



## Report

## Hope to be right: Biased information seeking following arbitrary and informed predictions

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## HIGHLIGHTS

- ▶ We test four explanations of selective exposure (SE) to confirming information.
- ▶ Information seeking was measured following predictions of varying arbitrariness.
- ▶ Participants engaged in SE following arbitrary and informed predictions.
- ▶ Anticipated positive affective reactions predicted information selections.
- ▶ The positive affect associated with being correct can drive post-prediction SE.

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## ABSTRACT

Five studies tested when and why individuals engage in confirmatory information searches (selective exposure) following predictions. Participants engaged in selective exposure following their own predictions, even when their predictions were completely arbitrary (Studies 1 and 3). The selective exposure was not simply the result of a cognitive bias tied to the salience of a prediction option (Study 2). Instead, it appears that making a prediction—regardless of how ill-informed a person is while making the prediction—can cause the person to anticipate enjoyment from being right (Studies 4 and 5) and to select new information consistent with that outcome. The results establish a desirability account that can explain post-prediction selective exposure effects even in cases when defense motivations, pre-existing differences, or positive-test strategies can be ruled out as explanations.

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## Introduction

People frequently make predictions about outcomes in various domains (e.g., business, sports, politics). By definition, people making predictions do not have complete knowledge and therefore cannot be certain of the outcome. Often, additional information that is potentially relevant to the prediction becomes available after the prediction is made but before the true outcome is learned. How people attend to and use this additional information is important because new information can shape confidence in one's prediction (Windschitl, Scherer, Smith, & Rose, 2012) and influence subsequent decision-making (e.g., Kray & Galinsky, 2003).

Research on post-choice information selection has shown that after making a choice between options—say Vacation A and Vacation B—people prefer to read information that supports their choice rather than conflicts with it (for reviews see Hart et al., 2009; Jonas,

Schulz-Hardt, Fischer, & Frey, 2006; Smith, Fabrigar, & Norris, 2008). Recent work from our lab revealed a related result for *post-prediction* information selection. That is, after having made a prediction about which of two outcomes/answers is correct, participants tended to select additional information that supported rather than conflicted with their prediction (Windschitl et al., 2012).

The studies in the present paper address the questions of when and why people exhibit a post-prediction information selection bias. Regarding the *when* question, we tested whether the amount of information that people have at the point of making a prediction moderates the extent to which they exhibit a bias in their post-prediction information selections. In an extreme case, we tested whether a purely arbitrary prediction triggers selective exposure. We believe that it is both interesting and important to examine how even highly arbitrary predictions might trigger a bias in subsequent information processing. People often appear to be willing to offer speculative predictions about events for which they know next to nothing, and we suspect they do this with the comfort of knowing it is “just a prediction” or “just a guess.” Yet, it is possible that even with arbitrary predictions, the act of picking one outcome rather than another

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(or others) could trigger changes in how subsequent information is searched and used.

By varying level-of-information and other task variables, our studies also provide answers to the *why* question. This paper discusses four main accounts for why people might exhibit a post-prediction selection bias. While all of these accounts are plausible under general conditions, they differ in what they posit regarding selection biases after people have made purely arbitrary predictions (and under other conditions that we explore).

Before discussing the particular accounts, we wish to comment on the relationship between information selection following choice (about which there is a large literature) and prediction. A prediction between possible outcomes is a type of choice, so there is clearly a degree of conceptual overlap for understanding post-choice and post-prediction information selection. This overlap is reflected in the discussion of accounts below. However, we note that the post-prediction context is importantly distinct from the general case of choice, because it involves uncertainty about an objectively correct answer. When a person searches for additional information after a prediction, there is an objective reality looming. That is, the person will learn that they made the right or wrong prediction, and this ultimate determination is not flexible. Biased information searching after a prediction cannot change whether the prediction is right or wrong. Alternatively, biased searching after other types of choices has the potential to shape the determination/evaluation of the outcome (e.g., finding additional fun things to do at the chosen rather than rejected vacation destination can lead one to conclude that a good choice was made). In short, it seems important to directly study post-prediction information selection, rather than merely assuming it is fully understood through studies that involve other forms of choice.<sup>1</sup>

#### Four accounts

##### *Defense motivation*

The *defense-motivation account* incorporates ideas from cognitive dissonance and related theories of defense motivation (Chen & Chaiken, 1999; Jonas et al., 2006) and is the primary account offered for post-choice selective exposure (Hart et al., 2009). Applied to a case of a non-arbitrary prediction, the account would posit that individuals engage in selective exposure as a means of reducing or avoiding concern that they might be wrong. After evaluating all available information and making a prediction, reading new information that conflicts with one's prediction could arouse dissonance or other negative affective responses, so that information is avoided.<sup>2</sup>

