

What Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin and Viktor Orban Understand about your brain

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Lying and conspiratorial thinking might seem to be two different problems, but they turn out to be related. I study political rhetoric and have tried to understand how populist politicians use language to develop a cult-like following, divide nations, create culture wars and instill hatred. This pattern goes back to antiquity and is seen today in leaders including former President Donald Trump, Hungary's Viktor Orbán and Russia's Vladimir Putin. These leaders are capable of using words and speeches to whip people into such an emotional tempest that they will do things like march on the seat of Congress or invade a neighboring country.

What makes this kind of speech worrying is that politicians can also use rhetoric to influence the public's thoughts and beliefs, and spread lies and conspiracy theories. Those lies and conspiracy theories are stubbornly resistant to countervailing facts and can sow divisions that destabilize their own societies.

What I have found is that throughout history, speeches by dictators and autocrats have one thing in common: they use dehumanizing metaphors to instill and propagate hatred of others. And it's effective regardless of whether the people who hear this language are predisposed to jump to extreme conclusions. Once someone is tuned into these metaphors, their brain *actually changes* in ways that make them more likely to believe bigger lies, even conspiracy theories.

The first step to manipulating the minds of the public, or really the precondition, is that listeners need to be in the right emotional state. In order to hack into the minds of the public, people need to feel fear or uncertainty. The brain is designed to respond to fear in various ways, with its own in-built defense mechanisms which produce chemicals in the response pattern, such as cortisol and adrenaline. These chemical responses, which zip straight past our logical brains to our fight-or-flight reactions, are also activated by forms of language that instill fear.

In effect, metaphors bypass higher cognitive reasoning centers to make linkages that may not have a basis in reality. And when that happens, a person is less likely to notice the lie, because it "feels" right.

This pattern becomes more effective the more it is used. According to studies, the more these circuits are activated the more hardwired they become, until it becomes almost impossible to turn them off. What this means is these repetitive uses of dehumanizing metaphors are incredibly powerful to those brains already willing to hear them, because they direct their thoughts, making it easy to focus on certain things and ignore others.

The same is true of conspiracy theories. The neuroscientific research shows that people who believe them develop more rigid neural pathways, meaning they find it difficult to rethink situations once this pattern of thinking is established. This also means that if someone is already more susceptible to believing lies in the form of dehumanizing metaphors and this same person comes across a big lie or a conspiracy theory that fits into that well-trodden neural pathway, they are more likely to believe it and be influenced by it. This is how language that might seem like harmless hyperbole winds up literally changing the way people think. And once they think differently, they can act in ways that they might not have before.