THE MARKETING SOCIETY

MORE THAN TWO SIDES TO AN ARGUMENT

The Behavioural Architects' Crawford Hollingworth and Liz Barker look at an increasingly divided world and ask, is it possible to build a better one using empathy and human connection?

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THERE ARE ALWAYS MORE THAN TWO SIDES TO AN ARGUMENT

By Crawford Hollingworth and Liz Barker, The Behavioural Architects

Challenging an entrenched, polarised world

Brexit, Trump, Covid-sceptics, Anti-vaxxers, Climate change deniers...the list of issues which generate highly polarised viewpoints is seemingly growing at an alarming rate. In the US, political polarisation and partisanship have been increasing over the last 50 years. In the UK too, the last four years since the EU referendum have also seen much greater polarisation. And the backlash of responses is also increasing, from cancel culture and no platform, to blocking on social media and even protests. False equivalence in the media is also adding to the fire.

Is it possible to build and shape a better world, with greater empathy and human connection? A world where we can at least maturely agree to disagree, or even find a sliver of common ground? And can brands have a role in helping to facilitate this?

We would very much hope for the answer to be YES. And behavioural science can help, firstly by explaining what gets in the way of empathy and connection and secondly, by providing the tools for anyone - from individuals to brands - to build more empathy.

A lack of empathy can be created by cognitive biases, often inherent to some degree within us.
In particular, we are drawn to overly simplistic two-sided framing - sometimes known as 'binary bias' - when we oversimplify large bodies of evidence into two categories. A simple example is how people often try to categorise foods such as chocolate or wine or butter. They're either categorically bad for you or categorically good for you, when in fact the answer is usually more complex.

Various scientists have noted this **tendency**; in 2004, evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins argued that humans often make an either-or classification for ease and reassurance. And in 2018, psychologists Mathew Fischer and Frank Keil conducted research into binary bias, asking people to evaluate a continuous range of data

points. They found people tended to sort into just two categories regardless of the strength of the data; meaning we have a tendency to create a dichotomy whether it exists or not. Rather like the stories we read as children with one-sided 'goodies' and 'baddies', we sort evidence into just two boxes - good, bad; for or against; positive or negative, when in fact the reality is much more nuanced due to the strength of each piece of evidence.

This tendency can also create an **illusion of false equivalence**, something for which the media is often criticised these days, whereby we are led to assume both 'sides' of the argument carry equal weight when in fact one side may be only a tiny minority view with a fragile evidence base. The discussion around climate change over the last few decades is a good example where critics have argued that climate change deniers have been given as much 'airtime' as climate change experts and activists.

With this understanding, behavioural science can provide effective tools to build and encourage greater empathy and reduce polarisation.

Amanda Ripley is an investigative journalist who has researched how the media could do a better job of presenting viewpoints and bringing people together. Through her research she has come to believe:

"There are ways to disrupt an intractable conflict… the goal is not to wash away the conflict; it's to help people wade in and out of the muck (and back in again) with their humanity intact.

[We] will continue to disagree, always; but with well-timed nudges we can help people regain their peripheral vision at the same time."

Amandy Ripley, journalist

One successful strategy, developed by Professor Peter Coleman, a psychologist at the Difficult Conversations Lab at Columbia University, helps two people with opposing views on an issue to find common ground by just tweaking how an issue is **framed** or presented. Behavioural scientists have found time and time again that how information is presented can influence our perceptions and ultimately our decision-making. The exact language used, emotion conveyed and how numbers are used all have a recognisable impact. Semantically, 'not more than 5% risk' is **subtly different to saying** 'as much as 5% risk'. Numerically speaking, discussing a potential surgery with a 5% risk of dying feels very different from presenting it as having a 95% chance of success.

Coleman has explored how rather than presenting an issue as merely two-sided, which actually promotes polarisation, an issue can be better communicated by framing it as multi-faceted, with not just two opposing angles, but three or four nuanced angles. *"Just providing the other side will only move people further away,"* Coleman says.

In his experiments, he invites people with opposing viewpoints on issues like abortion, euthanasia, gun control and the death penalty to come into the lab, pairing them up for a discussion. Before each pair come together for a 20 minute discussion, they are asked to read a short article about another divisive topic. There are three types of article - one which only presents one side of an argument, a second which presents 'both' sides of an issue and a third which presents the issue as complex, with many different viewpoints, nuances and shades of grey.

After reading the 'two-sided' article, 46% of discussants found they could write and sign a joint statement stating their shared views. However, 100% of those who had been primed by reading the third article beforehand found they could sign a joint statement. The pre-conversation reading made a difference.

"[People] don't solve the debate," Coleman says, "but they do have a more nuanced understanding and more willingness to continue the conversation."

Coleman highlights the implications of his findings for the society we live in today: "The more serious problems that our country is divided over today [...] are immensely complicated matters. Because this complexity makes us anxious we are often comforted by overly-simplistic solutions offered by members from our side."

