

# The battle against cognitive bias




Humans often like taking shortcuts and mental shortcuts, known as heuristics, to help us make quick decisions when needed. Heuristics are basically rules of thumb or simplifying strategies for decision making. Although such shortcuts are helpful in many ways especially in coping with the complex environment surrounding our decisions, they can also be the cause of cognitive biases. In a way, cognitive biases are systematic errors in our thinking that can affect our judgements and decision making. It should be noted that cognitive bias is not the same as being prejudicial or unwilling to have an open mind. Cognitive biases are complex psychological phenomena and occur because of the limitations on our ability to properly deal with and process all the information that is available.

Researchers have so far identified about 180 cognitive biases. Some of them are more common than others, for instance, confirmation bias; anchoring bias; and attention bias. Confirmation bias is favouring information that conforms to our beliefs and disregarding or devaluing evidence that does not. Anchoring bias is a heavy reliance on the first piece of information we learn. Attention bias is paying attention to some things while ignoring others. All these biases have implications for information professionals as they affect how users use information sources and services.

Research has shown that cognitive biases affect how people look for and use information, whether it is health information or information related to holiday planning. Cognitive biases can result in selective searching, selective attention to information, selection interpretation of information, and misremembering. For instance, as a result of confirmation bias users might ignore alternative pieces of information and only use information that might not be necessarily trustworthy. Anchoring bias makes users apply the first thing they learn about something and not consider alternatives (eg using different keywords for searching).

Understanding of cognitive biases is more important now than ever given the current information environment which is full of fake news, misinformation and self-deception. Information professionals and librarians can play an active role in encouraging debiasing and in mitigating the impact of some of the cognitive biases. A first step for information professionals is to understand their own cognitive biases and to reflect on how these may impact their own practice. In developing an understanding of our own biases, we will be able to increase our capacity to mitigate against them for others.

To help users, information professionals can take several measures. Cognitive biases should be explained in information literacy training. Skills such as critical thinking, rational discourse and active open-mindedness should be promoted in training for information literacy. Providing alternative information sources and exposing users to alternatives, especially counter bias information can help them avoid biases and improve their perception and decision making.

It should be noted that simple awareness of the existence of cognitive biases does not necessarily result in avoiding them; education and practice are needed. Dialogues, reflection and deliberations should be included in group activities and communal programs to help people be exposed to different perspectives and understand various points of view. Information professionals should play a role in mitigating the negative effects of cognitive biases. 

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