

Richard Helppie's
THE COMMON BRIDGE

The Monthly Magazine

Issue 1



The Reckoning

In This Issue

Iryna Stavchuk

Marc Weitzmann

Matt Taibbi

Jonathan Haidt



Welcome to The Common Bridge Magazine

A WORD FROM
THE PUBLISHER

Welcome to the first issue of The Common Bridge Magazine. This is a digital publication offered to our premium subscribers on Substack, and like our podcast, offers a wide range of views on current events, foreign and domestic policy, science, and even the arts. Our goal is always to find solutions our problems in a fiercely non partisan manner. After three seasons of The Common Bridge, I've learned that while our programs are informative and generate positive reviews both on podcast channels and your YouTube show, we're probably going to have something in every episode that you *won't* like. But I'm equally confident that you'll find our content enlightening. We repost, with permission, columnists and essayists, from across the political spectrum, but what I ultimately think is good writing. I also welcome you to join the conversation, and send your columns, essays, or even comments, to editor@thecommonbridge.com. Thanks for reading our first issue, and we hope you spread the word.

Richard Helppie

TO OUR READERS: This issue of The Common Bridge is the first issue of our monthly publication. If you would like to respond to what you see here, please do so at [**editor@TheCommonBridge.com**](mailto:editor@TheCommonBridge.com) and make sure you include your name and a functioning email address where we can reach you. While we cannot respond to all emails, we'll make every attempt to get back with you and we welcome your comments.



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How Europe and Ukraine can phase-out Russian oil and gas.

by IRYNA STAVCHUK and OLEH SAVYTSKYI- Reprinted from Kyiv Independent



Ukrainian state-run gas transport company Ukrtransgaz is part of the largest national oil and gas company of Ukraine, Naftogaz. (Ukrtransgaz)

Today, Russia's egregious armed aggression against Ukraine as an X-ray highlights a chronic disease of a united Europe that has long required radical "surgery". The acute energy crisis that EU is facing now comes as the culmination of decades of flawed energy policy and the result of a pernicious dependence on fossil fuel imports from Russia and other anti-democratic regimes. Today, it is obviously clear how politically, socially and economically vulnerable Europe is because of its dependence on coal, oil and gas. Addictions to fossil fuel imports and energy subsidies have already posed threats to the EU's energy security, profoundly undermining economic security and, worst of all, violating human rights,

destroying the environment, climate and social justice.

In the month since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, EU countries have paid the Putin regime nearly 19 billion euros for fossil fuels, including 12 billion euros for natural gas. Because Western powers have imposed sanctions on Russia's Central Bank and frozen its reserves, Putin is now demanding that gas be paid for in rubles, which Western customers must buy for foreign currency. Thus, the Kremlin is openly trying to put Gazprom in the place of the Central Bank, while openly blackmailing the EU and showing how much the Putin regime relies on exporting fossil fuels for its survival.

Without billions in financial flows from hydrocarbon exports, Russia would not be able to wage hybrid wars against neighboring countries, finance propaganda and a brutal repressive machine within the country, as well as build offensive weapons and blackmail the world with nuclear weapons. The invasion of Ukraine should be the beginning of the end for the Russian oil and gas industry, and the EU should make every effort to accelerate the transition from fossil fuels to green energy.

The problem of fossil fuel addiction creates another global problem – climate change. Today we are at a time when temperatures in the Arctic are 30 degrees above the historical level, and in Antarctica – 40 degrees, and UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres declares from the rostrum of an international conference that "dependence on fossil fuels is a mutual guaranteed destruction." The climate emergency we are facing is threatening not only all of humanity, but most of life on Earth. This is a time to realize mistakes and probably the last chance for decisive action.

It is indeed difficult for Europe and Ukraine to give up coal, oil and gas at the same time. In Europe, rising gas and fuel prices are already having severe consequences for the economy and the social sphere, and there are currently no guarantees of protection against new energy price spikes due to the large role of fossil fuels in the energy balance. But now Europe and Ukraine, already physically integrated into a single synchronous electricity grid, are on the threshold of a new "green" energy era with an enormous shared potential for renewable energy development. The decisions taken these days will determine the fate of Europe's energy security over the next few years, as well as the EU's ability to meet its obligations under the Paris Agreement and be a leader in tackling the climate emergency. Ukraine must

be an active player in shaping and implementing these decisions. The long-term success of the united Europe's energy transition is largely up to us. So what should Europe and Ukraine do to succeed?

Specific measures to eliminate dependence on fossil fuels

Responding to the climate crisis, the EU is already implementing and strengthening its policy of phasing out fossil fuels. Last year, the European Union adopted a package of legislative changes "Fit for 55" to make EU policies on climate, energy, land use, transport and taxation suitable to reduce net greenhouse gas emissions by at least 55% by 2030

This week, the Climate Action Network Europe, which brings together more than 1,700 CSOs in 38 countries, called on the European Commission and EU national governments to take decisive and immediate action to eliminate fossil fuel dependence.

In particular, the European Climate Network points to 8 specific measures to implement an accelerated, secure and compatible with the Paris Agreement energy transition to the EU:

1. It is necessary to immediately adopt specific plans for phase-out of fossil fuels, starting with Russian, and then all other imports and the

capacities every year compared to 2020.

5. It is necessary to ensure a rapid transition to heating systems based on renewable energy sources, starting with the large-scale deployment of heat pumps.

6. For the energy market, tools should be introduced to increase the flexibility of energy systems to facilitate the balancing of solar and wind energy.

7. Industrial restructuring should be based on energy and resource adequacy targets using the best available technologies.

8. All financial flows, both public

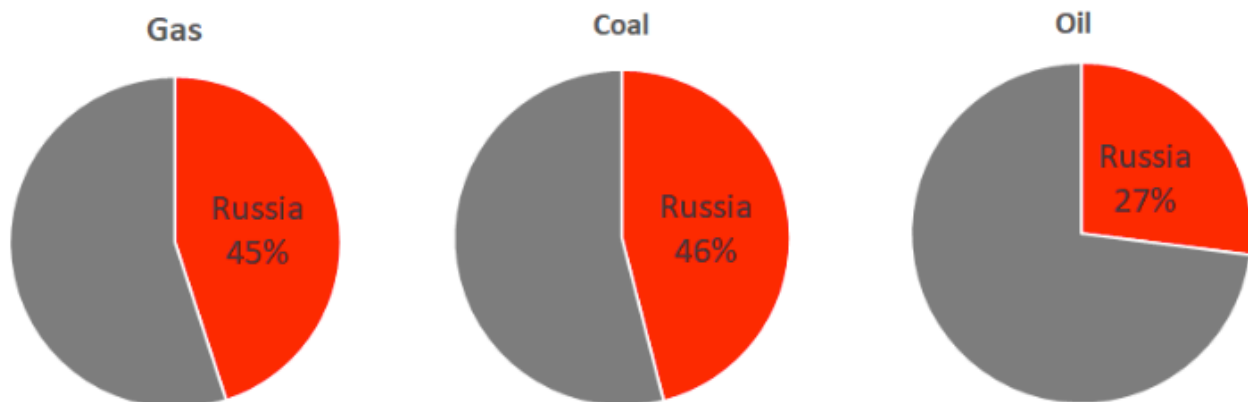


Fig. 1. Share of Russian supplies in EU imports of fossil fuels in 2021.

compared to 1990 levels. Achieving such emission reductions over the next decade is crucial for Europe to become the world's first climate-neutral continent by 2050 and to make the European Green Deal a reality.

Aggression in Ukraine and energy blackmail by Russia have added to the urgency of plans to completely decarbonise Europe and call for them to be greatly accelerated.

curtailment of local production in a socially just way.

