



KNOWLEDGE RESIDES IN CONSENSUS: HOW EXTREMISTS TRY TO CONTROL TRUTH THROUGH SOCIAL DYNAMICS

Date: November 21, 2024

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KEY EVENTS

On November 21, 2024, Dr. J.M. Berger presented *Knowledge Resides in Consensus: How Extremists Try to Control Truth Through Social Dynamics* for this year's West Coast Security Conference. The presentation was followed by a question-and-answer period with questions from the audience and CASIS Vancouver executives. The key points discussed were how extremism can be defined as related to intergroup conflict, how the age of the internet has made it easier for extremist groups to push out propaganda and exploit microtargeting to flourish, and how extremism exploits a desire for cognitive security.

NATURE OF DISCUSSION

Dr. Berger's presentation covered the nature of individual and group thinking, discussing the idea that one's reality is formed by discourse communities, or ingroups. He described the evolution of media and its influence on the measurement of consensus in public opinion. Dr. Berger also offered points about journalistic practices and conveying science to the public in order to maintain accuracy and trust. Dr. Berger's presentation concluded with a discussion of how large social coalitions can promote prosocial views and values and potentially counter smaller extremist movements.

BACKGROUND

Presentation

Dr. Berger began his presentation discussing how the subjective experience of reality is socially constructed: people's perspectives are shaped by discourse

communities, meaning that their understanding of facts and values are developed in consultation with others. Dr. Berger said discourse community are ingroups, or the group with which an individual identifies. An outgroup, conversely, is a group of people who are excluded from the ingroup. Dr. Berger defined extremism as an ingroup the belief that one's ingroup cannot succeed or survive unless they are engaged in hostile action against an outgroup. He noted that people can be extremists without necessarily acting on their extremist views, and that violence is not the only form of extremist action.

Consensus reality is destabilized when conflict arises. When an ingroup is exposed to new information or a view of reality that conflicts with its existing consensus, it has two strategies to resolve the conflict. Therapy is a strategy to resolve conflicting consensuses by modifying the beliefs of people in the ingroup. Nihilation, in contrast, assigns people with a conflicting view to an inferior status. When the conflict occurs within the ingroup, dissenting members may be deemed ineligible for ingroup membership due to their challenge to the ingroup consensus. Ineligible ingroup members are at risk of being expelled from the ingroup and assigned to an outgroup. One way that ingroup members become ineligible is by interacting too closely with members of an outgroup, for instance by fraternizing or intermarrying. Using ISIS membership as an example, Dr. Berger said that they deem apostates to be Muslims who are fully disqualified from ingroup membership because they are so far removed from the extremist group's view of reality.

When extremists take hostile action against an outgroup, they seek to reduce the outgroup's challenge to the ingroup consensus.

Power in the media evolved from being highly centralized to decentralized and played a significant role in dissemination of extremist viewpoints, according to Dr. Berger. He stated that in the mid-late twentieth century, power was centralized in the media. Large companies would enforce self-regulation as they desired maximum engagement, creating an incentive to have a specific centralized view. The media monopoly meant that extremists were pushed to the margins as it was costly to produce and push out their own media. However, as the age of the internet arose, extremists gained easier means of publishing propaganda. Dr. Berger explained that there was a focus shift to engagement, allowing platforms to micro-target: aim at people who were susceptible to being obsessive over a product, or slicing audience ingroups into subcategories centered around identity types that target race, religion, and political preferences. Dr. Berger argued that political media takes on the power of an ingroup

consensus to validate people's belief. He pointed out that the U.S. is especially vulnerable because of their binary system, which can create an impression of equivalence between both sides of the political system. Similarly, polling questions can affect how people respond, to which Dr. Berger stressed that poll results can be misleading because of how questions are framed and how samples are chosen.

To address extremist tendencies, he suggested the building of coalitions that do therapy in the social constructivist sense; a big coalition is better than smaller socially fragmented groups that can be potentially harmful. Public displays of values that are prosocial and promote kindness can mitigate extremist tendencies, he added. He noted that only an ingroup can threaten an ingroup consensus, suggesting that people instinctively recognize the humanity of out-groups. Because of that, Dr. Berger said that extremism requires tremendous amount of cognitive labor to justify the dehumanization of an outgroup and to engage in hostile action. To close, he noted that extremism attracts people who crave cognitive closure, but it does not provide the closure it promises, leading adherents to keep escalating their engagement.

Question and Answer

What happens when the outgroup becomes the in-group as we may be experiencing currently over in our neighboring country? [The United States]

Dr. Berger reiterated that his recent work has intentionally defined extremism to include non-fringe movements that have the power to take over a state. He stated that the United States is heading in a different direction than an ideologically focused extremist regime like the Taliban, but rather was becoming a fascist regime, which uses extremism as a means of social control. A surge of anti-immigrant extremism and misogyny can be viewed as ideological. Dr. Berger suggested waiting and seeing how the upcoming administration reacts to both external and internal pushback and responses to their anticipated actions. He stated that visibility of human rights, consensus, and democracy will be helpful to the situation.

What do you think is an effective strategy for informing the public on this fundamental difference in the modern internet era — which is the lack of peer review to get published?

Dr. Berger noted that academics and policy circles typically understand how to treat academic information, but the public is typically not moved by this information in the same way, bringing up the example of vaccine popularity. He highlighted that there is a struggle of to discredit the idea of expertise and growing challenges about what qualifies one to give an informed opinion. He noted that in the U.S, there is an anti-elitist sentiment wherein elites are viewed as an outgroup, and solidifying the perception of an ingroup consensus is too difficult to navigate in the information environment. Dr. Berger highlighted that there is an ongoing process of media reckoning. He motioned towards a rethinking of journalistic practices and for journalists to be better educated on how science is conducted in order to relay that information to the public.

You were referring to how bad actors are manipulating consensus. Are state actors pushing narratives onto other states? If so, how would you characterize that impact on growth and spread of extremism?

State actors do play a big role, said Dr. Berger, but it is difficult to disentangle what outside influence from organic domestic trends. He said it's easy to blame social problems on outsiders, such as when police blame outside agitators for protests or riots. State-sponsored disinformation may echo or amplify homegrown sentiments, rather than creating them. Disinformation actors can also manipulate public opinion online by manipulating the appearance of consensus, for instance by generating likes and shares on content that originates domestically.

Given the clear negative outcomes of years of unregulated social media and internet-based publications, do you think an internet or social media regulatory apparatus should be implemented? Which department Should be responsible for it - if not, why?

Good faith regulation in the media is important, however mal-actors with political power threaten the integrity of the regulatory process.

KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION

- Extremism is defined as an orientation toward intergroup conflict. Ingroups are not monolithic and are divided into subgroups. When an ingroup experiences internal conflict, it may try to heal the divisions or to expel dissenting members.
- Decentralized media played a role in allowing for extremist media to become accessible by the public.

- Building large public social coalitions that do therapy in a manner of social constructivism can help mitigate socially fragmented groups.

FURTHER READING

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