

Newcomb Response

Let's begin where Professor Haidt ends:

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.

For a modern-day Rip Van Winkle (who would have only had to sleep seven years instead of 20), I would provide this article from The Atlantic (and the embedded reference articles) as about as good a place to begin as any. It provides some "bones of an outline" from which to think better about the current concerns about a) the clear and growing disconnect between truth and reality, or individual and society; b) the future of democratic governance not only in this nation but in others around the world; c) a growing sense of powerlessness and individual agency. The story of the city of Babel from the Book of Genesis illustrates the compelling power of Metaphor to capture the many threads of thought and discussion that seem to come at us from all directions in all manner of messages. As Haidt says this is not a phase and it cannot be simply categorized under tribalism

In this vein, I found Ben Yagoda's essay from 2018 especially valuable. He sets out on the quest to know "Are We Simply Hard-Wired to Delude Ourselves?", a journey that brings together and distills some of the best work on this subject.

If more proof is needed, one needs only go to Professor Haidt's other written works or more recently Anne Applebaum's article on The New Puritans { apologies if you get the pay wall)
https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2021/10/new-puritans-mob-justice-canceled/619818/?utm_source=email&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=share

But it is also a time to reflect, listen, and build.

Having read Haidt's final paragraphs, I am left with the age-old, overriding conundrum. My own implicit biases (confirmation, base-rate fallacy, availability and more) put me appropriately "in the tension" between the polarities of Optimism and Pessimism. As I read through each of Haidt's recommendations, I feel compelled to look for evidence both for and against any of these changes taking place. I want to look beyond the "availability bias" that comes from the fact that most of the news that Americans (on both sides of the divide) see is driven by monetary considerations. The cost of not attempting to use the human being's ability to use rational thinking and personal relationships seems simply too great.

There are efforts afoot to reform Key Democratic Institutions. We all can wax loquaciously there. I will offer up the work of the Problem Solvers Caucuses of both US House and US Senate who are attempting to address matters of "over-arching interest" – the outside influence of extremists, the role of money in politics, and constraints on EITHER party being able to "game the system". Delaware House Representative Lisa Blunt Rochester and Delaware Senator Chris Coons are each members of their respective Problem Solvers.

I am also in the group that believes that there is a role for our national government to play in the regulation of the monopolies of both money and information held by the mega technology companies. (Twitter if taken private gets its own consideration). It will take some care in order to find a common frame – (e.g. acknowledging the potential of limiting the “Share” function, implementing lessons learned from placing limits on money laundering (yes – I know this is a new game with decentralized finance)

I was pleased to see Haidt recommend perusing all of the members of the BridgeAlliance.us and specially to know that he has remained active and engaged with Braver Angels as they have been one of the groups that has taken action, measured outcomes, reflected and changed over their short five year history. There are many aspects to their work that are accessible to us all.

And finally, yes, there is much work to be done to help reduce the current health threats of allowing 13 year-olds to be considered adults for Internet tracking. Somehow, somewhere along the line our society decided that one had to be 16 in order to drive an automobile.

By the way, for the record, I happen to be a proud member of the “Progressive Activists” (per the More in Common folk) and recognize that at one time in life belonged to all the others. Where will an “open mind” take me next?

Respectfully submitted,

Pat Newcomb

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