2. Set ambitious energy saving targets at European and national levels. Overall energy consumption should decline significantly within this decade.

3. Deep and large-scale renovation of buildings in Europe must begin immediately, for which appropriate incentives must be created.

4. It is necessary to build at least 4 times more solar and wind energy

and private, should support the energy transition.

All these 8 measures are also relevant for the future of Ukraine, as our economy in the process of future post-war reconstruction will have to find a new path and end its dependence on Russian energy resources.

The vital need for an accelerated energy transition for Ukraine

Following a full-scale Russian invasion and the strengthening of the

geopolitical alliance between Russia and China, a major overhaul of energy and the economy to eliminate energy dependence on imports of coal, gas, oil and nuclear fuel is essential for Ukraine to assert its sovereignty and gain energy independence.

Moreover, the transition to clean and safe renewable energy sources and clean technologies will allow Ukraine to build a new strong and modern economy, closely integrated with the economies of the EU member states.

According to the latest available energy balance data, in 2020 Ukraine imported 12 million tons of oil and oil products, 21 million tons of coal and 9.1 billion m³ of natural gas.

According to the State Customs Service, in 2020 Ukraine also imported \$ 212 million worth of nuclear fuel from Russia, which is 62% of all supplies of fuel assemblies. Thus, more than half of all nuclear fuel came from Russian company TVEL, while the American Westinghouse supplied only 38%.

Ukraine paid for imported coal \$ 1.7 billion in 2020, and in 2021 – \$ 2.5 billion. Most of the coal came from Russia and Kazakhstan – 62.1% and 10.2% respectively. So last year we bought more than two-thirds of imported coal from the enemy.

The situation with gas is somewhat better – in 2021 Ukraine reduced gas imports by 6 times to 2.6 billion m³. But dependence on Russia remains, as 89% of imported gas comes in virtual reverse from EU countries to which transit flows go.

To gain full and real energy independence from Russia, Ukraine in the process of reconstruction must immediately follow the path of accelerated energy transition and not

repeat its own mistakes and the mistakes of the European Union, made in recent years. We must ensure that Ukraine's post-war reconstruction plan is developed and implemented to deliver the rapid development of high value-added sectors and new industries in Ukraine, such as: renewable energy technologies; building materials and technologies for energy efficient construction; production of batteries, electronics, electric cars, heat pumps; electrometallurgy and hydrogen-based steel production.

As a basis for reconstruction, Ukraine needs to build its own new industrial base and means of production that will not rely on fossil fuels. Without this, the development of a modern green economy of the XXI century is impossible. The post-Soviet industrial legacy of energy-intensive industries, which have already suffered structural decline, now has been severely affected by the Russian invasion, and related supply chains have been halted.

Some of the enterprises after the shelling and bombing simply no longer exist, so the reconstruction of the industry will have to start from scratch using new technologies. The production of equipment for renewable energy, batteries, electric vehicles, heat pumps, modern electrified construction equipment and other solutions to get rid of dependence on fossil fuels should be the focus for the revival of Ukrainian industry.

Today, Ukraine has a chance to start implementing energy transition at a pace unprecedented for Europe, integrating into new clean supply chains and helping to decarbonize Europe's economy faster. To achieve the ultimate victory and protect our children from new resource wars,

energy blackmail and the devastating effects of climate change, we must not just embark on the path of energy transition, we must race upon it and push Europe forward to completely stop using coal, oil and gas. Then we will win the final victory.

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The decisions taken these days will determine the fate of Europe's energy security over the next few years, as well as the EU's ability to meet its obligations under the Paris Agreement and be a leader in tackling the climate emergency. Ukraine must be an active player in shaping and implementing these decisions. The long-term success of the united Europe's energy transition is largely up to us. So what should Europe and Ukraine do to succeed?

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The Reckoning Is Yet to Come

Through the Russia-Ukraine conflict, Europe has been rediscovering the values of the continent's half-forgotten legacy.

by MARC WEITZMANN

In addition to fear and horror, the war in Ukraine during its first weeks awakened a strange feeling of self-confidence in Europe. “Solidarity with Ukraine makes democracy cool again,” the Serbian activist Srdja Popovic told the French newspaper *Liberation* on March 23. Vladimir Putin, through his rhetoric, indiscriminate bombing, and civilian massacres, has taken on a role much bigger than that of an old-fashioned tyrant: that of an openly fascist statesman. At last, after decades of false alarms, the first real one of his kind in Europe in 80 years. And somehow, perhaps because we’d been expecting a leader like him for so long, it also sounded to some like reinvigorating news.

During the Balkan War of the early ’90s, Popovic opposed the Serbian strongman Slobodan Milošević with what he called “laughtivism,” using mockery against power. He stood in a tradition of the weak fighting against the strong, the dreamers riding against the men of action, as Leonard Cohen used to sing during that same decade—a tradition that Václav Havel called, in his essay *condemning Communist totalitarianism*, “the power of the powerless.”

This tradition seems to have been taken up by Ukrainian President

Volodymyr Zelensky, the Jewish former comedian who now defies the brutal force of Russia. Half consciously, half irrationally, Zelensky’s Jewishness adds to the sense that he stands within a whole Mitteleuropean tradition of satire, fueled by the most anarchic tendencies of Yiddishkeit. He is practicing the art honed by Kafka, Chaplin, and Brecht, and taken up by Kundera, Norman Manea, and the ones we once called the dissidents.

Isn’t that what made Zelensky speak to the Knesset the way he did, calling out the memory of the Shoah to try to force Israel’s solidarity, presenting Ukraine—Ukraine, land of the Cossacks! Ukraine, which saw some of the worst pogroms in European history!—as a country that saved the Jews from Hitler? Whether this revision of history was a form of denial, or the price to pay for Ukraine’s shift toward democracy that started with the Orange Revolution in 2004, was almost impossible to decide.

Through the conflict, Europe has been rediscovering the values of the continent’s half-forgotten legacy. In France, the Russian invasion has appeared to serve as a long-awaited reality check. Morosity, self-doubt, and the populist politics they

empower have briefly seemed to be declining. Families have accepted Ukrainian refugees into their houses and apartments in an unexpectedly warm welcome—unseen, to say the least, during the Syrian-refugee crisis—that destabilized the far right’s campaign of xenophobia. And as has been noted before, NATO, declared “brain-dead” by French President Emmanuel Macron as recently as 2019, seems on its way to resurrection. Europe is not alone anymore, the United States is isolationist no longer, the West is back, things make sense again. This is a war of good against evil, truth against lies, a war fought many times over before in Europe, from Barcelona to Sarajevo. How can we lose? How can Putin ever win?

And there may be something in all of this. But isn’t it also a little too beautiful to be true? In March, in an apt illustration of this mindset, the French philosopher Bernard-Henri Lévy posted photos on Twitter showing him walking the streets of Odesa. In a theoretically more dignified documentary format, he also filmed himself tagging the French motto “Liberté, égalité, fraternité” on a wall. In itself, this act does not suffice to undermine the cause it purports to defend—civilians fighting for their lives and country have other fish to fry

anyway—but shouldn't it give us pause?

The first war of intellectuals—the first in Europe where the line between right and wrong was crystal clear—was the Spanish Civil War of the 1930s, in which Lévy's father actually fought. Not coincidentally, it was also the first media war, with facts and images distorted by both camps in the name of ideas. The photographers who shaped our modern vision of what the news is supposed to be, like Robert Capa and Joris Ivens, staged their pictures to make them more romantic and more heartbreaking—truer. Writers such as André Malraux and Ernest Hemingway misled readers about what they saw and did. And the war also produced George Orwell, the first, perhaps, to understand the full implications of this new mixture of real events, serious ideas, media technology, communication, and narcissism. "If thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought," he famously wrote in "Politics and the English Language," published at the dawn of the Cold War.

