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It's Time to Defund Social Media

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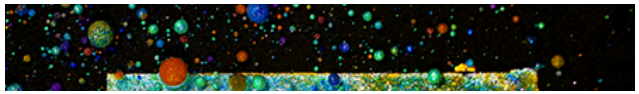
8-10 minutes

Political speech has always been tethered to public health. The mass protests that erupted following George Floyd's murder foreground this overlap: White supremacy is a public health disaster. Climate denialism and anti-vaxx activism similarly threaten the lives and safety of citizens around the globe. With Covid-19, the line between political speech and public health has eroded in even more distressing ways. Objects of science have, for many, been reduced to matters of opinion—or even outright conspiracy. In those cases, masks aren't just masks; they're symbols of oppression. Anthony Fauci isn't just the country's most prominent infectious disease expert; he's part of a Deep State cabal seeking to undermine the Trump administration from within. The virus itself isn't ripping through our neighborhoods, forcing cities like Houston to use backup morgue space; it's a hoax, or something the Democrats are exploiting to goose their election odds. The inability to cordon off the basic facts of public health from reactionary propaganda threatens people's lives. And, like everything in this godforsaken pandemic, things are on track to get much worse.



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While it might be tempting to blame the people who refuse to wear masks, or the politicians who would rather discuss individual rights than public health, or the president who would rather tweet about beans, our present crisis runs much deeper than any single individual or group. The structures and assumptions we take for granted are themselves part of the problem. Calls to defund the police provide a helpful analogue. Until we fundamentally reimagine what law enforcement means and does, lasting change will not be possible; all the injustice baked into the system will continue emerging from that system. Something similar could be said of social media: Until we fundamentally reimagine our information ecosystem and our respective roles within it, we'll keep repeating the same patterns over and over—not as a bug of the system, not as a feature of the system, but as the system itself.

One force we must confront is the attention economy, an incentive

structure designed to reward the most uncompromising, polarized, clickable minority. (Ironically, this minority is very often part of the white majority; see breathless, disproportionate coverage of white nationalists and supremacists following the 2016 election.) The resulting tyranny of the loudest presents an algorithmically-warped view of what's happening in the rest of the United States.

The debate around masks is a textbook example. The articles that trend and videos that go viral don't feature the majority of Americans who are perfectly fine wearing masks; who do so without once throwing a temper tantrum in Costco. Without question, there are people who cannot stop throwing temper tantrums in Costco; it's become its own genre of performance art. It's also true that many Republican politicians have flouted CDC guidance on masks or refused to issue mask mandates; Georgia governor Brian Kemp is even suing the city of Atlanta to *prevent* enforcement of a mandate. All of this is unquestionably dangerous; in a global pandemic, it doesn't take a very high percentage of the population to put everyone else at risk—with particularly dire consequences for Black and Latino communities, making mask recalcitrance (indeed, any Covid-related recalcitrance) as much a threat to civil rights as to public health. Still, it just isn't the case that, across the country, everyone is screaming at each other about masks. Most people shut up and wear them.

If we could emphasize the common-sense consensus on masks, it wouldn't just affirm our faith in humanity. (Though it certainly would do that: I'd spend hours on a YouTube channel dedicated to groups of people being reasonable.) It would also undercut the attention economy, in two ways.

First, it would minimize the incentive to be an asshole. If you're not

rewarding people with clicks and likes for antagonistic behaviors, there's less reason for them to keep doing it. This is a dynamic as old as trolldom. As long as something generates capital—whether economic or social—there's no reason to stop. In fact, one's livelihood might depend on keeping it up, and doing it even worse the next time.

Second, foregrounding the good-faith majority short-circuits the amplification feedback loops that normalize harm. I made this argument back in April in response to the anti-quarantine protests: when you frame a fringe movement as a mainstream one, it has a funny tendency to become exactly that. In the case of masks, propagating the anti-maskers' arguments, even to condemn them, risks spreading those arguments to even more people who might be sympathetic. At the very least, it muddies the issue—if so many people are fighting about masks, does that mean there's something here to fight about?

Another structural cause of our informational woes is embedded in straightforward-seeming ways to fix them. One of the most common is the assumption that calling attention to a harm will help to mitigate it; this is sometimes referred to as the "sunlight disinfects" model of media. All we need to do is show that the bad thing is happening—that Karen is at it again—and let the marketplace of ideas, that great Costco in the sky, handle the rest. People will use their critical thinking skills to compare being a Karen with not being a Karen, and the result will be fewer Karens. The problem is, the people most likely to arrive at this conclusion are the ones who already agree. Sharing mask freakout videos, or other content spotlighting anti-maskers, still amplifies their messages, however, looping us right back to all the ways the attention economy incentivizes the tyranny of the loudest. Such a system isn't just

good for Karens; it was *built* for Karens.

Fact-checking is another idea that sounds good on paper but is quite tricky in practice. Many approach the spread of false or misleading information as a case of people not having all the facts. If we only said the facts more loudly, we could stop the flow of bad information. In reality, the people who see masks as an encroachment on their rights, who think the threat of the virus has been overblown, or that Anthony Fauci is actually Bill Gates in a George Soros mask, don't arrive at those conclusions because they're low-information rubes. They're often steeped in information. That information, however, is filtered through what Ryan Milner and I call deep memetic frames: sense-making apparatuses that structure how people see the world, and the ways that they respond to it.

As Milner and I illustrate throughout our book, fact checks aimed at deep memetic frames rarely have the intended effect—you can trace this from the Satanic Panics of the 1980s and 1990s to QAnon. The precise reasons why are complicated; research around the efficacy of fact checking is, let's say, mixed. What is clear is that throwing facts at falsehood doesn't magically change hearts and minds. If it did, we wouldn't be in this mess.

So what's the best way forward? How do we avoid pushing an already terrible situation to an even worse place? The answer is fundamental structural change. We need to reimagine what our networks can and should be. We need to put justice over profits. We need to defund social media. Individual people can't do that on their own, of course. Even journalists are limited in the effects they can personally have; everyone's a dollar sign to someone up the chain. Still, by identifying the systems we're all embedded within

and considering how those systems are fundamentally part of our problems, we can make choices—about the things we publicize, who we share them with, how we choose to frame them—that, at the very least, actively resist information dysfunction, rather than greasing its wheels.

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