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Insurrection, pandemic, and censorship

On January 6, thousands gathered in Washington, DC to hear an inciteful speech from President Trump, then forcefully breached the US Capitol Building in an effort to disrupt the peaceful transition of presidential power—an institutional foundation of democracy. Some among the mob entering the building were recorded chanting “Hang Mike Pence!,” while others beat police with pipes (even though the throngs of rioters included some off-duty police from around the country), with one officer dying of injuries. They demanded to know House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s whereabouts, vandalized property, and erected a makeshift gallows outside. They planted explosive devices at the headquarters of both political parties and stashed guns, pipe bombs, and Molotov cocktails in the vicinity.

The insurrectionists shared a set of delusions and perceived grievances: that whites are being left behind as America transitions to a more densely urbanized, multi-racial society. That Trump is a brilliant political savior (rather than a narcissistic huckster out to line his pockets and inflate his self-image). That the president’s defeat in the recent election was a fraud engineered by a broad conspiracy of liberals, moderate Republicans, the deep state, and the mainstream media. And that glory lies in emulating the “lost cause” of the Confederacy by making a brave, violent stand against perceived tyranny.

Most Americans, including many Republicans, reacted with horror (though, [according to one poll](#), 45 percent of Republicans approved the assault on the Capitol building). The backlash came rather swiftly: Twitter banned Trump permanently and Republican senators and representatives who had spent weeks parroting the president’s baseless claims of election fraud found themselves on the defensive, some facing calls to resign. Chuck Shumer, who is about to become Senate majority leader, is pushing for a no-fly list to ban insurrectionists from traveling by air to the next rally or riot.

Still, the conspiracy theories continue to proliferate. A few online “experts” have claimed the insurrection was a pre-planned set-up, designed to provide incoming president Biden with the justification for creating a police state, and designating protesters (and vaccine refusers) as “domestic terrorists.”

Right-wing message boards are currently calling for marches to surround and

occupy all 50 state capitols, and for a massive action to disrupt the inauguration on January 20. Meanwhile, 10,000 troops are on their way to Washington to supplement the Capitol Police.

All of this is occurring just as the COVID-19 pandemic is reaching its most virulent and deadly stage. On average, the US is seeing 250,000 new case per day and over 3,000 daily fatalities. As has been widely documented, this horrendous state of affairs is largely due to a failure of national leadership, along with widespread misinformation and disinformation about the disease itself, and effective ways to manage it.

The US hadn't seen a serious pandemic in a century; the current one has come along at just the moment when divisive new communication technologies and platforms are breaking down trust in traditional information sources. If the pandemic itself is literally viral, the conspiracy theories about it are figuratively so. Visit a few of the most popular conspiracy websites and you will learn that the pandemic was planned by global elites (it wasn't), that the death toll has been greatly exaggerated (it hasn't been), and that the vaccines are fraudulent means for Bill Gates to inject microchips into everyone on the planet (they aren't). This eruption of paranoid fantasy is likely just a preview of what we may see as the real challenges of the century begin to bite—including climate change, resource depletion, the deflation of the global debt bubble, and the ending of our decades-long orgy of economic growth.

If, as I argued in a recent essay, the US has entered a new violent phase in its ongoing [breakdown of consensus reality](#), then it is entirely predictable that those most responsible for maintaining the mainstream consensus will react by tamping down free expression—as happened previously during vaguely analogous moments in American history. During the Civil War, citizens in northern states could be imprisoned for singing Confederate songs or giving anti-war speeches. During World War I, authors of writings deemed seditious (including Eugene Debs) were imprisoned; activist Rose Pastor Stokes was prosecuted, in part, for writing to a newspaper: “I am for the people and the government is for the profiteers.”

Communication is the responsibility not just of individuals seeking to be heard, but also the media that spread their views. In the two periods of upheaval just mentioned, the main means of communication were books, magazines, and newspapers. Censorship was a simple, if often brutal, process. Today, most communication occurs via the internet and social media. There are far more voices seeking to be heard, and far more alternate mental “realities” are being created. Maintaining a consensus is becoming difficult to impossible. Is the answer censorship?

China offers the starkest of alternatives: there, the single-party government controls what is allowed. Online content is policed constantly—not just by blocking website and social media content, but by restricting online access. Internet platforms engage in continual self-censorship and face serious penalties if they fail to prohibit problematic content. For dissenters, rights are essentially non-existent.

Democracy requires an informed citizenry and reliably informative media. Now, largely because of the fragmenting impacts of new electronic

communication platforms, fewer people trust the media, consensus is harder to achieve, and the citizenry is as much misinformed and disinformed as it is informed. Under these circumstances, censorship may be ineffective or counterproductive. Already, the banning of pro-insurrection users on social media platforms is impacting not only their efforts to organize, but also efforts by authorities to track and pre-empt further violence. Serious insurrectionists are predictably turning to encryption, which is cheaply and widely available.

There are no easy answers, from either a technical or an ethical perspective, to this nexus of problems. It's difficult to justify maintaining free speech for one group (for example, Black Lives Matter protesters) while denying it to another (e.g., the American Freedom Party). Maintaining peace and order would seem to require bolstering the mainstream consensus; but, while that consensus has many admirable goals (democracy, civil liberties, equality of opportunity, etc.), it has generally failed to deliver on those values, especially for certain groups within society. Further, like all consensus realities, it contains blind spots. The particular blind spot onto which my colleagues and I have spent many years shining light is the false assumption that our society can continually deliver more prosperity to more people through an ever-accelerating process of degrading nature and turning it into consumer products and waste. In a capitalist society, that's a subversive claim; is it also seditious?

The best I can suggest is that we as a society draw the line at physical violence and direct calls for harm to others. Prosecute anyone who vandalizes property or injures other people in the process of making their point, along with those who knowingly incite them. Take down message boards used to plan efforts to overthrow elected leaders. Beyond that, as long as we have the internet and social media, we will probably have to live with the cognitive dissonance and fracturing of consensus reality that they facilitate. It's an uncomfortable situation, but the alternatives are worse.

We have individual responsibility for how we shape our own worldviews based on the news and opinions we "ingest." Don't assume the worst about individuals who have adopted views you find unhinged or even dangerous; sometimes they're just ordinary people who've fallen into a disinformation echo chamber. Heterodox assertions about reality are worth examining; sometimes they're right. But when you find yourself considering a novel claim or theory about what's happening and why, whether it concerns politics or the pandemic, exercise critical thinking. Has this idea been debunked? By whom? What are the verifiable facts? Be prepared to withhold judgment if the facts are unclear. The mainstream media are getting pummeled these days—sometimes for good reason. But credentialed reporting is the closest thing we have to a science of fact gathering. So, just as you should be careful not to dismiss a heterodox idea just because it's *not* mainstream, be even more leery to dismiss reportage just because it issues from, say, CNN or the *New York Times*. If you find yourself thinking, "Of course they'd say that—they're all in it together!", then think again. If your media diet is making you anxious and angry, take time out. Go for a walk in the woods—and if no woods are available, spend time in as natural an environment as you can find.

Those of us who understand the systemic crises we face have a special responsibility to build our own emotional resilience and to be open-minded so

that we can help others in our communities, who don't have that same clarity, to navigate the craziness to come.

It's a crazy world out there, and it's getting crazier. Don't add to the insanity.