During that Cold War, in Eastern Europe, this concern for true words versus politics was kept alive by dissident writers and thinkers—Jan Patočka, Danilo Kiš, Ivan Klíma—as well as by their counterparts in the West such as Albert Camus and Arthur Koestler. Then, as soon as the Soviet Union fell, the books of the dissidents that circulated widely in samizdat in the East largely ceased to be read. The last great moment of the West was probably 1990. That year Havel, the dissident and playwright, was elected president of Czechoslovakia, and two of his first moves were to appoint Frank Zappa as cultural ambassador of his country and invite the Rolling Stones to Prague. The concert they gave soon

turned into a legendary event. For a while, it seemed that high and low Western culture could mix and shape the democratic future of the new global world rising on the ruins of totalitarianism.

Can this confidence be reestablished, after 9/11 and the Iraq War? After we discovered that the entity called the West was more fractured than anyone had thought, after the notion of a common reality was challenged? After the former dissidents left the stage or were disqualified because of their politics, and the old literary culture gave way to the digital age?

Odesa may have been Isaac Babel's hometown, but if you look for genuine testimony as to what the Ukrainian population is now enduring, you will find it primarily on TikTok and Instagram. Self-branding and its visual and audio codes of communication are replacing the poems and prose that, in the 20th century, described the horrors of war. In that sense, and in that sense only, BHL's photos of his thaumaturge-like silhouette pacing the streets of Odesa are fitting.

And so is Zelensky's not-too-subtle talent for instrumentalizing the cultural tropes of the countries he addressed during his virtual world tour last month: in Israel, the Shoah; in Rome, preservation of European holy cities; in Berlin, the shadow of the wall erected "in the middle of Europe between freedom and slavery"; in D.C., Pearl Harbor; and at the French Parliament, incredibly enough, the actor Jean-Paul Belmondo, whose memory is apparently considered more meaningful, by Zelensky's spin doctors, than that of the Resistance fighters.

Today's hollow clichés replace yesterday's lyrical calls to bravery. And the question hovering over

Zelensky—who hosted a remarkably gross popular TV show for years, then played a high-school teacher who was elected president before actually becoming president—is whether his form of laughtivism belongs to the tradition of Chaplin or to the post-literary society of spectacle. The least that can be said about his performance at the Grammys is that it does not point to the first answer. And yet he has exhibited real heroism, choosing to remain in Kyiv rather than become a president in exile. That is the irony of the tragic situation. Having played the part of president for so long in peacetime, what choice did he have but to inhabit it for real once the war came?

Koestler once wrote that to fight against totalitarianism is not to fight for the truth against the lie but rather to fight "against a total lie in the name of a half-truth." The half-truths of the West have nurtured anti-liberal tendencies for decades. It is their exact nature that we should be lucid about if we want to prevent populist forces from rebounding.

In France, since the end of the Cold War especially, the futility of the West has been seen as its cardinal sin—the symptom of its decadence. Critics of Macron view him as a bourgeois child of the naive '90s and the decade's emphasis on publicity, narcissism, and spectacle; until a few weeks ago, these same critics on the far-right and the left publicly admired Putin as a real man. Chief among them was Marine Le Pen, probably the most popular political figure in France today, who promises Frexit and peace with Putin if she is elected president in two weeks. As of this writing, Macron's poll numbers keep declining while he wages a superficial and hubristic campaign.

And not just in Paris has the Russian president found admirers. In



Hungary and in Serbia, Viktor Orbán and Aleksandar Vučić have been reelected this month on pro-Russian tickets. In Algeria, as the writer Kamel Daoud reminded me when we spoke last week, Islamist columnists support Putin’s “strength” because it contrasts with the alleged “feminization” of the liberal West. So do, it seems, one-third of Africa, most of the Arab world, and Latin America: areas saturated with post-colonial, Cold War resentment.

Boosted by these opinions, and by his own propaganda, Putin, strangely enough, may face the same kind of image problem Zelensky confronts. Putin portrays himself as a besieged, virtuous leader defending Russia’s integrity and Christian manhood against Nazi plots and Western evil. This narrative finds its roots in the paranoid Eurasian ideology of half-lunatic writers such as Viatcheslav Volodine and Alexander Dugin. These men share with the Islamists a strange mix of absolute religious faith and complete nihilism that is one of the most baffling traits of our new century. For years Putin was able to balance their mad views with an apparently more pragmatic approach. He played the cruel neofascist czar or the modern statesman according to

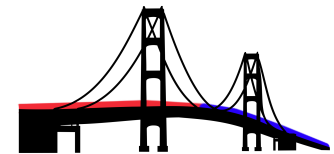
the circumstances and the people he was talking with.

But “language can ... corrupt thoughts,” as Orwell put it, and thoughts create reality. We may never know all the reasons Putin chose to fully commit to the part of the Eurasian fascist. (The pass he received in Syria, where the strategy of terror deployed in Ukraine was first developed; the messy American withdrawal from Afghanistan, which led him to think he could act freely; his own isolation since the start of the coronavirus pandemic—all surely played some role.) He probably always believed in the narrative, at least partly. But by endorsing it, he has definitively brought us into a world in which sociopathic Dostoyevskian characters make the rules.

A war against civilians is terror, and terror is a language from which there is no way back. What makes the Russian soldiers act the way they did in Bucha—and tomorrow, elsewhere—is not known, but one hypothesis, given the bombings of civilian sites that preceded those crimes, is that they are following orders. “Madness alone is truly terrifying, inasmuch as you cannot placate it either by threats, persuasion, or bribes,” says Mr. Vladimir, the Russian attaché

and terrorist instructor in Joseph Conrad’s *The Secret Agent*, a novel that should be reread today along with Dostoyevsky’s *Demons*. In other words, barbaric behavior sends a message of paradoxical seriousness that renders who loses and who wins a pointless question.

To what extent, then, does Putin need that kind of war in order to prove that he can make war? Each step toward more terror is a step away from any kind of credible negotiations. Any peace talk, after terror, appears like a surrender to brute force. Savagery is a test of the reality of Putin’s own threat—including the nuclear one—as well as the truth of our determination. And in the face of that, easy Western self-confidence won’t do. The time of reckoning is yet to come.



Activism, Uncensored: "West Virginia Rising" Takes on Joe Manchin

Climate change activists
block the entrance to a coal
company that pays the
Senator a \$500,000 dividend



Grant Town Power Plant,

by MATT TAIBBI and FORD FISCHER- Reprinted with permission from Substack

One of the things I like about Ford Fischer's "Activism, Uncensored" series is the longer run time better captures the feel of protest events. Particularly when they take place in remote locations, like this group called "West Virginia Rising" executing a "Coal Baron Blockade" in front of a coal plant in a place called Grant Town, there's a ton of down time and subtle negotiation that often reveal as much as the main event.

The police are usually basically on the side of the property owners, but superficially reasonable, working with the protesters to help stage the demonstration. Good local chiefs will give in a little to shorten things, often worried as much about their own deputies as the protesters. The more time cops spend breaking up domestic calls and getting their cars puked in by addicts, the less patience they tend to have with people who are

trying to get arrested, creating an urgency to keep things short.

