

Information and Division In Contemporary American Society 2022

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Introduction

Humans are both socially and genetically disposed to support their social groups [sociobiology]. That is GOOD as it leads to cooperation and cohesion which ultimately contribute to species sustainability. So, What's the Problem?

Between these predispositions and social cohesion there must be a belief system that is shared among the group's members. This common belief system depends largely on a shared language which supports the communication of information, values, and ideas. So, language becomes the primary medium upon which belief is based, and the intensity of belief defines the degree of commitment to the group. It follows that who controls the language of information and communication controls belief. In simpler societies – where subgroups are limited, new information tends to be immediately shared and gets adjusted for its accuracy, as needed, in the interaction of the group members. Rumor can be a challenge in any group, but rumor is not intentional deceit, which can not be tolerated in smaller groups. And control of information by any individual or subgroup is rare in simpler societies – mostly bands and tribes.

Conditions in Modern Complex Societies

In complex societies, which are composed of many large and small subgroups, this self-adjusting condition with respect to information is not the case. In this context, if a subgroup can gain control of the information system – or a significant portion thereof, it can promote half truths and lies that are not immediately “tested” and adjusted for their accuracy by the larger group. In this way, beliefs can be promoted and sustained that are counter productive to supporting cohesion in the society as a whole. When this occurs, competing belief systems among subgroups can arise, and if these belief systems are significantly different and intensely held, they can threaten the integrity of the larger complex society.

Democratic complex societies that support free speech rights can easily lose control of the dissemination of reliable information in their technologically complex and diverse information systems. This is especially the case where some components of these information systems are unregulated and where some of the information purveying sources are more interested in economic gain than in information accuracy.

The American Particulars

Since the era of Ronald Reagan, American society has become more and more polarized: liberal vs. conservative; individual values vs. communal values; urban vs. rural; religious vs. secular orientation; hyper rich vs. economically suppressed; Democrat vs. Republican; globalist vs. isolationist; racial, ethnic and religious diversity vs. exclusivity; more educated vs. less well educated; climate change subscribers vs. deniers, etc. In behalf of his self-interests, Donald Trump has exacerbated and promoted these divisions, and Republicans and the Republican Party have allowed themselves to be cowed by Trump's attack mode and his control of what has become his political base.

Free Speech and a Free Press are important hallmarks of a democratic society, but, like any social value, they can be carried to an unproductive extreme. When freedom of any kind overwhelms the values of social obligation and responsibility, the resulting imbalance can destabilize society. This is especially true for organizations and corporations that disseminate information to the public on an immediate and massive scale. In the past, the broadcast media was held to standards that required confirmation of the accuracy of the information that they purveyed. If they did not meet these standards, their public licenses could be suspended or revoked. But with the advent of totally unregulated social media, the door has been opened for individuals, groups, and corporations to instantaneously offer sensational, unsubstantiated, and even entirely bogus information to a global public [promoting propaganda, disinformation, and outright lies].

Under this same umbrella and purely for financial gain, these same information purveyors can track the flow of their information releases so as to identify personal preferences and promote virtual subgroups of the populace to whom they can then feed "attractive" information while their advertisers push the sale of targeted goods and services. The overall effect of this process is to render it very easy to transform outright falsehoods into believed facts through the confirming effect of repetition and immediate confirmation from other "members" of a rapidly created, virtual subgroup. In this manner, sensational false information can take hold to the point where negative consequences result at a national scale. In addition, the total absence of information standards in the domain of social media can have negative repercussions in the mainstream broadcast media where some major networks significantly reduce their standards for accuracy.

Trump learned quickly to use social media to generate and sustain his base of supporters by constantly disseminating disinformation and lies and attacking any and all opponents. With the duplicity of the Republicans, he has managed to sustain his “Big Lie” that his loss in the 2020 presidential election was the result of election fraud by Democrats. This lie has been repeated so often in conservative social media – with its built-in, amplifying, echo chamber function – that even a year after Trump’s election loss three quarters of the Republican Party continue to believe it.

Polarization of a nation’s citizenry is dangerous in itself. A populist President using unregulated social media to promote himself and to create a massive following among an already polarized citizenry is potentially disastrous. It can lead to armed conflict, civil war, and the collapse of American democracy to be replaced by an authoritarian form of government.

Conclusion

As Americans, we must be aware that our innate predisposition as humans to commit to belief systems that support our social groups can be exploited to the detriment of our representative democracy under the “right” circumstances: 1) a polarized and frustrated citizenry, 2) a complex society where unregulated mass social media can be used to promote and sustain sensational falsehoods to a large, targeted subgroup, and 3) a self-serving, populist leader with authoritarian aspirations that takes advantage of these conditions. Under these circumstances, the beliefs of a significant portion of the American populace can be manipulated to support the anti-democratic goals of the populist. We can be grateful that Trump is not a strategic manipulator. But as the New Year of 2022 arises, he is still at IT, while the Republicans are struggling to grasp a modicum of integrity.

Fix It or Lose It!