



“WHAT UNITES US”: HOW THE ANGRY FEW HIJACK PUBLIC OPINION AND WHY INSTITUTIONS MUST INTERVENE TO SAVE DEMOCRACY

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Abstract

American president John F. Kennedy once said: “what unites us is greater than what divides us”. The rise of political polarization around the globe undermines this sentiment, leaving people feeling the exact opposite of united. Instead, the public falls in one of two camps: the “exhausted majority”, who want poisonous partisanship to end; and the “angry few,” who dominate public discourse and thus play an outsized role in shaping public opinion. This essay will describe the consequences of an exhausted majority on public opinion, social stability, and democracy itself. It will make the case that institutions must intervene to reinforce protections for individuals who represent the silent, tired majority: journalists, advocates, and government officials. The essay will conclude with tangible steps institutions including government, non-profits, and the private sector can take to elevate the voices of the exhausted majority and save democracy from the rancor that currently dominates public discourse.

Keywords: Public opinion; social media; political polarization; democratic institution.

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“We are all connected. What unites us is our
common humanity. (...) pain is pain – joy is joy.”
Desmond Tutu

INTRODUCTION

We may indeed be connected in the human experience -- in our pain; our joy. But in 2019, the global public sphere feels just the opposite: divided among ideological lines into increasingly atomized camps of customized suffering or invite-only celebration. Regardless of the commonality of living among one another, we no longer feel connected to each other. The rise of political polarization around the globe leaves people feeling distanced; split. This feeling of division leaves the public in one of two camps: the “exhausted majority”, who want poisonous partisanship to end; and the “angry few,” who dominate public discourse and thus play an outsized role in shaping public opinion.

This chapter will describe the consequences of an exhausted majority on public opinion, social stability, and democracy itself. It will make the case that institutions must intervene to reinforce protections for individuals who represent the silent, tired majority: journalists, advocates, and government officials. The chapter will conclude with tangible steps institutions including government, non-profits, and the private sector can take to elevate the voices of the exhausted majority and save democracy from the rancor that currently dominates public discourse.

WHERE WE ARE

In 2019, information is a weapon: strategically used to infect social media with false claims designed to undermine citizens’ sense of safety, of reality; to undermine the stability of democracy itself. This can be seen with the rise of the measles.

Before the advent of the measles vaccine, this highly contagious disease killed approximately 2.6 million people each year. Thanks to successful vaccination campaigns over several decades, cases of the measles plummeted worldwide. In 1999, the Centers for

Disease Control (CDC) saw 100 reported measles cases in the US. By the following year, they declared the United States had completely eradicated the disease.

But by 2007, the measles was back, and spreading farther by the year. Social media emerged in 2006 – Facebook, YouTube, followed by Twitter in 2008. With these tools, the fringe voices whom erroneously claimed the measles vaccine caused autism suddenly found the perfect platforms to amplify their distrust far and wide. It started slowly: by 2007, the CDC reported 72 cases (CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL, 2005). By 2014, this shot up to 840%, to 677 cases. In the first five months of 2019, the US already had 764 cases, an average of 152 cases per month. If the outbreak continues at this rate, 2019 will see 1,833 cases by the time the year is out. 90% of those who suffer from the disease will be children under the age of 5 (CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL, 2019). Infected children, especially if poor and malnourished, are also most likely to suffer from ear infections that can lead to deafness, eye conditions that lead to blindness (the disease remains the leading cause of childhood blindness to this day), or to be outright killed by the disease.

How did this happen? How could a country go from total eradication of a preventable disease to thousands of cases per year again?

It's not that people don't understand the information they're given about the safety of the vaccines. The vast majority of Americans – 90% – complete high school and the average American reads at the 8th grade level with a working vocabulary of approximately 10,000 words (the number of words considered to be necessary to achieve complete fluency for English as a foreign language learners).

Rather, the outbreak is caused by social-media trafficked fear. Stoked by misinformation spread like wildfire through platforms like Facebook and Twitter, anti-vaccinations fears balloon from isolated worriers to a full-fledged movement of parents who fear the measles vaccine might cause autism: a myth routinely debunked by scientists across the globe.

As a consequence of this fear, the so-called “anti-vax” movement parents don't allow their children to be vaccinated. And without the vaccinations, outbreaks inevitably ensue.