In this instance you see the Marion County sheriff, named Jimmy Riffle, working with the lawyer for "West Virginia Rising" to negotiate the "blockade." The protesters' aim is to draw attention to Enersystems, a company founded by Manchin that paid him a \$500,000 dividend in 2020 alone. The plant, as Fischer notes, processes "Gob," a form of coal waste that requires extra refining. Manchin is more heavily invested in this kind of energy business than any other Senator, making his position as chair of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee a particularly troublesome one for energy activists.

The main event goes off smoothly enough, with police waiting with bored faces for protesters to lock arms in a "Sleeping Dragon" maneuver, before hauling the line of them all off

together. There's a comic scene where Ford interviews two cheerful activists while a deputy tries and seemingly fails to figure out a way to cut PVC tubing with a set of long nose pliers. Later, things take an ugly turn after protesters try sneaking onto the property through a back route, leading to rough stuff. In between, we hear from farmers, miners, and demonstrators, many of whom have choice words for their "Coal Baron" Senator.



Why the Past 10 Years Have Been Uniquely Stupid

It's not just a phase

By JONATHAN HAIDT

What would it have been like to live in Babel in the days after its destruction? In the Book of Genesis, we are told that the descendants of Noah built a great city in the land of Shinar. They built a tower “with its top in the heavens” to “make a name” for themselves. God was offended by the hubris of humanity and said:

Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another's speech.

The text does not say that God destroyed the tower, but in many popular renderings of the story he does, so let's hold that dramatic image in our minds: people wandering amid the ruins, unable to communicate, **c o n d e m n e d t o m u t u a l** incomprehension.

The story of Babel is the best metaphor I have found for what happened to America in the 2010s, and for the fractured country we now inhabit. Something went terribly wrong, very suddenly. We are disoriented, unable to speak the same language or recognize the same truth.



We are cut off from one another and from the past.

It's been clear for quite a while now that red America and blue America are becoming like two different countries claiming the same territory, with two different versions of the Constitution, economics, and American history. But Babel is not a story about tribalism; it's a story about the fragmentation of everything. It's about the shattering of all that had seemed solid, the scattering of people who had been a community. It's a metaphor for what is happening not only between red and blue, but within the left and within the right, as well as within universities, companies, professional

associations, museums, and even families

Babel is a metaphor for what some forms of social media have done to nearly all of the groups and institutions most important to the country's future—and to us as a people. How did this happen? And what does it portend for American life?

The Rise of the Modern Tower

There is a direction to history and it is toward cooperation at larger scales. We see this trend in biological evolution, in the series of “major transitions” through which multicellular organisms first appeared and then developed new symbiotic relationships. We see it in cultural

evolution too, as Robert Wright explained in his 1999 book, *Nonzero: The Logic of Human Destiny*. Wright showed that history involves a series of transitions, driven by rising population density plus new technologies (writing, roads, the printing press) that created new possibilities for mutually beneficial trade and learning. Zero-sum

media platforms, which launched around 2003. Myspace, Friendster, and Facebook made it easy to connect with friends and strangers to talk about common interests, for free, and at a scale never before imaginable. By 2008, Facebook had emerged as the dominant platform, with more than 100 million monthly users, on its way to roughly

had effectively overcome the curse of division by language. For techno-democratic optimists, it seemed to be only the beginning of what humanity could do.

In February 2012, as he prepared to take Facebook public, Mark Zuckerberg reflected on those extraordinary times and set forth his plans. “Today, our society has reached another tipping point,” he wrote in a letter to investors. Facebook hoped “to rewire the way people spread and consume information.” By giving them “the power to share,” it would help them to “once again transform many of our core institutions and industries.”

In the 10 years since then, Zuckerberg did exactly what he said he would do. He did rewire the way we spread and consume information; he did transform our institutions, and he pushed us past the tipping point. It has not worked out as he expected.

Things Fall Apart

Historically, civilizations have relied on shared blood, gods, and enemies to counteract the tendency to split apart as they grow. But what is it that holds together large and diverse secular democracies such as the United States and India, or, for that matter, modern Britain and France?

Social scientists have identified at least three major forces that collectively bind together successful democracies: social capital (extensive social networks with high levels of trust), strong institutions, and shared stories. Social media has weakened all three. To see how, we



conflicts—such as the wars of religion that arose as the printing press spread heretical ideas across Europe—were better thought of as temporary setbacks, and sometimes even integral to progress. (Those wars of religion, he argued, made possible the transition to modern nation-states with better-informed citizens.) President Bill Clinton praised *Nonzero*’s optimistic portrayal of a more cooperative future thanks to continued technological advance.

The early internet of the 1990s, with its chat rooms, message boards, and email, exemplified the *Nonzero* thesis, as did the first wave of social-

3 billion today. In the first decade of the new century, social media was widely believed to be a boon to democracy. What dictator could impose his will on an interconnected citizenry? What regime could build a wall to keep out the internet?

The high point of techno-democratic optimism was arguably 2011, a year that began with the Arab Spring and ended with the global Occupy movement. That is also when Google Translate became available on virtually all smartphones, so you could say that 2011 was the year that humanity rebuilt the Tower of Babel. We were closer than we had ever been to being “one people,” and we

must understand how social media changed over time—and especially in the several years following 2009.

In their early incarnations, platforms such as Myspace and Facebook were relatively harmless. They allowed users to create pages on which to post photos, family updates, and links to the mostly static pages of their friends and favorite bands. In this way, early social media can be seen as just another step in the long progression of technological improvements—from the Postal Service through the telephone to email and texting—that helped people achieve the eternal goal of maintaining their social ties.

But gradually, social-media users became more comfortable sharing intimate details of their lives with strangers and corporations. As I wrote in a 2019 Atlantic article with Tobias Rose-Stockwell, they became more adept at putting on performances and managing their personal brand—activities that might impress others but that do not deepen friendships in the way that a private phone conversation will.

Once social-media platforms had trained users to spend more time performing and less time connecting, the stage was set for the major transformation, which began in 2009: the intensification of viral dynamics.

Before 2009, Facebook had given users a simple timeline—a never-ending stream of content generated by their friends and connections, with the newest posts at the top and

the oldest ones at the bottom. This was often overwhelming in its volume, but it was an accurate reflection of what others were posting. That began to

change in 2009, when Facebook offered users a way to publicly “like” posts with the click of a button. That same year, Twitter introduced something even more powerful: the “Retweet” button, which allowed users to publicly endorse a post while also sharing it with all of their

that posts that trigger emotions—especially anger at out-groups—are the most likely to be shared.

By 2013, social media had become a new game, with dynamics unlike those in 2008. If you were skillful or lucky, you might create a post that would “go viral” and make you “internet famous” for a few days. If you blundered, you could find yourself buried in

hateful comments. Your posts rode to fame or ignominy based on the clicks



followers. Facebook soon copied that innovation with its own “Share” button, which became available to smartphone users in 2012. “Like” and “Share” buttons quickly became standard features of most other platforms.

Shortly after its “Like” button began to produce data about what best “engaged” its users, Facebook developed algorithms to bring each user the content most likely to generate a “like” or some other interaction, eventually including the “share” as well. Later research showed

of thousands of strangers, and you in turn contributed thousands of clicks to the game.

This new game encouraged dishonesty and mob dynamics: Users were guided not just by their true preferences but by their past experiences of reward and punishment, and their prediction of how others would react to each new action. One of the engineers at Twitter who had worked on the “Retweet” button later revealed that he regretted his contribution because it had made Twitter a nastier place.

As he watched Twitter mobs forming through the use of the new tool, he thought to himself, “We might have just handed a 4-year-old a loaded weapon.”

As a social psychologist who studies emotion, morality, and politics, I saw this happening too. The newly tweaked platforms were almost perfectly designed to bring out our most moralistic and least reflective selves. The volume of outrage was shocking.

