General insights from: "The Intellectual Dark-Web"

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Within the modern era, personal ideology and political affiliation, in particular, have become absolutely integral components of social identity. In-group bias, and out-group prejudice based on political stance are currently more palpable than biases regarding race, religion, and other facets of personal identity (Iyengar and Westwood, 2015). It simply goes unquestioned that the bipartisan values one holds serve as an all-encompassing test of character and must be subject to incessant scrutiny and questioning, with little nuance or restraint (Peterson et al., 2017). Moreover, close personal relations across party lines have become a rarity, with people increasingly disassociating themselves from those of whom support non-partisan groups (Huber and Malhotra, 2017; Iyengar, Konitzer, and Tedin, 2018; Iyengar and Westwood, 2015; Westwood et al., 2017; Peterson et al., 2017).

Rather than working to solve issues collectively, the pressures to either wholly reject or accept ideas have become overwhelming, causing people to be avoidant and exceedingly distrustful of oppositional figures (Rowson, 2020). Suffice it to say, the parameters for amiable discourse are slimming, even though the issues we universally face are nonetheless worsening. There is no singular cause for this growing polarization; it is truly a multivalent problem. However, exogenous forces such as social media do play a significant role. Recently, a movement known as "The Intellectual Dark-Web" has taken the academic sphere within these virtual networks by storm. Furthermore, this group has indoctrinated millions of users in the last decade, effectively strengthening the already divided population.

In this paper, a brief overview of the group's most prominent partisans, Jordan Peterson and Ben Shapiro, will be posited to provide readers with some general insights on their character, online presence, and ideological standings. It will then examine three of the most fundamental cultural insights one may gain from their posterity and societal influence. Finally, the conclusion will use the previous two sections to provide possible advice to learn, understand, and confront the intrinsic behavioral issues tied to this phenomenon.

Gathering empirical, statistical, and experimental findings across various fields, the conclusion is reached that "The Intellectual Dark-Web's" rise in recent years stems from our populations' penchant for: [1]

binary approaches to complex issues, [2] sensational discourse — as opposed to nuanced, resolute dialogue — and [3] a palpable systemic aversion to alter and ameliorate the disparities which beset those living in society's margins. Although this conclusion is quite bleak, change is possible if the individual focuses on understanding those they fundamentally oppose–their agendas, the breadth of their beliefs, et cetera. This undertaking is how to mitigate this issue, and "The Intellectual Dark-Web" provides a favorable opportunity to practice this.

Introduction

Within the modern era, personal ideology and political affiliation, in particular, have become absolutely integral components of social identity. In-group bias, and out-group prejudice based on political stance are currently more palpable than biases regarding race, religion, and other facets of personal identity (Iyengar and Westwood, 2015). It simply goes unquestioned that the bipartisan values one holds serve as an all-encompassing test of character and must be subject to incessant scrutiny and questioning, with little nuance or restraint (Peterson et al., 2017). Moreover, close personal relations across party lines have become a rarity, with people increasingly disassociating themselves from those of whom support non-partisan groups (Huber and Malhotra, 2017; Iyengar, Konitzer, and Tedin, 2018; Iyengar and Westwood, 2015; Westwood et al., 2017; Peterson et al., 2017). Rather than working to solve issues collectively, the pressures to either wholly reject or accept ideas have become overwhelming, causing people to be avoidant and exceedingly distrustful of oppositional figures (Rowson, 2020). Suffice it to say, the parameters for amiable discourse are slimming, even though the issues we universally face are nonetheless worsening. There is no singular cause for this growing polarization; it is truly a multivalent problem. However, exogenous forces such as social media do play a significant role. This paper will be examining the current movement known colloquially as "The Intellectual Dark-Web" to highlight the magnitude of this heightening divide, and what insights are illuminated from its analysis and history — in addition to the ways the group's presence offers us the opportunity to transcend this binary ethos.

    "The Intellectual Dark-Web" is a virtual network of self-proclaimed cultural critics who host various media within the realm of online pseudo-academia (Weiss & Winter, 2018). This group has become ubiquitous within the modern zeitgeist on platforms such as YouTube and Twitter. They can be watched for hours espousing conservative doctrine to their predominantly male, adolescent audience in hopes of maintaining the status quo and eschewing activism (Weiss & Winter, 2018). There are many figures in this group; however, this paper will focus primarily on the two most notable members: Jordan Peterson and Ben Shapiro. Now, before going forward, this paper's overarching purpose is not to invalidate the claims of this movement — although this form of analysis will be done

to some extent throughout the work. But instead to illuminate the underlying reasons why such a group could attain such scholarly prominence in the West, and further, how the population's reception of them reflects ominous traits of the Western culture.

