketing at the Nanyang Business School in Singapore, investigated exactly how online users process anonymous reviews. His research reveals a previously unknown cognitive phenomenon that influences whether or not users will accept a review as good advice, and act on it – something that both owners of review sites and online review users should be aware of.

SIMILAR IS GOOD

Current research on how humans process advice in face-to-face situations has shown that if a person receiving advice thinks they share similarities with the person giving it, the advice is more likely to be well received.

The theory is that similar people are more likely to share preferences and experiences, and the advice is considered more relevant. Also, people tend to like those whom they perceive as similar to themselves, therefore they are more likely to follow the advice.

These explanations are credible in face-to-face encounters, but when interactions are largely anonymous, how can people tell if others are similar to themselves? Usually, the only details available about a reviewer are arbitrary: age, location or username.

More often than not, reviews are completely anonymous – so the argument that people follow the advice of those they perceive as similar to themselves (and whom they might like to befriend) does not ring true in the digital space.

Yet the researchers noticed that seemingly arbitrary similarities (age or location of the reviewer relative to the reader) appeared to influence how a reviewer's advice was received. In their initial experiments, even when readers of online reviews shared only the same birth month as the reviewer, it still had a positive effect on how they interpreted the advice. This indicated that there was another underlying cognitive phenomenon at play.

For online reviews, it seems, it's not necessarily a conscious belief that advice from similar people is more valid but rather a subconscious feeling that advice from similar people feels right. This is an important distinction in an online setting because currently reviews are generally anonymous and no attempt is made to establish or reveal similarities between the reviewer and the reader.

TRICK OF THE MIND

The researchers also found that even something as random as being allocated to the same group was sufficient to influence the way in which reviewers' advice was perceived. Furthermore, when some of the participants were primed to think about the thoughts and motivations of others, or to "mentalise", another intriguing phenomenon was observed.

To investigate these rather unexpected behaviours, the researchers assigned paid volunteers into two arbitrary groups (C or E) and asked them to evaluate a camera based on an anonymous review – as if they were considering a purchase. Part way through, both groups were deliberately interrupted by another task.

Half the participants were asked to imagine and describe the thoughts and emotions of people performing a range of tasks, the other half were asked to simply describe their physical actions. Those describing thoughts and emotions were then deemed as primed for mentalising, and those who described actions



It's not necessarily a conscious belief that advice from similar people is more valid but rather a subconscious feeling that advice from similar people feels right. PHOTO: FREEIMAGES

were not. The participants were then instructed to continue with the product evaluation.

Analysis of the results confirmed the earlier findings: Respondents who were assigned to the same group as the reviewer perceived the anonymous individual as more similar to themselves than those who were assigned to a different group and, importantly, they were more likely to agree with the reviewer's advice about the camera. However, being assigned to the same group had no effect on other perceptions of the anonymous reviewer.

Interestingly, respondents who were primed for mentalising rated themselves as more certain of their answers than those who were not similarly primed. This shows that the feeling of certainty about one's choices, triggered by being primed to think about the

The research shows even seemingly unimportant similarities could influence buying decisions for completely unrelated products and services. The data could also have very important consequences for understanding online user behaviour.

emotions of others, appears to transfer to other, unrelated tasks.

The crucial finding from this research is that when users are online and none of the real-world signals that we rely on during face-to-face interactions to help us mentalise a reviewer's state of mind are available – such as facial expressions, tone of voice or gestures – we subconsciously accept any perceived similarities as a replacement. It's a trick of the mind. When the human element is removed from an advice exchange, the brain looks for something else, and these otherwise unrelated similarities seem to fill that gap.

IMPLICATIONS FOR REVIEW SITES

How can review sites use these insights to help readers identify reviewers that are more closely

suited or relevant to themselves? In other words, to tailor reviewers to specific readers?

Actively highlighting similarities between reviewers and readers, even if these similarities do not obviously apply to the context of the review, may prove highly effective. For example, it may seem odd to display what a reviewer's favourite movie is on a TripAdvisor hotel review, but as many TripAdvisor users link their accounts to Facebook and specify their favourite movies in their public profiles, it is not only straightforward to implement, but could also significantly boost the effectiveness of the review.

The research has also proved that persuasiveness persists in situations unrelated to the advice. So a person who is currently in a mentalising mindset – that is having read a review from a "similar" reviewer, acted on their advice and purchased a product – retains a feeling of "certainty" in terms of the decision they've made even after the transaction is complete.