It was just this kind of twitchy and explosive spread of anger that James Madison had tried to protect us from as he was drafting the U.S. Constitution. The Framers of the Constitution were excellent social psychologists. They knew that democracy had an Achilles’ heel because it depended on the collective judgment of the people, and democratic communities are subject to “the turbulence and weakness of unruly passions.” The key to designing a sustainable republic, therefore, was to build in mechanisms to slow things down, cool passions, require compromise, and give leaders some insulation from the mania of the moment while still holding them accountable to the people periodically, on Election Day.

The tech companies that enhanced virality from 2009 to 2012 brought us deep into Madison’s nightmare. Many authors quote his comments in “Federalist No. 10” on the innate human proclivity toward “faction,” by which he meant our tendency to divide ourselves into teams or parties that are so inflamed with “mutual animosity” that they are “much more disposed to vex and oppress each other than to cooperate for their common good.”

But that essay continues on to a less quoted yet equally important insight, about democracy’s vulnerability to triviality. Madison notes that people

are so prone to factionalism that “where no substantial occasion presents itself, the most frivolous and fanciful distinctions have been sufficient to kindle their unfriendly passions and excite their most violent conflicts.”

Social media has both magnified and weaponized the frivolous. Is our democracy any healthier now that we’ve had Twitter brawls over Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s Tax the Rich dress at the annual Met Gala, and Melania Trump’s dress at a 9/11 memorial event, which had stitching that kind of looked like a skyscraper? How about Senator Ted Cruz’s tweet criticizing Big Bird for tweeting about getting his COVID vaccine?

It’s not just the waste of time and scarce attention that matters; it’s the continual chipping-away of trust. An autocracy can deploy propaganda or use fear to motivate the behaviors it desires, but a democracy depends on widely internalized acceptance of the legitimacy of rules, norms, and institutions. Blind and irrevocable trust in any particular individual or organization is never warranted. But when citizens lose trust in elected leaders, health authorities, the courts, the police, universities, and the integrity of elections, then every decision becomes contested; every election becomes a life-and-death struggle to save the country from the other side. The most recent Edelman Trust Barometer (an international measure of citizens’ trust in government, business, media, and nongovernmental organizations) showed stable and competent autocracies (China and the United Arab Emirates) at the top of the list, while contentious democracies such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Spain, and South Korea scored near the bottom (albeit above Russia).

Recent academic studies suggest that social media is indeed corrosive to trust in governments, news media, and people and institutions in general. A working paper that offers the most comprehensive review of the research, led by the social scientists Philipp Lorenz-Spreen and Lisa Oswald, concludes that “the large majority of reported associations between digital media use and trust appear to be detrimental for democracy.” The literature is complex—some studies show benefits, particularly in less developed democracies—but the review found that, on balance, social media amplifies political polarization; foments populism, especially right-wing populism; and is associated with the spread of misinformation.

When people lose trust in institutions, they lose trust in the stories told by those institutions. That’s particularly true of the institutions entrusted with the education of children. History curricula have often caused political controversy, but Facebook and Twitter make it possible for parents to become outraged every day over a new snippet from their children’s history lessons—and math lessons and literature selections, and any new pedagogical shifts anywhere in the country. The motives of teachers and administrators come into question, and overreaching laws or curricular reforms sometimes follow, dumbing down education and reducing trust in it further. One result is that young people educated in the post-Babel era are less likely to arrive at a coherent story of who we are as a people, and less likely to share any such story with those who attended different schools or who were educated in a different decade.

The former CIA analyst Martin Gurri predicted these fracturing effects in his 2014 book, *The Revolt of the Public*. Gurri’s analysis focused on the authority-subverting effects of information’s exponential growth,

beginning with the internet in the 1990s. Writing nearly a decade ago, Gurri could already see the power of social media as a universal solvent, breaking down bonds and weakening institutions everywhere it reached. He noted that distributed networks “can protest and overthrow, but never govern.” He described the nihilism of the many protest movements of 2011 that organized mostly online and that, like Occupy Wall Street, demanded the destruction of existing institutions without offering an alternative vision of the future or an organization that could bring it about.

Gurri is no fan of elites or of centralized authority, but he notes a constructive feature of the pre-digital era: a single “mass audience,” all consuming the same content, as if they were all looking into the same gigantic mirror at the reflection of their own society. In a comment to Vox that recalls the first post-Babel diaspora, he said:

Mark Zuckerberg may not have wished for any of that. But by rewiring everything in a headlong rush for growth—with a naive conception of human psychology, little understanding of the intricacy of institutions, and no concern for external costs imposed on society—Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and a few other large platforms unwittingly dissolved the mortar of trust, belief in institutions, and shared stories that

had held a large and diverse secular democracy together.

I think we can date the fall of the tower to the years between 2011 (Gurri’s focal year of “nihilistic” protests) and 2015, a year marked by the “great awakening” on the left and

competence, Twitter can overpower all the newspapers in the country, and stories cannot be shared (or at least trusted) across more than a few adjacent fragments—so truth cannot achieve widespread adherence.

The many analysts, including me, who had argued that Trump could not win the general election were relying on pre-Babel intuitions, which said that scandals such as the Access Hollywood tape (in which Trump boasted about committing sexual assault) are fatal to a presidential campaign. But after Babel, nothing really means anything anymore—at least not in a way that is durable and on which people widely agree.

Politics After Babel

“Politics is the art of the possible,” the German statesman Otto von Bismarck said in 1867. In a post-Babel democracy, not much may be possible.

Of course, the American culture war and the decline of cross-party cooperation predates social media’s arrival. The mid-20th century was a time of unusually low polarization in Congress, which began reverting back to

historical levels in the 1970s and ’80s. The ideological distance between the two parties began increasing faster in the 1990s. Fox News and the 1994 “Republican Revolution” converted the GOP into a more combative



the ascendancy of Donald Trump on the right. Trump did not destroy the tower; he merely exploited its fall. He was the first politician to master the new dynamics of the post-Babel era, in which outrage is the key to virality, stage performance crushes

party. For example, House Speaker Newt Gingrich discouraged new Republican members of Congress from moving their families to Washington, D.C., where they were likely to form social ties with Democrats and their families.

So cross-party relationships were already strained before 2009. But the enhanced virality of social media thereafter made it more hazardous to be seen fraternizing with the enemy or even failing to attack the enemy with sufficient vigor. On the right, the term RINO (Republican in Name Only) was superseded in 2015 by the more contemptuous term cuckservative, popularized on Twitter by Trump supporters. On the left, social media launched callout culture in the years after 2012, with transformative effects on university life and later on politics and culture throughout the English-speaking world.

What changed in the 2010s? Let's revisit that Twitter engineer's metaphor of handing a loaded gun to a 4-year-old. A mean tweet doesn't kill anyone; it is an attempt to shame or punish someone publicly while broadcasting one's own virtue, brilliance, or tribal loyalties. It's more a dart than a bullet, causing pain but no fatalities. Even so, from 2009 to 2012, Facebook and Twitter passed out roughly 1 billion dart guns globally. We've been shooting one another ever since.

Social media has given voice to some people who had little previously, and it has made it easier to hold powerful people accountable for their misdeeds, not just in politics but in business, the arts, academia, and elsewhere. Sexual harassers could have been called out in anonymous blog posts before Twitter, but it's hard to imagine that the #MeToo movement would have been nearly so successful without the viral enhancement that the major platforms offered. However, the warped "accountability" of social media has

also brought injustice—and political dysfunction—in three ways.