Ripley also points to a slightly different strategy to promote complexity and nuance - moving away from a narrow two-sided frame and widening and broadening the issue. Topical examples today are whether we should still display old statues of historic figures who were involved in slavery, or equalising the distances for men and women in cross-country running. Both topics will generate extremely heated, divisive debates, but broadening the issue to "What is public art? What is included? How should we decide?" or "What part does cross-country running play in the athletic racing season? What athletic performance are we trying to assess?" is likely to lead to more


Amanda Ripley talks about respectful disagreement - Feb 2019

productive, constructive discussion. Talk to most people and you'll find they don't like deadlock and impasse; it makes them anxious and uncomfortable; no-one likes feeling negative emotions. So giving them an alternative path of discussion is immensely appealing.

Implications for brands

Brands need to be conscious of what division or polarisation they might create. The conversation around BLM and woke is illustrative as it is such a complex issue with so many factors to take in, yet brands continue to make faux-pas. After the 2020 riots so many brands and organisations felt a need to state their position in a very bland, black and white way and may have only embedded polarisation further. Brands can not only steer clear of muddy waters, but can actually help build greater empathy and reduce polarisation. What the research above shows is that brands do not
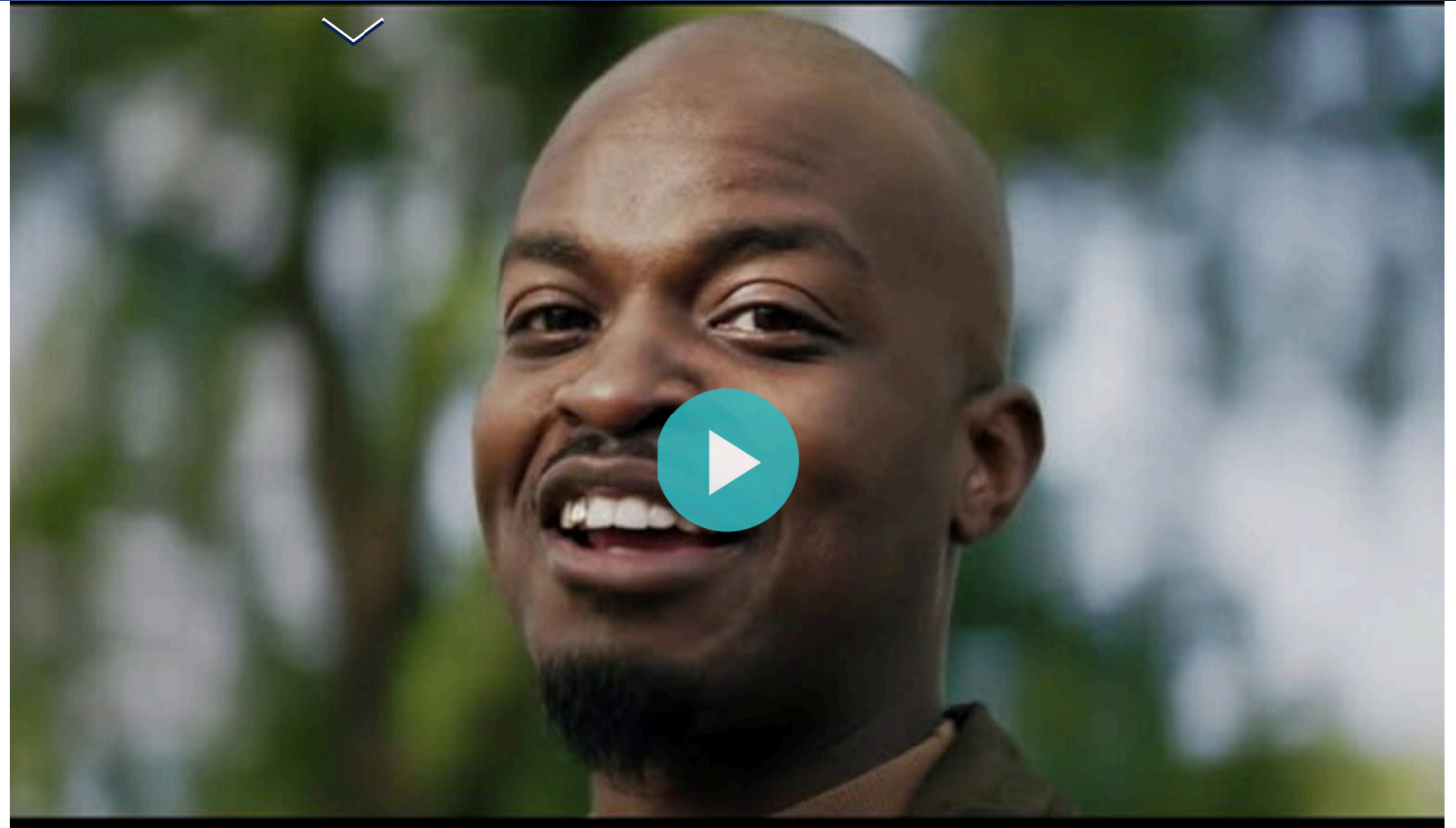
Coca-Cola and George the Poet present: Open Like Never Before

appeal and be accepted, but can actually benefit themselves and society by reframing issues with three or four angles, or broadening the issue. It gives marketers the tools to present more nuanced arguments with multiple sides. Coca-Cola succeeded in doing just that with its recent

into the politics of the pandemic succeeded in broadening the issue as to how we can collectively appreciate and imagine a better future.

Find out more about The Behavioural Architects