Listening in the Age of Shouting

In the wake of the anniversary of the January 6 insurrection, we cannot help but wonder, *how did we ever let it get so far?*

Constant barrages of fear-mongering, misinformation, and willful ignorance plague social media platforms, creating superspreaders of falsehoods. Cooperation and consideration are traded for partisanship and intransigence. All the while, the voices of scientists and professionals fade from social media feeds in favor of "free speech."

Today, the U.S. is characterized by a pervasive political divide. A month before the 2020 presidential election, about 8 out of 10 people, both Democrats and Republicans, disagreed on core American values.[1] The result of this divide? An inability to unite during a crisis and an unwillingness to compromise on public policy.

With politics at the forefront of people's lives, the politicization of the COVID-19 pandemic magnified the spread of the disease, obscuring scientific information and obstructing the adoption of preventative measures.[2] Before long, Americans experienced setbacks in implementing life-saving measures, resulting in preventable deaths.

Never before has politics been so deeply ingrained into our psyche than social media, in sites serving as hosts for hostility. A study on social media consumption showed that Facebook's content-ranking algorithm increases polarization by limiting users' access

[1] Dimock, Michael, and Richard Wike. "America Is Exceptional in Its Political Divide." *The Pew Charitable Trusts*, 29 Mar. 2021, www.pewtrusts.org/en/trust/archive/winter-2021/america-is-exceptional-in-its-political-divide.
[2] "Researchers Find Broad Impacts from Political Polarization." *University of Wyoming*, 10 Feb. 2021, www.uwyo.edu/uw/news/2021/02/researchers-find-broad-impacts-from-political-polarization.html.

to news outlets with viewpoints contrary to their own,[3] creating online echo chambers (social media feeds that cycle only content aligning with one's beliefs). As algorithms mask users from alternate viewpoints, arguments dissolve into insults and threats are hurled.

But amid this 'pandemic of hate,' there is hope: the voices of students willing to participate in political discussion and add their dialogue. Young people, who have historically been more open-minded and tolerant of others[4] have the potential to create well-researched content. Young people, who are largely unwilling to commit to party labels,[5] are not limited to examining world issues through a single perspective. And young people, who are more politically knowledgeable than the previous generation,[6] can hold worthwhile discussions on real issues.

But all this is not possible without one thing: open-mindedness. That is, the desire to seek out new opinions, to expand our knowledge on the issues that plague us today, and to question *everything*. Sustained communication and new perspectives are crucial to changing mindsets.[7] At a time where biases are all the more pervasive, student journalists, the inquisitive young minds of our generation, must extend beyond individual algorithms and simply *listen*. We must unite social media accounts incorporating alternate viewpoints on the topics we post about. We must ensure that our sources are professionally-vetted.

[3] Barrett, Paul, et al. "How Tech Platforms Fuel U.S. Political Polarization and What Government Can Do about It." *Brookings*, 24 Sept. 2021, www.brookings.edu/blog/techtank/2021/09/27/how-tech-platforms-fuel-u-s-political-polarization-and-what-government-can-do-about-it/.

[4] Janmaat, Jan G., and Avril Keating. "Are Today's Youth More Tolerant? Trends in Tolerance among Young People in Britain." *Ethnicities*, vol. 19, no. 1, Feb. 2019, pp. 44–65, doi:10.1177/1468796817723682.

[5] "The New Era of Politics According to Gen Z." *Tallo*, 9 Apr. 2021, tallo.com/blog/politics-according-to-gen-z/.

[6] Abrams, Samuel J. "Gen Z Is Anything but Politically Ill-Informed." *American Council of Trustees and Alumni*, 7 May 2021, www.goacta.org/news-item/gen-z-is-anything-but-politically-ill-informed/.

[7] Reaume, Bridget. "Social Media, Perspective Taking, and the Lack of Meaningful Conversation." *Students 4 Social Change*, 19 Sept. 2018, students4sc.org/2018/09/19/social-media-perspective-taking-and-the-lack-of-meaningful-conversation/.

And most importantly, we must conduct conversations with the utmost respect for each other.

      For too long, we have stubbornly stuck with what aligned with our views, sharing only content that fits with our narratives and refusing to verify the information we are given. However, as our accounts become more open and diverse, so does our thinking. As our lives are increasingly digitized, we must pop our perfectly-curated bubbles to find truth, understanding, and a possibility for change.

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