From the points raised hitherto, the following topics will be broken up into three components. Firstly, a brief overview of the two figures mentioned above will be posited to provide readers with some general insights on Peterson and Shapiro's character, online presence, and ideological standings. The second section will propound some of the most fundamental issues which present themselves with said ideological standings and the cultural insights one may gain from their posterity. Finally, the third component will use the previous two to provide possible advice to learn, understand, and confront the intrinsic behavioral issues tied to this phenomenon.

Preliminary analysis

It would be somewhat impetuous to deal with these two figures interchangeably as many of their views differ markedly. That said, where both seem to be analogous is found in the culturally symptomatic effects of their fame. So, for clarity and the preemption of misrepresentation, a short biography of both will be mentioned separately. By doing this, the similarities will present themselves naturally; thus, paving the way for critiques to be posited jointly.

Jordan Peterson

Raised in Northern Alberta, Dr. Jordan Peterson worked extensively in various fields, acquiring a diverse professional background and a distinctive amalgam of personality traits (Peterson, 2021). Amongst the litany of pursuits Peterson has embarked on, the most prominent and long-lasting are author, professor of psychology at the University of Toronto, and clinical psychologist (Peterson, 2021). Peterson has contributed to and published more than 100 scientific papers, furthering research in psychological academia on subjects including creativity, competence, and personality. He has produced three highly esteemed non-fiction books–*Maps of Meaning: The Architecture of Belief, Beyond Order: 12 More Rules for Life* and *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos*–all of which hastily became international bestsellers and, what many consider, culturally important pieces (Peterson, 2021). Peterson's online presence has been apparent since 2013 when he began posting his lectures on YouTube. Yet, his proverbial claim to fame came in 2016, not long after the release of his 12 Rules for Life, after said lectures went viral, propelling him into intellectual prominence within various countries (Peterson, 2021). Currently, Peterson can be watched across myriad media platforms. He frequents numerous podcasts and television series — The Joe Rogan Experience, The H3H3 Podcast, and The Rubin Report, to

name a few — in addition to the preexisting platforms he himself hosts (Peterson, 2021).

The indomitable influence of Peterson is undeniable, and his work within the field of psychology is undoubtedly inspiring. Many students have characterized him as life-altering, and the rules he explicates in his books are innocuous enough to be deemed constructively insightful (University of Toronto, 2021). Moreover, within the contemporaneous climate of formidable economic competition from developing countries, the instantiation of artificial intelligence in employment, and a generation of youths likely to be poorer than their parents, his advice regarding individual growth certainly can push many onto auspicious paths — that of which rely on forces within one's control (Rowson, 2020). Despite this, he strays from worthy approbation because of his beguiling political artifice and the behavioral contradiction this politicization manifests. He can often be found imploring his followers to be non-political if their lives are not in complete order and because the preponderance of his watchers is young adults, what he means by this is that anyone who experiences familial "disorder" (most, if not all people) must avoid any advocacy for systemic change, and conversely, take his word as gospel (Robinson, 2018). This critique may seem to be a stretch; however, when one considers the impracticality of telling adolescents to avoid activism if they experience any personal quandary — often of which persist due to the political systems in place — it truly is not.

What is more, his success in the mainstream can be primarily attributed to the political arguments he posits. Notably, Peterson received considerable attention for speaking out against Bill C-16 at a Senate committee hearing in 2016, claiming that the legislation was based on totalitarian precepts and infringed one's free speech (Chiose, 2017). For insight, the bill's fundamental purpose is to forestall hate crimes against transgender citizens in Canada by adding gender identity and expression to associated laws (Minister of Justice, 2016). Peterson's behavior during this time illuminates many issues, but two primarily. Firstly, by openly opposing the acts of government, Peterson flippantly contradicts his own advice. According to him, one should not "dare" try to tamper with the machinations of society if they have not established a consolidated knowledge base within the field (Harvard University, 2017). Once again, Peterson is a psychologist whose work has specialized in myth, religious belief, and personality assessment, not politics. The second issue this presents stems from the blatant inaccuracy of Peterson's conviction. Nowhere in the Criminal Code are pronouns referenced; meaning, their misuse alone would not constitute illicit action (Minister of Justice, 2016). So, either Peterson grossly misunderstood the bill, or he used it as a helpful platform to express his distaste towards transgenderism, specifically, and progressivism, generally. Considering he discusses his anomalously high IQ at length, the latter is much more likely (Psychology Insight, 2018). This examination is anecdotal, so it would be wrong to