Whereas defense motivation could be compelling as an account for non-arbitrary predictions, what about entirely arbitrary predictions? Cognitive dissonance theory and various empirical findings suggest that when a strong external justification for a dissonance-provoking action is available, the justification is readily used to diffuse or avoid such dissonance (e.g., Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959; Joule & Azdia, 2003). Therefore, a defense motivation account might

suggest an absence of selective exposure after arbitrary predictions. More specifically, people would not feel threatened by disconfirming information, because they have a compelling justification for being wrong—the lack of information forced them to simply guess. Also, defense theorists often assume that commitment to a decision is important before dissonance triggers compensatory effects (Hart et al., 2009), but with an entirely arbitrary prediction, people would likely have little sense of commitment to a prediction. Nevertheless, in principle, one could argue that even after an entirely arbitrary prediction, people have a sense of concern or perhaps just a negative affective reaction when encountering information suggesting they might be wrong, motivating people to be biased in the information they select after the prediction. In short, whereas a classic interpretation of dissonance theory might suggest no selective exposure after arbitrary predictions, there are interpretations of what might still be called dissonance or defense accounts that could be used to explain the existence of selective exposure after even an arbitrary prediction.

##### *Pre-existing differences*

The *pre-existing differences account* posits a much different explanation. It starts with the assumption that, even at the start of a study, participants vary in their pre-existing beliefs, attitudes, and preferences. It further posits that participants' predictions and information selections within the study covary as a function of these pre-existing differences. Critically, then, this account suggests that making a prediction does not *cause* individuals to engage in selective exposure. Instead, selective-exposure effects (and predictions) are driven by pre-existing beliefs, attitudes, and/or preferences. For example, a person who likes mountains more than oceans might be more likely to predict that Colorado is rated as a more beautiful state than Florida and find information that highlights the natural beauty of Colorado's mountains more interesting and informative than information that highlights the natural beauty of Florida's beaches. Predicting Colorado would not cause the person to engage in selective exposure for Colorado, the person's existing preference would determine the prediction and information selection. The pre-existing differences account shares features with Chen and Risen's (2010) recent critique of cognitive dissonance explanations of spreading-of-alternatives effects, with Sears and Freedman's (1967) notion of de facto selective exposure, and with a biased-evaluation process described by Fischer, Jonas, Frey, and Schulz-Hardt (2005). The account is an important one because it challenges the routinely accepted idea that the choice process truly triggers post-choice selective exposure.

Whereas pre-existing differences could account for selective exposure that coincides with a non-arbitrary prediction, what about cases involving entirely arbitrary predictions? If the prediction is so arbitrary as to be essentially random (see Study 1), this means there is no systematic link between predictions and pre-existing differences or information selections. Consequently, the pre-existing differences account could not account for observed selective exposure effects after fully arbitrary predictions.

##### *Positive-testing*

The *positive-test account* posits that post-prediction selection biases reflect a generic cognitive strategy. This account is related to the positive-test strategy for hypothesis testing (see Klayman & Ha, 1987; Snyder & Swann, 1978). The account suggests that, after people make a prediction and while they are assessing whether their prediction was correct, they check on evidence that is consistent with it being correct (i.e., confirming evidence). As a generic process, this tendency/strategy to check on confirming evidence does not reflect nor is fueled by a motivation to be correct; it would presumably be applied to testing any focal hypothesis. Consequently, even if person's prediction was entirely arbitrary, this account still predicts that they

<sup>1</sup> A reviewer noted that previous studies have involved information selection following choices that could be characterized as somewhat arbitrary. We agree, but wish to note that our paradigm investigates arbitrary predictions in a way that other post-choice paradigms have not. Commonly used post-choice selective exposure paradigms, such as one in which respondents decide whether the contract of "Mr. Miller" should be extended, (Frey, 1981), are explicitly hypothetical and have no objectively correct response (see also Fischer, Greitemeyer, & Frey, 2008). Additionally, unlike the arbitrary predictions we solicit in some of our studies, participants in those post-choice paradigms are given substantial (albeit not definitive) information on which to make their initial choice.

<sup>2</sup> People might also process decision-inconsistent information in a defensive manner or assume the decision-inconsistent information is of low quality, which could fuel selective exposure effects (e.g., Fischer, Greitemeyer, & Frey, 2008).

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