The real problem with the anti-vaccination movement is not just that they lead to physical suffering among thousands of children; it's that the misinformation behind the anti-vax movement is being intentionally enflamed.

Researchers determined that Russian trolls sowed anti-vax misinformation via social media starting in 2014 – the year measles cases began to skyrocket (KIRK, 2019). Their goal: to use vaccines “as a wedge issue” for the purposes of generating “social discord,” eroding trust of government institutions, and injecting fear into the minds of everyday Americans. It didn't take much effort; just effectively targeted effort, with only 50 Facebook pages generating almost half (46%) of the top 10,000 anti-vax posts during one studied six-month period (MADRIGAL, 2019).

What makes disinformation campaigns particularly worrisome is that while they may begin online, they don't stay online. As with the actual measles outbreak, hate crimes – enflamed and encouraged by disinformation campaigns online – have also increased dramatically in recent years. While no direct correlation between online hate speech and the physical world manifestation of hate speech has been proven, it is not difficult to see the patterns that link the two. Twitter, which has become increasingly effective at blocking speech that contains threats of violence stemming from terrorist-related accounts, has been virtually toothless when it comes to combatting the rising hateful and especially racist rhetoric on their platform.

Why? According to an anonymous Twitter official's report to *Vice* magazine, Twitter can't block white supremacist hate speech on their platform because it could inadvertently block many Republican politicians' accounts, perhaps even up to and including the American president, Donald Trump (COX, 2019). Regardless of whether one supports the president's politics, it is impossible to overlook his influence on Twitter and thus the public discourse. As an example, in the entirety of his predecessor, President Barack Obama's, eight-year term, he tweeted 352 times. President Donald Trump, since he was declared the winner of the 2016 election almost three years ago, has tweeted 10,674 times -- an average of 11 times per day.

This is problematic, because his tweets tend towards the negative or – worse -- the simply untrue. According to *The Washington Post*, the US president has made 12,019 false or misleading claims since taking office – approximately 13 false or misleading claims a day (KESSLER, 2019).

Take, for instance, climate change. President Trump has tweeted skeptically about the existence of climate change 118 times (MATTHEWS, 2017). A recent study by NBC News determined that 85% of Republicans reject the idea that climate change is a serious problem that requires action – a number that is unchanged since 1999, despite mounting evidence, public awareness, and lived climate catastrophes (CHINNI, 2018). Again, it's not possible to say with certainty that the Republican president has definitively influenced Republican voters on climate change, but it does not appear to be coincidence.

The most powerful official in the United States is actively undermining the truth. 90% of social media content is produced by just a handful of users – mostly the angriest, loudest voices on both the left and right. The public sphere seems to be devolving from Jürgen Habermas's hoped for “rational-critical debate” to instead a Wild West of lies, insults, and invective.

There is, however, good news. This rancor online is not how the majority of people actually feel. Indeed, only 10% of Twitter users dominate the platform, creating 80% of all tweets in the United States (WOJCIK, 2019). The remaining 90% of Twitter users average just about two tweets total and have somewhere in the neighborhood of 19 followers.

The disparity between the feeling that “everyone” spews anger online and the reality that only a small percentage of the population is responsible for the majority of content was confirmed by a recent report, “Hidden Tribes,” the product of a year-long study surveying over 8,000 Americans to better understand the current state of political polarization (HAWKINS, 2018). The report suggests that what may feel like a massive outpouring of negativity online actually stems from small factions on both the extreme right and far left who they diplomatically label the “Devoted Conservatives” – who make up just 6% of the American population -- and the “Progressive Activists” – who account for 8%. The report authors content that this combined 14% is responsible for the vast majority of partisan

fighting and political polarization online. I call them “the Angry Few.” According to the report authors, the Angry Few “comprise just 14% of the American population. (...) Yet it often feels as if our national conversation has become a shouting match between these two groups at the furthest ends of the spectrum” (HAWKINS, 2018).

Where does this leave the rest of us? According to the report, the bulk of Americans fall into the category of “the Exhausted Majority”: both conservatives and liberals who largely express a desire for compromise (65%) and feel, frankly, fed-up with the political divisiveness that dominates social media and the news. To put it in the words of a politically moderate woman in her 50’s:

“What would make me excited again is if people would just give somebody a chance. People should realize that we are all Americans. We have to accept what we have been given and we have to come together rather than divide, whether you are in agreement or not in agreement [with the choice of President or Congress]. In the past it’s never been this bad.” (54-year-old woman, New Jersey, USA as quoted in “Hidden tribes”).