USER BEHAVIOUR

Today, social networks are developing in-app shopping capabilities and, as the custodians of a vast user database, they could easily include shared preferences or similarities between reviewers and readers to differentiate their online shopping services from traditional online stores.

According to this new research, even seemingly unimportant similarities such as musicians and brands that people follow could influence buying decisions for completely unrelated products and services.

The data could also have very important consequences for understanding online user behaviour. Users in a state of high certainty could be more valuable to advertisers than other potential customers. If further studies confirm this, then bidding systems could be created so that brands could bid to show their ads to users who are likely to be in a heightened state of certainty.

In a world where the range of options is so extensive that it can give consumers choice paralysis, will advertisers pay more to target users who are primed for decisive action?

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COMMENTARY



By Frank Ching

China intends to control virtually the entire South China Sea, and if other countries cooperate, they can reap economic benefits.

Little that US can do about S-E Asia's pivot to China

CHINA'S chief official newspaper, the *People's Daily*, is gloating over the discomfort Washington finds itself in as Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte visited China and publicly said that he was leaving the United States, followed two weeks later by Malaysia's prime minister, Najib Razak, who also tightened relations with China, including signing security agreements.

On Nov 3, the paper published in its online edition a commentary headlined "State spokesman struggles with facts: As the US pivots to Asia, the region turns to China."

It focused on a State Department press briefing on Nov 1, in which the spokesman, John Kirby, was asked about the rebalance to the Asia-Pacific. Mr Kirby made two points:

"First, he said that the rebalance is not about China," the commentary reported. "Second, he argued against the idea that countries are turning away from the US and turning to China, saying that the idea 'is just not borne out by the facts.'"

"But," the commentary asserted, "the rebalance is about China, and the idea that more and more countries are turning away from the US and turning to China is completely borne out by the facts."

It pointed out that last year, the US put out a fact sheet entitled "Advancing the Rebalance to Asia and the Pacific" in which it listed "a stronger treaty alliance with the Philippines and a deeper partnership with Malaysia as two important accomplishments".

"One year later," it declared, "both countries have moved closer to China. For example, Philippine President Duterte's first non-Asean state visit was to China and the two sides have worked hard to warm relations. This does not mean that the US is out, but it does mean China is in."

It then cited the visit to China by Prime Minister Najib, who "signed numerous agreements with China, including security agreements".

Without claiming total victory, the commentary said: "The US may still be relevant, but so is China."

Interestingly, this was also Mr Kirby's theme. While he rejected the idea "that there's some sort of landslide movement towards China and away from the United States", he also asserted that "we have nothing to fear from the peaceful, productive rise of China, and we have nothing to fear from nations establishing better and warmer and more productive relationships with China".

Asked specifically about the agreements that Malaysia had signed with China, Mr Kirby replied in part: "Everywhere we go in the Asia-Pacific region, it's reiterated time and time again how important foreign leaders there view American presence, American economic assistance and participation in trade, as well as American leadership. So we don't view it, again, as a binary sort of equation, and we don't view it as a zero-sum game. The whole idea of the rebalance is to foster the kind of dialogue that you're starting to see happening. And so again, we welcome this."

For years, the countries of South-east Asia have been confronted with a situation where they are torn between relying on China for their economic well-being and on the US for their security. Now, it seems, some of them think that they can rely on China for their security as well. Since China is the one with whom they have conflicting maritime claims, it is difficult to see how this will work out in practice.

In the wake of the Duterte visit, China has allowed Filipino fishermen to return to Scarborough Shoal. Asked about this, a Chinese foreign ministry spokesman responded that the Chinese side continued to exercise "normal jur-

isdiction" over the area and "the situation there is and will remain unchanged". However, "proper arrangements" have been made in view of the improvement of relations following Mr Duterte's visit.

This means that China continues to reject Manila's territorial claim and it will continue to control the shoal as part of its territory. However, if the Philippines behaves itself, China will allow it to fish there. Otherwise, the fishermen can be barred at any time.

Similar treatment will no doubt be meted out to Malaysia and other claimant countries.

Non-claimant countries such as Singapore are expected to fall in line. China intends to control virtually the entire South China Sea, and for other countries cooperate, they can reap economic benefits. Otherwise, they will feel China's might, economic and military.

At this point, the US seems unsure how to proceed. Saying it approves of other countries' improved relations with China is putting the best face on a bad situation. However, if South-east Asian countries choose to make their peace with China, there is little that Washington can do.

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