First, the dart guns of social media give more power to trolls and provocateurs while silencing good citizens. Research by the political scientists Alexander Bor and Michael Bang Petersen found that a small subset of people on social-media platforms are highly concerned with gaining status and are willing to use aggression to do so. They admit that in their online discussions they often curse, make fun of their opponents, and get blocked by other users or reported for inappropriate comments. Across eight studies, Bor and Petersen found that being online did not make most people more aggressive or hostile; rather, it allowed a small number of aggressive people to attack a much larger set of victims. Even a small number of jerks were able to dominate discussion forums, Bor and Petersen found, because nonjerks are easily turned off from online discussions of politics. Additional research finds that women and Black people are harassed disproportionately, so the digital public square is less welcoming to their voices.

Second, the dart guns of social media give more power and voice to the political extremes while reducing the power and voice of the moderate majority. The "Hidden Tribes" study, by the pro-democracy group More in Common, surveyed 8,000 Americans in 2017 and 2018 and identified seven groups that shared beliefs and behaviors. The one furthest to the right, known as the "devoted conservatives," comprised 6 percent of the U.S. population. The group furthest to the left, the "progressive activists," comprised 8 percent of the population. The progressive activists were by far the most prolific group on social media: 70 percent had shared political content over the previous year. The devoted conservatives followed, at 56 percent.

These two extreme groups are similar in surprising ways. They are the whitest and richest of the seven groups, which suggests that America is being torn apart by a battle between two subsets of the elite who are not representative of the broader society. What's more, they are the two groups that show the greatest homogeneity in their moral and political attitudes. This uniformity of opinion, the study's authors speculate, is likely a result of thought-policing on social media: "Those who express sympathy for the views of opposing groups may experience backlash from their own cohort." In other words, political extremists don't just shoot darts at their enemies; they spend a lot of their ammunition targeting dissenters or nuanced thinkers on their own team. In this way, social media makes a political system based on compromise grind to a halt.

Finally, by giving everyone a dart gun, social media deputizes everyone to administer justice with no due process. Platforms like Twitter devolve into the Wild West, with no accountability for vigilantes. A successful attack attracts a barrage of likes and follow-on strikes. Enhanced-virality platforms thereby facilitate massive collective punishment for small or imagined offenses, with real-world consequences, including innocent people losing their jobs and being shamed into suicide. When our public square is governed by mob dynamics unrestrained by due process, we don't get justice and inclusion; we get a society that ignores context, proportionality, mercy, and truth.

Structural Stupidity

Since the tower fell, debates of all kinds have grown more and more confused. The most pervasive obstacle to good thinking is confirmation bias, which refers to the human tendency to search only for evidence that confirms our preferred beliefs. Even before the advent of social media,

search engines were supercharging confirmation bias, making it far easier for people to find evidence for absurd beliefs and conspiracy theories, such as that the Earth is flat and that the U.S. government staged the 9/11 attacks. But social media made things much worse.

The most reliable cure for confirmation bias is interaction with people who don't share your beliefs. They confront you with counterevidence and counterargument. John Stuart Mill said, "He who knows only his own side of the case, knows little of that," and he urged us to seek out conflicting views "from persons who actually believe them." People who think differently and are willing to speak up if they disagree with you make you smarter, almost as if they are extensions of your own brain. People who try to silence or intimidate their critics make themselves stupider, almost as if they are shooting darts into their own brain.

In his book *The Constitution of Knowledge*, Jonathan Rauch describes the historical breakthrough in which Western societies developed an "epistemic operating system"—that is, a set of institutions for generating knowledge from the interactions of biased and cognitively flawed individuals. English law developed the adversarial system so that biased advocates could present both sides of a case to an impartial jury. Newspapers full of lies evolved into professional journalistic enterprises, with norms that required seeking out multiple sides of a story, followed by editorial review, followed by fact-checking. Universities evolved from cloistered medieval institutions into research powerhouses, creating a structure in which scholars put forth evidence-backed claims with the knowledge that other scholars around the world

would be motivated to gain prestige by finding contrary evidence.

Part of America's greatness in the 20th century came from having developed the most capable, vibrant, and productive network of knowledge-producing institutions in all of human history, linking together the world's best universities, private companies that turned scientific advances into life-changing consumer products, and government agencies that supported scientific research and led the collaboration that put people on the moon.

But this arrangement, Rauch notes, "is not self-maintaining; it relies on an array of sometimes delicate social settings and understandings, and those need to be understood, affirmed, and protected." So what happens when an institution is not well maintained and internal disagreement ceases, either because its people have become ideologically uniform or because they have become afraid to dissent?

This, I believe, is what happened to many of America's key institutions in the mid-to-late 2010s. They got stupider en masse because social media instilled in their members a chronic fear of getting darted. The shift was most pronounced in universities, scholarly associations, creative industries, and political organizations at every level (national, state, and local), and it was so pervasive that it established new behavioral norms backed by new policies seemingly overnight. The new omnipresence of enhanced-virality social media meant that a single word uttered by a professor, leader, or journalist, even if spoken with positive intent, could lead to a social-media firestorm, triggering an immediate dismissal or a drawn-out investigation by the institution. Participants in our key institutions began self-censoring to an unhealthy degree, holding back

critiques of policies and ideas—even those presented in class by their students—that they believed to be ill-supported or wrong.

But when an institution punishes internal dissent, it shoots darts into its own brain.

The stupefying process plays out differently on the right and the left because their activist wings subscribe to different narratives with different sacred values. The "Hidden Tribes" study tells us that the "devoted conservatives" score highest on beliefs related to authoritarianism. They share a narrative in which America is eternally under threat from enemies outside and subversives within; they see life as a battle between patriots and traitors. According to the political scientist Karen Stenner, whose work the "Hidden Tribes" study drew upon, they are psychologically different from the larger group of "traditional conservatives" (19 percent of the population), who emphasize order, decorum, and slow rather than radical change.

Only within the devoted conservatives' narratives do Donald Trump's speeches make sense, from his campaign's ominous opening diatribe about Mexican "rapists" to his warning on January 6, 2021: "If you don't fight like hell, you're not going to have a country anymore."

The traditional punishment for treason is death, hence the battle cry on January 6: "Hang Mike Pence." Right-wing death threats, many delivered by anonymous accounts, are proving effective in cowering traditional conservatives, for example in driving out local election officials who failed to "stop the steal." The wave of threats delivered to dissenting Republican members of Congress has similarly pushed many of the remaining moderates to quit or go silent, giving us a party ever more divorced from the conservative tradition,



constitutional responsibility, and reality. We now have a Republican Party that describes a violent assault on the U.S. Capitol as “legitimate political discourse,” supported—or at least not contradicted—by an array of right-wing think tanks and media organizations.

The stupidity on the right is most visible in the many conspiracy theories spreading across right-wing media and now into Congress. “Pizzagate,” QAnon, the belief that vaccines contain microchips, the conviction that Donald Trump won reelection—it’s hard to imagine any of these ideas or belief systems reaching the levels that they have without Facebook and Twitter.

The Democrats have also been hit hard by structural stupidity, though in a different way. In the Democratic Party, the struggle between the progressive wing and the more moderate factions is open and ongoing, and often the moderates win. The problem is that the left controls the commanding heights of the culture: universities, news organizations, Hollywood, art museums, advertising, much of Silicon Valley, and the teachers’ unions and teaching colleges that shape K–12 education. And in many of those

institutions, dissent has been stifled: When everyone was issued a dart gun in the early 2010s, many left-leaning institutions began shooting themselves in the brain. And unfortunately, those were the brains that inform, instruct, and entertain most of the country.