Whether its spreading misinformation online that leads to real world outbreaks or outright fighting on Twitter, the angry few, in 2019, have come to dominate the public discourse to the point where more moderate, compromise-minded people are simply too tired to engage in public debates.

WHAT IT COSTS US

We lose something through our collective cognitive exhaustion. First, we lose trust. We lose our willingness to get to know others who may be different from us. According to a Pew Research Center study, by the mid 2010s, a third of Americans did not know a single one of their neighbors, a figure that’s only increasing with each passing decade (SMITH, 2010). And of those who did know their neighbors, only half felt they could trust them (GAO, 2016).

If we can’t even trust the people we share the same physical world with -- people who share the same frustrations about having to shovel their sidewalks after a snow storm and noisy parties down the street and who see their children board the same school bus together – it’s no wonder that people feel they can’t trust what’s real in the digital world: while the

majority of Americans expect to learn about the world from social media, more than half – 57% -- don't expect the information they see to be accurate (SCHMIDT, 2018).

Indeed, Americans increasingly distrust institutions, starting with the media. According to a Gallup poll, only 32% of Americans reported trusting the media – the lowest rate of trust expressed since polling began in 1997 (SWIFT, 2016). Distrust in government is also at new lows, with just 30% of Americans expressing that they trust their official institutions (RAINIE, 2019). And from the highest office in the land – the White House – less than 30% believed in not just what the president tweeted, but official communications (BUMP, 2019).

Second, we lose societal civility. Hate crimes have increased in the United States for three consecutive years, according to the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI). In New York City alone, hate crimes rose 67% in the first quarter of 2019. And the phenomenon is not unique to the United States. Anti-Muslim hate crimes skyrocketed in London by a stunning 593% in the aftermath of the Christchurch mosque shootings that claimed 50 Muslims lives (COLLINS, 2019). And violent anti-Semitic attacks rose across all parts of the globe in 2018 (TAMKIN, 2019).

Hate crimes are in a way one of the most extreme manifestations of incivility – the embodiment of people's inability to see one another as humans, as peers, as fellow countrymen and women. It is a manifestation of tribal thinking, separating oneself from those who are different genders, different religions, different ethnicities – just plain different. And this is deeply destructive to diverse democracies, which requires a degree of tolerance to be able to come to compromises on issues, regardless of one's race, religion, or ethnicity.

Third, there is also an increasing sense of personal suffering. Depression and suicide rates are on the rise worldwide, leading the World Health Organization to identify depression as the leading cause of disability worldwide (TAMKIN, 2018). Young people are especially affected by the most severe possible outcomes of depression, with suicide being the second leading cause of death among 15-29 year olds across the globe.

Finally, the greatest loss is perhaps the loss of the primacy of global democracy itself. According to Freedom House, democracies are in decline, worldwide – steadily decreasing now for the 13th consecutive year (DEMOCRACY IN RETREAT, 2019). As the report notes, this is a startling trajectory from which no country appears immune: “Most troublingly, even long-standing democracies have been shaken by populist political forces that reject basic principles like the separation of powers and target minorities for discriminatory treatment” (DEMOCRACY IN RETREAT, 2019). We are divided from our neighbors, we are divided from those who hold opposing beliefs, and we are divided within our nations.

WHAT WE CAN DO

And yet, there is hope. As the American president John F. Kennedy once famously noted, “what unites us is greater than what divides us”. There is cause to be optimistic that this path towards divisiveness and polarization can be reversed; that we can overcome our mistrust and fear and isolation and forge trust and civility anew. Here are just a few ways how.

First, we must invest in protecting journalism. In the US, the media is under near constant attack from the president, who has repeatedly called them an “enemy of the people.” Famously, he tweeted this yet again on the same day that CNN, one of the international news outlets who most frequently criticizes the president, had bombs sent to its headquarters in New York City (CROUCHER, 2018). Indeed, according to the freedom of the press watchdog organization the Committee to Protect Journalists, “since announcing his candidacy in the 2016 presidential elections to the end of his second year in office, U.S. President Donald Trump has sent 1,339 tweets about the media that were critical, insinuating, condemning, or threatening” (SUGARS, 2019).