make any swift judgments from it, but what is interesting about Peterson is his uncanny ability to avoid standing behind the stances he holds. Peterson crafts his arguments in such a calculated fashion that only he knows what is truly meant by his words, making valid criticism incredibly difficult (Rowson, 2020). He also presents an acute proclivity to shift between "reflective, iconoclastic, avuncular, demagogic, compassionate, scientific, and philosophical modes of communicating," which further muddies genuine understanding and possible dissent (Rowson, 2020). Such is evident in interviews like Channel 4 News' 2018 special, in which interviewer Cathy Newman attempts to pigeonhole the doctor for half an hour (Channel 4 News, 2018). To her own misfortune, Newman failed in this instance, and was subsequently the subject of Peterson's truculent fanbase's wrath (Burn, 2019).

What can be said for certain about Peterson's political tendencies is that he holds Judeo-Christian values, and the work of forgotten thinkers like Piaget and Carl Jung — particularly in terms of Jung's conception of Jungian archetypes — in high regard, dislikes neo-Marxism, activism (including climate and feminist movements), bureaucratic intervention, postmodernism and identity politics of any sort, and puts a strong emphasis on individual responsibility and naturalism. These sentiments will be elaborated upon below. In short, the virtual phenomenon of Jordan Peterson is "powerful because it is built on academic prestige, fueled by personal charisma, and driven by oppositional identities" (Rowson, 2020).

Ben Shapiro

Born in 1984, Shapiro was raised devoutly Jewish in a wealthy household in Burbank, California (Premiere Speakers Bureau, 2021). At 17, he was hired by Creators Syndicate, becoming the youngest nationally syndicated columnist in the United States — an impressive feat (Premiere Speakers Bureau, 2021). After being accredited with a law degree from Harvard, he gained substantive notoriety, publishing articles on various acclaimed media platforms (Premiere Speakers Bureau, 2021). Furthermore, his divisive axioms and idiosyncratic distinctiveness gained him a cult-like following, becoming the subject and compatriot of public intellectual discourse in the West (Premiere Speakers Bureau, 2021). He authored several national bestsellers–amongst the likes of titles such as: Brainwashed: *How Universities Indoctrinate America's Youth (2004)*, and *Porn Generation: How Social Liberalism Is Corrupting Our Future (2005)* — most of which contemptuously oppose modern social progressivism, neo-Marxism, and liberal values as a whole, while laterally cajoling the eminence of Judeo-Christian values in the process (Premiere Speakers Bureau, 2021). He currently serves as chief editor and emeritus for The Daily Wire, a platform he founded, and hosts daily podcasts on The Ben Shapiro Show (Premiere Speakers Bureau, 2021). Unlike Peterson, Shapiro is the archetypal religious conservative, even extending to his well-groomed appearance. Notably, he is a Trump

apologist/supporter, saying he would vote for him in the 2020 election because he was "simply wrong on...policy" during the 2016 election, and because of Democrats losing "their f---ing minds" (Shapiro, 2020; Halon, 2020).

Regarding his convictions apart from policy, he openly dislikes the maxims of new age feminism, and believes that it is fundamentally altering the fabric of society for the worse. In a Q&A session in 2017, Shapiro had this to say when asked a question about "rape culture" in America:

I keep saying: tell me what you want me to do, and I'll do it...if you show me a rapist, like Harvey Weinstein allegedly is, then I will say send him to jail or castrate him. Right? Like, this is not difficult. But if you just say to me: "you don't acknowledge the rape culture," again, I need you to define that, and I need you to define what I did. Like really. I didn't do anything...