Liberals in the late 20th century shared a belief that the sociologist Christian Smith called the “liberal progress” narrative, in which America used to be horrifically unjust and repressive, but, thanks to the struggles of activists and heroes, has made (and continues to make) progress toward realizing the noble promise of its founding. This story easily supports liberal patriotism, and it was the animating narrative of Barack Obama’s presidency. It is also the view of the “traditional liberals” in the “Hidden Tribes” study (11 percent of the population), who have strong humanitarian values, are older than average, and are largely the people leading America’s cultural and intellectual institutions.

But when the newly viralized social-media platforms gave everyone a dart gun, it was younger progressive activists who did the most shooting, and they aimed a disproportionate number of their darts at these older

liberal leaders. Confused and fearful, the leaders rarely challenged the activists or their nonliberal narrative in which life at every institution is an eternal battle among identity groups over a zero-sum pie, and the people on top got there by oppressing the people on the bottom. This new narrative is rigidly egalitarian—focused on equality of outcomes, not of rights or opportunities. It is unconcerned with individual rights.

The universal charge against people who disagree with this narrative is not “traitor”; it is “racist,” “transphobe,” “Karen,” or some related scarlet letter marking the perpetrator as one who hates or harms a marginalized group. The punishment that feels right for such crimes is not execution; it is public shaming and social death.

You can see the stupefaction process most clearly when a person on the left merely points to research that questions or contradicts a favored belief among progressive activists. Someone on Twitter will find a way to associate the dissenter with racism, and others will pile on. For example, in the first week of protests after the killing of George Floyd, some of which included violence, the progressive policy analyst David Shor, then employed by Civis Analytics, tweeted a link to a study showing that violent protests back in the 1960s led to electoral setbacks for the Democrats in nearby counties. Shor was clearly trying to be helpful, but in the ensuing outrage he was accused of “anti-Blackness” and was soon dismissed from his job. (Civis Analytics has denied that the tweet led to Shor’s firing.)

The Shor case became famous, but anyone on Twitter had already seen dozens of examples teaching the basic lesson: Don’t question your own side’s beliefs, policies, or actions. And when traditional liberals go silent, as so many did in the summer of 2020, the

progressive activists' more radical narrative takes over as the governing narrative of an organization. This is why so many epistemic institutions seemed to "go woke" in rapid succession that year and the next, beginning with a wave of controversies and resignations at The New York Times and other newspapers, and continuing on to social-justice pronouncements by groups of doctors and medical associations (one publication by the American Medical Association and the Association of American Medical Colleges, for instance, advised medical professionals to refer to neighborhoods and communities as "oppressed" or "systematically divested" instead of "vulnerable" or "poor"), and the hurried transformation of curricula at New York City's most expensive private schools.

Tragically, we see stupefaction playing out on both sides in the COVID wars. The right has been so committed to minimizing the risks of COVID that it has turned the disease into one that preferentially kills Republicans. The progressive left is so committed to maximizing the dangers of COVID that it often embraces an equally maximalist, one-size-fits-all strategy for vaccines, masks, and social distancing—even as they pertain to children. Such policies are not as deadly as spreading fears and lies about vaccines, but many of them have been devastating for the mental health and education of children, who desperately need to play with one another and go to school; we have little clear evidence that school closures and masks for young children reduce deaths from COVID. Most notably for the story I'm telling here, progressive parents who argued against school closures were frequently savaged on social media and met with the ubiquitous leftist accusations of

racism and white supremacy. Others in blue cities learned to keep quiet.

American politics is getting ever more ridiculous and dysfunctional not because Americans are getting less intelligent. The problem is structural. Thanks to enhanced-virality social media, dissent is punished within many of our institutions, which means that bad ideas get elevated into official policy.

It's Going to Get Much Worse

In a 2018 interview, Steve Bannon, the former adviser to Donald Trump, said that the way to deal with the media is "to flood the zone with shit." He was describing the "firehose of falsehood" tactic pioneered by Russian disinformation programs to keep Americans confused, disoriented, and angry. But back then, in 2018, there was an upper limit to the amount of shit available, because all of it had to be created by a person (other than some low-quality stuff produced by bots).

Now, however, artificial intelligence is close to enabling the limitless spread of highly believable disinformation. The AI program GPT-3 is already so good that you can give it a topic and a tone and it will spit out as many essays as you like, typically with perfect grammar and a surprising level of coherence. In a year or two, when the program is upgraded to GPT-4, it will become far more capable. In a 2020 essay titled "The Supply of Disinformation Will Soon Be Infinite," Renée DiResta, the research manager at the Stanford Internet Observatory, explained that spreading falsehoods—whether through text, images, or deep-fake videos—will quickly become inconceivably easy. (She co-wrote the essay with GPT-3.)

American factions won't be the only ones using AI and social media to generate attack content; our adversaries will too. In a haunting

2018 essay titled "The Digital Maginot Line," DiResta described the state of affairs bluntly. "We are immersed in an evolving, ongoing conflict: an Information World War in which state actors, terrorists, and ideological extremists leverage the social infrastructure underpinning everyday life to sow discord and erode shared reality," she wrote. The Soviets used to have to send over agents or cultivate Americans willing to do their bidding. But social media made it cheap and easy for Russia's Internet Research Agency to invent fake events or distort real ones to stoke rage on both the left and the right, often over race. Later research showed that an intensive campaign began on Twitter in 2013 but soon spread to Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, among other platforms. One of the major goals was to polarize the American public and spread distrust—to split us apart at the exact weak point that Madison had identified.

We now know that it's not just the Russians attacking American democracy. Before the 2019 protests in Hong Kong, China had mostly focused on domestic platforms such as WeChat. But now China is discovering how much it can do with Twitter and Facebook, for so little money, in its escalating conflict with the U.S. Given China's own advances in AI, we can expect it to become more skillful over the next few years at further dividing America and further uniting China.

In the 20th century, America's shared identity as the country leading the fight to make the world safe for democracy was a strong force that helped keep the culture and the polity together. In the 21st century, America's tech companies have rewired the world and created products that now appear to be corrosive to democracy, obstacles to

shared understanding, and destroyers of the modern tower.

Democracy After Babel

We can never return to the way things were in the pre-digital age. The norms, institutions, and forms of political participation that developed during the long era of mass communication are not going to work well now that technology has made everything so much faster and more multidirectional, and when bypassing professional gatekeepers is so easy. And yet American democracy is now operating outside the bounds of sustainability. If we do not make major changes soon, then our institutions, our political system, and our society may collapse during the next major war, pandemic, financial meltdown, or constitutional crisis.

What changes are needed? Redesigning democracy for the digital age is far beyond my abilities, but I can suggest three categories of reforms—three goals that must be achieved if democracy is to remain viable in the post-Babel era. We must harden democratic institutions so that they can withstand chronic anger and mistrust, reform social media so that it becomes less socially corrosive, and better prepare the next generation for democratic citizenship in this new age.

HARDEN DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS

Political polarization is likely to increase for the foreseeable future. Thus, whatever else we do, we must reform key institutions so that they can continue to function even if levels of anger, misinformation, and violence increase far above those we have today.

For instance, the legislative branch was designed to require compromise, yet Congress, social media, and partisan cable news channels have co-evolved such that any legislator who reaches across the aisle may face

outrage within hours from the extreme wing of her party, damaging her fundraising prospects and raising her risk of being primaried in the next election cycle.

Reforms should reduce the outsize influence of angry extremists and make legislators more responsive to the average voter in their district. One example of such a reform is to end closed party primaries, replacing them with a single, nonpartisan, open primary from which the top several candidates advance to a general election that also uses ranked-choice voting. A version of this voting system has already been implemented in Alaska, and it seems to have given Senator Lisa Murkowski more latitude to oppose former President Trump, whose favored candidate would be a threat to Murkowski in a closed Republican primary but is not in an open one.