Despite the American presidents’ penchant for deriding the news media, scientists have shown that people pay more attention to journalism than they may think they do. In one study published in the journal *Science*, investigators ran an experiment with 48 American news organizations from October 2013 through March 2016 (NETBURN, 2016). During this time frame, the news outlets clustered stories on one of 11 topics – for instance, immigration, education policy, race relations, and climate change – to see if their coordinated coverage influenced what was subsequently discussed on social media.

The size of the impact surprised the investigators – social media posts about the target content jumped 19% on average the day after the news was published, resulting in an increase of an additional 13,166 posts on that topic. Whether they're aware of it or not, people consuming the news do actually appear to integrate it into their thought processes to a certain degree, up to and including deciding to post about it on social media. This is both a testament to the power of journalism and a reason for both government and civil society to ensure the media is supported and protected.

Second, we must protect public officials and public service itself. In the United States, annual federal spending increased 600% between 1960 and 2012 (DILULIO, 2014). However, despite the additional programs and services the federal government has undertaken, the number of public servants employed to manage them has remained static. In other words, the volume of work generated by the federal government has increased dramatically, but the staff in place to actually *do* that work has remained essentially the same.

What this creates is overworked, overburdened, and ultimately, burnt-out civil servants. A recent poll noted that approximately 72% of federal workers were “disengaged” (WICHOWSKI, 2018). And this spells trouble for the health of government. As former CIA analyst Matthew Burton wrote:

“Elected officials don't run our government. Government employees do. Even if we elect good people to write good laws, those laws still need to be executed. If we want to change government, we can't ignore the bureaucrats who make it run. If reform-minded citizens shun their government, their ideals will be poorly represented where it matters most. And as they forego opportunities to serve the public, those positions of influence are necessarily filled by more and more people who don't give a damn about our cause.”

To ensure that democratic institutions who serve the people are well functioning, we must invest in empowering and supporting those who keep those institutions running. A well-run government requires officials remain productive and engaged. That doesn't happen without making public service and public servants a priority.

Third, we must embrace creative solutions to right our current societal wrongs. We must use every tool at our disposal to find ways to encourage unity, tolerance, and willingness to

listen – truly listen – to those who we are currently staunchly polarized against. In one particularly novel example of using creative means to encourage social change, a group of researchers worked with a Nigerian filmmaker to create two versions of a narrative (as opposed to documentary) film (DIZIKES, 2019). In one version there appears a five-minute scene in which the central character – a local activist – sets up a number so that community members can text to report instances of corruption. The other version didn't contain this scene.

In the communities where the film with the text-reporting scene was screened, locals reported corruption 70% more than in areas where the film was shown without this scene. This is evidence that even something like popular entertainment – in this case, a movie -- can be a powerful mechanism for encouraging local advocacy and social good.

“AND THEN YOU READ”

It is a natural human phenomenon to believe that we are alone in our experience of the world; that no one truly understands what we could be going through or why we believe what we believe. Yet to be part of a community, a society – a democracy – we must broaden our minds, open ourselves up to others' experiences, and reserve judging others who may not think as we do. As the American essayist James Baldwin so eloquently put it, “You think your pain and your heartbreak are unprecedented in the history of the world, but then you read.”

We are not alone in our experiences, and new technologies like social media can help us identify with others who, yes, have similar experiences. But we must work harder to also connect with others whose experiences are unfamiliar, foreign, and perhaps a little confusing at first. It is only through truly listening – with a pre-determined sense that you will suspend judgment and give others unlike oneself the benefit of the doubt – that we can once again find ways to compromise and break through the polarization that is currently dominating our world.

Through finding what unites us – our shared joys and pains, our habits and curiosities, our worries and fears – we can indeed overcome what divides us. It will take work. But it is work worth doing: for the sake of our personal sense of peace, our societal wellbeing, and our democratic ideals. We as a unified people are truly greater than the sum of our parts; we need only to step back from our individual cell phones and Twitter feeds to remind ourselves to engage with each other, and moreover, to do so with as much kindness as we can muster, for everyone we meet is fighting some fear of their own.

Because polarization is, at its core, fear: fear that those unlike ourselves will get something that we won't. As one last great American, Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., said, "darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that". It's not easy to fight our fears, but our welfare as nations – as humans – depends on our determination to do so.

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