Why whistleblowing doesn't come easily

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Research from our Department of Computer Science has found an explanation for why we often believe gossip more than our own personal experiences. The study also gives a biological explanation as to why it is so difficult for people to come forward as a whistleblower for their organisation.

Psychologists have long known that people persist in perpetuating incorrect social information, or gossip, even when there is evidence that shows the gossip is wrong. This instinct is even stronger when people are a part of an organisation or group with the same beliefs.

The study, published in the *Journal of Theoretical Biology*, used game theory to look at why this behaviour might be beneficial in evolutionary terms.

The researchers, from the University's Department of Computer

Science, created a computer model of a society where individuals can choose to cheat or play fair. Generally, gossiping helped the players identify which players not to trust.

However, researchers found that when an individual is unfairly identified as a cheater, the group overall sometimes did better when individuals "in the know" continued to spread the false information. This was because cooperating with a "known" cheater could also give an honest individual the wrong reputation.

An example of this is when people in the public eye are linked to a high profile crime, their reputation still suffers even if they are later proven to be innocent of any wrongdoing. The research suggests why it is so difficult for individuals to come forward as a whistleblower.

Paul Rauwolf, one of the study's authors, said: "It's generally very difficult to maintain cooperation between individuals but you can unite people by believing in a common truth, for example maintaining a company culture.

"The dark side to this is that individuals who act on a piece of information that goes against this perceived common truth pay a reputational cost, even if their information is correct.

"An example of this is when whistleblowers are vilified by colleagues, even when the evidence is in their favour.

"In circumstances where like-minded individuals work together, it is evolutionarily more beneficial for individuals to 'toe the party line'."

Dominic Mitchell, who co-authored the study, added: "You can't solve this problem by simply criminalising those who don't speak up against their organisation when something is wrong - this just raises the stakes

higher and makes it an even more stressful working culture in which to work.

"Instead organisations should try to lower the reputational cost to whistleblowers, acknowledging that this is a problem of human biology and introduce measures to make it easier to report problems rather than simply introducing criminal punishments to those who don't have the courage to go against their biology."

More information: The report is available online: opus.bath.ac.uk/42094/1/RauwolfMitchellBryson.pdf

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