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Why Differences in Opinion Will Save the World

In a world increasingly categorized and explained by scientific theories, one would think that life would follow the same pattern: a clear division between right and wrong, fact and fiction. However, if one thing is undeniably true, it is that it is never that simple when it comes to human morality. The impossibility of choosing one completely “correct” opinion on any given issue means that there will almost always be disagreement. However, there is a disastrous polarization that is greater than mere contention between sides, and it has emphasized sources of severe social conflict, such as political differences, conflicting views on laws, and controversial catastrophes. This polarization will only continue to grow if left untreated, festering into a beast that will permanently divide the world and prevent social change for the better. While most people seem to believe that the solution to mend the divide is to feverishly convert the disagreeers to their side, this has proven to be ineffective: everyone has different beliefs, morals, and experiences that shape their opinions and will not allow them to be swayed. Instead, it is time to change the approach. It is time to shift our perspective on social media, where a significant amount of our conversing takes place, and recognize it as the tool it can be in improving our communication. It is time to transform the way we communicate with others online into a way that values genuine connection and understanding rather than one driven by winning a debate. Although it may seem difficult and outlandish to fundamentally change the way we talk to others, especially those we disagree with, achieving communication on the internet that prioritizes listening over arguing and values everyone’s opinion is the key to depolarizing, and beginning to solve sources of social conflict.

Free communication is the first step to depolarizing sources of social conflict. It is undeniable that not everyone has the ability to communicate online openly and without restriction, which means that discussions online concerning social conflict are often lacking complete perspective and information. While the Founding Fathers could not have predicted the rise of the internet and social media over two centuries ago when writing the Constitution, they saw the importance of having the right to freedom of speech. If it was so essential as to be included in papers that are the backbone of our country, then it should be of utmost importance for us to achieve globally through unrestricted social media access. Of course, there are differences in what should be considered a fundamental right across countries, but discussion and cooperation will never suffer from allowing more people to freely participate in conversation. Although most would agree that it is a common goal for everyone to have access to unrestricted communication spaces online, some would point out that this is a difficult, perhaps impossible, goal to achieve. However, it is vital to keep pushing for uncensored internet globally, despite how lofty of a goal it is, because it is essential for ensuring that all people of different backgrounds are represented in discussions around social conflict. After all, it is not like this is a novel idea. Programs like the Open Technology Fund (OTF), for example, are actively promoting access to the internet, enhancing privacy, and spreading awareness on anti-observation measures in severely restricted countries, proving that this area has significant potential for success (“Supporting Internet Freedom Worldwide”). It is also important to remember that the fight for free communication will likely always be ongoing, but it is about consistency and patience, not perfection. Working towards free communication for everyone is the vital first move to depolarizing sources of social conflict.

Once free communication becomes more accessible to people everywhere, it is time to create a culture of peaceful communication online. Peaceful communication is one in which different opinions are valued and viewed as a way to learn more, not a way to win a debate, encouraging peacefulness and togetherness. Not only does peaceful communication allow us the chance to intimately learn about different cultures, establish empathy, and build personal connections, it teaches us the importance of interacting with people we disagree with. In a 2011 TED Talk “On Being Wrong,” Kathryn Schulz points out that we mostly live in a bubble in which we firmly believe that we are right, and those who disagree with us must be either ignorant, dumb, or evil (Schulz). However, this simply is not true; not everyone views the world the same way we do, which is for the best. Without the different and diverse perspectives other people bring, we would lack the creativity and innovation that has defined us as a species. Having honest conversations with those on the opposite side of us is essential to our ability to mend the polarization and begin change. Creating a culture of peaceful communication online is not necessarily something a company or government can enforce, so it is up to the people to take personal responsibility and be the change. It begins by listening with a truly open mind—something easier said than done, but virtually nothing important comes easily, anyways. It begins by genuinely trying to understand why someone may think that way. It begins by listening with empathy and not apathy. Peaceful communication can start in many different ways, but it all ends the same: with a conversation that has challenged your beliefs or given you a new, insightful perspective on someone you disagree with. Living in a small town, I have personally seen how it is nearly impossible to have a complete understanding regarding any situation without an honest discussion with someone who believes differently than you. It is essential to have the extra perspective to be well rounded and understanding. That being said, it is important

to acknowledge that some beliefs are widely viewed as morally wrong and should never be held, like racism or sexism. However, arguing is not how change is achieved. It is achieved by trying to understand their frame of mind and what led them to believe such things, and using that to try to grow their thinking. Some people will never change their perspectives on such things, but if even one person's beliefs can be changed, then we should use the most effective way of listening to do so. Peaceful communication that finds the value in interacting with people we disagree with is the essential next step to depolarizing sources of social conflict.

The combination of free and peaceful communication results in communication that is just: communication in which everyone is heard, and their opinions are valued, so depolarization and further achievement at last can occur. Achieving communication that values justice is essential to depolarizing sources of social conflict because it creates a space in which everyone's opinions are viewed as important and establishes empathy, so people can understand why the other side may feel that way, shortening the gap and defusing the intense feelings between different sides. One of the most important steps in establishing this depolarization is "intergroup contact" and "perspective taking" (De-Wit, Lee, et al.). By encouraging both contact between different groups and stepping into a different perspective, people are exposed to different beliefs than their own, leading to a greater, more informed knowledge base. Without just communication that prioritizes new, diverse perspectives, there will continue to be a severe gap of understanding. Furthermore, our goals do not have to stop at just depolarization of sources of social conflict. Following this mentality, we can eliminate sources of social conflict and begin to solve problems, using a way of communication that focuses on compromise and listening to all sides. Perhaps the greatest compromise of all was the creation of the very basis of the United States, the Constitution. Members fought bitterly over how states should be represented, but in the end they

were able to reach an understanding and created something that has been effective ever since because of their successful communication. Communication that values justice leads to greater understanding and willingness between sides, and therefore, a greater drive to find solutions and compromise. Some may consider that this is oversimplifying a much larger, more complicated issue, or that it is not practical for real life. To an extent, both are true: social conflict has many more pieces at play, and it is not realistic to expect every opinion to be acknowledged every time. However, everything involves communication, and if it is not done in the most effective or fair way possible, then it is not ideal communication. Changing the way we communicate in a more just way will be an improvement for every issue, no matter how small. Even though not everyone will be able to be heard every time, it is still a step in the right direction, and as long as we are moving forward, then there is progress. Overall, communication that values justice is essential to depolarizing and also beginning to solve those sources of social conflict.

Communication that emphasizes values of freedom, peace, and justice, is crucial to depolarizing sources of social conflict. However intimidating or difficult it may seem to change the way we communicate online, it is vital that we do so; polarization of sources of social conflict is a significant issue that needs to be addressed. It will require all of us to accept and adapt to a new, more effective way of talking to people we disagree with. It will not be accomplished easily, but it is a feat worth taking on for the well-being of people world-wide. It is not often that individuals get the chance to affect something as globally significant of an issue as social conflict, so it should be viewed as both a duty and an honor to do so in a world that seems to become increasingly more chaotic. While human morality may not be so easily pushed into categories of right and wrong, one thing is as close to fact as science gets: we are incredible at

overcoming challenges and surviving, despite the odds. And as long as we choose to adapt and embrace a new way of communication, we will thrive.

Works Cited

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