A second way to harden democratic institutions is to reduce the power of either political party to game the system in its favor, for example by drawing its preferred electoral districts or selecting the officials who will supervise elections. These jobs should all be done in a nonpartisan way. Research on procedural justice shows that when people perceive that a process is fair, they are more likely to accept the legitimacy of a decision that goes against their interests. Just think of the damage already done to the Supreme Court's legitimacy by the Senate's Republican leadership when it blocked consideration of Merrick Garland for a seat that opened up nine months before the 2016 election, and then rushed through the appointment of Amy Coney Barrett in 2020. A widely discussed reform would end this political gamesmanship by having justices serve staggered 18-year terms so that each president makes one appointment every two years.

REFORM SOCIAL MEDIA

A democracy cannot survive if its public squares are places where people fear speaking up and where no stable consensus can be reached. Social media's empowerment of the far left, the far right, domestic trolls, and foreign agents is creating a system that looks less like democracy and more like rule by the most aggressive.

But it is within our power to reduce social media's ability to dissolve trust and foment structural stupidity. Reforms should limit the platforms' amplification of the aggressive fringes while giving more voice to what More in Common calls "the exhausted majority."

Those who oppose regulation of social media generally focus on the legitimate concern that government-mandated content restrictions will, in practice, devolve into censorship. But the main problem with social media is not that some people post fake or toxic stuff; it's that fake and outrage-inducing content can now attain a level of reach and influence that was not possible before 2009. The Facebook whistleblower Frances Haugen advocates for simple changes to the architecture of the platforms, rather than for massive and ultimately futile efforts to police all content. For example, she has suggested modifying the "Share" function on Facebook so that after any content has been shared twice, the third person in the chain must take the time to copy and paste the content into a new post. Reforms like this are not censorship; they are viewpoint-neutral and content-neutral, and they work equally well in all languages. They don't stop anyone from saying anything; they just slow the spread of content that is, on average, less likely to be true.

Perhaps the biggest single change that would reduce the toxicity of existing platforms would be user verification as a precondition for gaining the algorithmic amplification that social media offers.

Banks and other industries have “know your customer” rules so that they can’t do business with anonymous clients laundering money from criminal enterprises. Large social-media platforms should be required to do the same. That does not mean users would have to post under their real names; they could still use a pseudonym. It just means that before a platform spreads your words to millions of people, it has an obligation to verify (perhaps through a third party or nonprofit) that you are a real human being, in a particular country, and are old enough to be using the platform. This one change would wipe out most of the hundreds of millions of bots and fake accounts that currently pollute the major platforms. It would also likely reduce the frequency of death threats, rape threats, racist nastiness, and trolling more generally. Research shows that antisocial behavior becomes more common online when people feel that their identity is unknown and untraceable.

In any case, the growing evidence that social media is damaging democracy is sufficient to warrant greater oversight by a regulatory body, such as the Federal Communications Commission or the Federal Trade Commission. One of the first orders of business should be compelling the platforms to share their data and their algorithms with academic researchers.

PREPARE THE NEXT GENERATION

The members of Gen Z—those born in and after 1997—bear none of the blame for the mess we are in, but they are going to inherit it, and the preliminary signs are that older generations have prevented them from learning how to handle it.

Childhood has become more tightly circumscribed in recent generations—with less opportunity for free, unstructured play; less

unsupervised time outside; more time online. Whatever else the effects of these shifts, they have likely impeded the development of abilities needed for effective self-governance for many young adults. Unsupervised free play is nature’s way of teaching young mammals the skills they’ll need as adults, which for humans include the ability to cooperate, make and enforce rules, compromise, adjudicate conflicts, and accept defeat. A brilliant 2015 essay by the economist Steven Horwitz argued that free play prepares children for the “art of association” that Alexis de Tocqueville said was the key to the vibrancy of American democracy; he also argued that its loss posed “a serious threat to liberal societies.” A generation prevented from learning these social skills, Horwitz warned, would habitually appeal to authorities to resolve disputes and would suffer from a “coarsening of social interaction” that would “create a world of more conflict and violence.”

And while social media has eroded the art of association throughout society, it may be leaving its deepest and most enduring marks on adolescents. A surge in rates of anxiety, depression, and self-harm among American teens began suddenly in the early 2010s. (The same thing happened to Canadian and British teens, at the same time.) The cause is not known, but the timing points to social media as a substantial contributor—the surge began just as the large majority of American teens became daily users of the major platforms. Correlational and experimental studies back up the connection to depression and anxiety, as do reports from young people themselves, and from Facebook’s own research, as reported by The Wall Street Journal.

Depression makes people less likely to want to engage with new people,

ideas, and experiences. Anxiety makes new things seem more threatening. As these conditions have risen and as the lessons on nuanced social behavior learned through free play have been delayed, tolerance for diverse viewpoints and the ability to work out disputes have diminished among many young people. For example, university communities that could tolerate a range of speakers as recently as 2010 arguably began to lose that ability in subsequent years, as Gen Z began to arrive on campus. Attempts to disinvite visiting speakers rose. Students did not just say that they disagreed with visiting speakers; some said that those lectures would be dangerous, emotionally devastating, a form of violence. Because rates of teen depression and anxiety have continued to rise into the 2020s, we should expect these views to continue in the generations to follow, and indeed to become more severe.

The most important change we can make to reduce the damaging effects of social media on children is to delay entry until they have passed through puberty. Congress should update the Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act, which unwisely set the age of so-called internet adulthood (the age at which companies can collect personal information from children without parental consent) at 13 back in 1998, while making little provision for effective enforcement. The age should be raised to at least 16, and companies should be held responsible for enforcing it.

More generally, to prepare the members of the next generation for post-Babel democracy, perhaps the most important thing we can do is let them out to play. Stop starving children of the experiences they most need to become good citizens: free play in mixed-age groups of children with minimal adult supervision.

Every state should follow the lead of Utah, Oklahoma, and Texas and pass a version of the Free-Range Parenting Law that helps assure parents that they will not be investigated for neglect if their 8- or 9-year-old children are spotted playing in a park. With such laws in place, schools, educators, and public-health authorities should then encourage parents to let their kids walk to school and play in groups outside, just as more kids used to do.

Hope After Babel

The story I have told is bleak, and there is little evidence to suggest that America will return to some semblance of normalcy and stability in the next five or 10 years. Which side is going to become conciliatory? What is the likelihood that Congress will enact major reforms that strengthen democratic institutions or detoxify social media?

Yet when we look away from our dysfunctional federal government, disconnect from social media, and talk with our neighbors directly, things seem more hopeful. Most Americans in the More in Common report are members of the “exhausted majority,” which is tired of the fighting and is willing to listen to the other side and compromise. Most Americans now see that social media is having a negative impact on the country, and are becoming more aware of its damaging effects on children.

Will we do anything about it?

When Tocqueville toured the United States in the 1830s, he was impressed by the American habit of forming voluntary associations to fix local problems, rather than waiting for kings or nobles to act, as Europeans would do. That habit is still with us today. In recent years, Americans have started hundreds of groups and

organizations dedicated to building trust and friendship across the political divide, including BridgeUSA, Braver Angels (on whose board I serve), and many others listed at BridgeAlliance.us. We cannot expect Congress and the tech companies to save us. We must change ourselves and our communities.

What would it be like to live in Babel in the days after its destruction? We know. It is a time of confusion and loss. But it is also a time to reflect, listen, and build.

