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# How Our Desires Shape Our Beliefs

*What determines whether you affect the way others think and behave or whether you are ignored?*

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Courtesy of Unsplash

People love propagating information and sharing opinions. You can see this online: every single day, four million new blogs are written, eighty million new Instagram photos are uploaded, and 616 million new tweets are released into cyberspace. It appears the opportunity to impart your knowledge to others is internally rewarding. A study conducted at Harvard University found that people were willing to forgo money so that their opinions would be broadcast to others. We are not talking about well-crafted insights here. These were people's opinions regarding mundane issues, like whether coffee is better than tea. A brain imaging scan showed that when people received the opportunity to communicate their opinions to others, their brain's reward center was strongly activated. We experience a burst of pleasure when we share our thoughts, and this drives us to communicate. It is a useful feature of our brain, because it ensures that knowledge, experience, and ideas do not get buried with the person who first had them, and that as a society we benefit from the products of many minds.

Of course, in order for that to happen, merely sharing is not enough. We need to cause a reaction—what Steve Jobs aptly referred to as making a “dent in the universe.” Each time we share our opinions and knowledge, it is with the intention of impacting others. Here is the problem, though: we approach this task from inside our own heads. When attempting to create impact, we first and foremost consider ourselves. We reflect on what is persuasive to us, our state of mind, our desires, and our goals. But if we want to affect the behaviors and beliefs of the person in front of us, we need to understand what goes on inside their head.

What determines whether you affect the way others think and behave or whether you are ignored? You may assume that numbers and statistics are what you need to change their point of view. As a scientist I certainly used to think so. Good data, coupled with logical thinking – that's bound to change minds, right? So I set out to test whether information alters people's beliefs. My colleagues and I conducted dozens of experiments to figure out what causes people to change their decisions, update their beliefs, and rewrite their memories. We peered into people's brains, recorded bodily responses, and documented behavior.

Well, you can imagine my dismay when I discovered that all these experiments pointed to the fact that people are not driven by facts. While people do adore data, hard facts are not enough to alter beliefs, and they are practically useless for

motivating action. Consider climate change: there are mountains of data indicating that humans play a role in warming the globe, yet approximately 50 percent of the world's population does not believe it. What about health? Hundreds of studies demonstrate that exercise is good for you and people believe this to be so, yet this knowledge fails miserably at getting many to step on a treadmill.

The problem with an approach that prioritizes information is that it ignores the core of what makes us human; our motives, our fears, our hopes, our desires, our prior beliefs. In fact, the tsunami of information we are receiving today can make us even less sensitive to data because we've become accustomed to finding support for absolutely anything we want to believe with a simple click of the mouse. Instead, our desires are what shape our beliefs; our need for agency, our craving to be right, a longing to feel part of a group. It is those motivations we need to tap into to make a change, whether within ourselves or in others.

*Excerpted from THE INFLUENTIAL MIND: What the Brain Reveals About Our Power to Change Others (Henry Holt; Hardcover; September 19, 2017).*

## PSYCHOLOGY, EMOTIONS



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– MARCUS AURELIUS

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