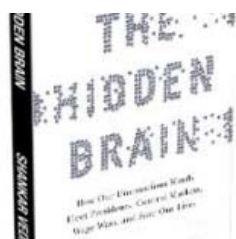


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Folks: what this article tells us is that prejudice is a powerful antidote to truth and facts. No wonder the ignorantsia tend to remain ignorant.

The Psychology of Political Slurs

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Why do candidates for political office sling mud? Well, because it works. Shankar Vedantam, author of *The Hidden Brain* and columnist for *Slate*, says that studies are now shedding light on exactly how it works and how political operatives get us to believe slurs about their opponents.

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BOB GARFIELD: This is On the Media. I'm Bob Garfield.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: And I'm Brooke Gladstone. Why do even the most brazenly scurrilous and toxic ads so often beguile the electorate? Is it due to the skill of the messenger or the avidity of the message?

In the months before the 2008 presidential election, a certain devilish question was making its way around the Internet and into the mainstream media.

MALE CORRESPONDENT: Is Obama the Antichrist? Seventy-three percent in the site's online poll say either yes or maybe.

MALE CORRESPONDENT: He literally could be a cosmic Antichrist figure.

MALE CORRESPONDENT: Obama Antichrist Internet traffic is up.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: But it turns out that the political operatives and propagandists may be only partly to blame for the popularity of those rumors. Shankar Vedantam, author of *The Hidden Brain* column in *Slate*, says several recent studies are shedding light on the role we ourselves play in shaping political slurs. Shankar, welcome to the show.

SHANKAR VEDANTAM: Thanks so much for having me, Brooke.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: So let's start with the study involving this "Obama as Antichrist" meme.

SHANKAR VEDANTAM: Sure. So this was research done by Tom Pyszczynski, a social psychologist. He asked volunteers to come and told them that he was giving them a creative writing exercise and asked them to write essays about people who were named either Brad Walker or Tyrone Walker. This has turned out to be a very effective way to prime people's unconscious racial attitudes, because Brad Walker is a typically white name and Tyrone Walker is a typically black name.

And then Pyszczynski presented his volunteers with a number of statements about the 2008 presidential candidates, including how, you know, there are various Internet sites that suggest the Antichrist will be a man in his forties, he will be of Muslim descent, people will flock to him and he will promise them false hope and world peace. He will not have any male descendants to pass on his name. And then he basically asked his volunteers whether they believed the claim that Obama was the Antichrist.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: We're talking about white volunteers, correct?

SHANKAR VEDANTAM: That is correct.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: And people who were asked to write about Tyrone Walker were more likely to believe the Antichrist charge than those who were asked to write about Brad.

SHANKAR VEDANTAM: And doing the reverse, priming them with the white prime, actually made them significantly less likely to buy the claim that Barack Obama was the Antichrist.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: So why would priming somebody to think about a black person increase the likelihood that you would believe that Obama is the Antichrist?

SHANKAR VEDANTAM: Most of us believe that we believe the things we do because we are either persuaded or unpersuaded by the information that comes to us. And what Pyszczynski's experiment and a number of others suggest is really it's the terrain of our own minds that determines whether we buy certain claims or we do not.

It turns out that if we can be prompted to think about some aspect of a person that makes that person different from us, we are instantly more likely to buy wildly inaccurate claims about that person.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: In other words, if the terrain of our brains is primed to think about otherness, we're more likely to believe bad things about the other?

SHANKAR VEDANTAM: That's exactly right, and it doesn't make a difference really how that otherness is defined. You can define it according to race. You can define it according to political allegiances. In other words, if you ask Democrats to think about a Republican and then present them with a wildly inaccurate claim about Republicans, they are much more likely to believe that claim.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: Okay, so bring us to this second group of researchers who tackled the question of otherness with some studies.

SHANKAR VEDANTAM: So what this other group of researchers basically did -

BROOKE GLADSTONE: Who were they?

SHANKAR VEDANTAM: Well, a group of researchers that were led by Spee Kosloff and Jeff Greenberg at the University of Arizona.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: Mm-hmm.

SHANKAR VEDANTAM: And in the 2008 election, Barack Obama was not the only candidate who had smears about him in general circulation. So did John McCain. The smears against John McCain, of course, were not race related, but they were age related, that McCain was mentally unfit to take office.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: How did they prime people to think about age?

SHANKAR VEDANTAM: All that they asked people to do was to write down their own age. This was a group of relatively young volunteers, and so the researchers knew that they were essentially activating concepts in their mind that reminded the volunteers that they were youthful.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: Anyone who is aware of these studies would conclude that, in politics, exploiting the worst fears of the electorate works.

SHANKAR VEDANTAM: You don't really need a psychological study to prove that, you know, nasty mudslinging campaigns work. I think what the new research is showing is how precisely they work. One of the intriguing things, for example, that they show is that when people have very strong ideological beliefs, in other words, if they are very strongly supportive of Obama or McCain, they were much less likely to be persuaded by these unconscious biases. It's the people in the middle, in many ways, who were more persuadable.

If you can trigger in these voters' minds a sense that there's something about this candidate that's different from you, those voters become much more likely to buy complete and blatant falsehoods about the candidate and then gravitate away from that candidate. And you can immediately see how insidious and subversive this is in an actual election campaign.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: How do you counter it?

SHANKAR VEDANTAM: Our typical reaction is to counter those falsehoods with facts. With the smear about Barack Obama, for example, not being born in the United States, there have been hundreds of websites that have tried to present Obama's birth certificate as an argument against those smears. And it turns out that those factual refutations have virtually no impact.

The things that turn out to be actually effective are the things that turn out to be effective in psychotherapy, which is you don't try and confront people's beliefs head on but you try and confront them sideways. You try and approach them from a point of view of giving them an alternate way to think about their own feelings, without deliberately or overtly denying the validity of those feelings.

A very successful campaign ad that countered the belief that Obama was going to place the interests of African-Americans ahead of the interests of whites was to have a white voter speaking directly into the camera and talking about how she had had a conversation with her mother about the time John Kennedy was running for president, and there were fears that he was going to place the interests of Catholics ahead of everyone else. But it turned out that that didn't happen, and the voter tells the camera, I've decided I'm going to give Barack Obama a chance.

What's more effective is to give people an alternate way to think about their mental terrain, without directly challenging them.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: Shankar, thank you very much.

SHANKAR VEDANTAM: Thanks so much for having me on, Brooke.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: Shankar Vedantam is a reporter for The Washington Post. He is also author of the book The Hidden Brain, and he writes The Hidden Brain column for Slate.