He goes on to say:

Feminist theory says that [sexual assault] is bad because of power imbalances but the...libertarian culture of the left suggests that power imbalance doesn't have anything to do with it. If I feel like trading my body for a part in a movie, well, that's my business and if you say differently than you're slut-shaming. Well, you can't really have it both ways, either it's bad or it's not bad and if we are going to fight sexual harassment and sexual assault it seems to me that we have to do a couple of things. One: we have to reinvest sex with value beyond just a physical transaction. It's not just two people getting each other's "rocks off", it actually means something beyond that...and [2]: we need to re-inculcate in men themselves not just the "teach men not to rape" routine...My dad never sat me down and said: "Son, don't rape people." What my dad taught me was to be a gentleman and to treat women with respect and that has to do with...recognizing differences in sex roles. One of the things that's happening is the traditional masculinity, the idea that it is a man's job to protect women — this is one of our jobs as...men — the feminist movement doesn't like that. Well, then you can't blame us for not protecting women if you don't want us to protect women (Shapiro, 2017).

Additionally, when Shapiro partook in the transgender debate — Caitlyn Jenner's transition specifically — he expressed his distaste vehemently:

Okay, forget about the disrespect, facts don't care about your feelings. It turns out that every chromosome, every cell in Caitlyn Jenner's body, is male, with the exception of some of his sperm cells. ... It turns out that he

still has all of his male appendages. How he feels on the inside is irrelevant to the question of his biological self (Shapiro, 2015).

Along with these relatively antiquated, surely controversial opinions, Shapiro openly admits to his skepticism on matters pertaining to climate change, white privilege, abortion, and systemic racism (Johnston, 2020). Despite the expansive range of issues he discusses publicly, a commonality amongst his views is the utilization of naturalism — or, the naturalist fallacy — as the comprehensive basis of all societal machinations in the West (The Economist, 2019). This is contrary to what most postmodernists believe, which is that environmental factors also play an essential role in the trajectory of one's life–alongside human biology (Rowson, 2020).

Shapiro has been prone to contradict previous statements he has made, yet — to his own misfortune — his views are consistent enough to allow fellow public intellectuals a platform for dissent and critique, dissimilar to Peterson. What truly differentiates Shapiro from other conservatives, however, is the reach of his cultural influence. Whether this is from his actual intellectual prowess or from the fact that he recites facts so quickly during debates that one does not have enough time to reflect on what is genuinely being said, his ability to gain millions of unfaltering disciples is remarkable. As this paper is being written, Shapiro has more than 3 million subscribers and approximately 416 million views on YouTube alone (Urgo, 2021).

So, if it is true that the politics of this movement are based on a personal vendetta, an overreliance on naturalism, prejudice, and convoluted jargon and much less so on "facts and logic," why have both parties received such popularity within the public intellectual sphere? And despite the valid criticism they *do* receive, could there be some extent of autotelic value to their fame and ubiquity?[1] The former of these two questions will be considered immediately below, while the latter will be covered towards the end of the paper.

Culturally symptomatic

Many of whom study the work of Peterson and Shapiro — and "The Intellectual Dark-Web" entirely — are befuddled by their rise and influence. Although this confusion is not unfounded, there indeed are attributable causes that explain this. The following will attempt to explicate what these are and how they present unfortunate truths of Western culture and the mechanics of human behavior at large.

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1 The term "autotelic" is denoted as an individual, creative work, or activity having an end or purpose in and of itself. In this instance, it is making reference to the potential inherent value derived from "The Intellectual Dark-Web's" presence in academic, and public discourse (Oxford University Press, 1901).

Political binaries

The pervasion of social media, in recent years, has effectively altered the dialectic platforms by which consumers process information and develop beliefs (Cinelli, Morales, Galeazzi, Quattrociocchi, & Starnini, 2021). In terms of political discourse specifically, these networks have been found rather ideologically homogeneous (Messing, 2013; Peterson et al., 2017). That is to say, the personalized algorithms used on these networks reinforce users' pre-existing political beliefs by continuously feeding them partisan information. For those who frequently use these platforms, the result is a more polarized and unidimensional outlook on issues, as little effort is needed to encounter analogous ideologies. Understanding this implicates users to concertedly search for varying opinions rather than acquiesce with the algorithmic avalanche of the self-serving, biased material they see every day. However, whether users do this is somewhat of a mixed bag according to experimental and statistical findings.

Psychological phenomena such as confirmation bias, selective exposure theory, and cognitive dissonance would lead one to assume one's natural inclination is to be constantly seeking out echo chambers (Peterson et al., 2017). Although most users indeed exhibit strong proclivities to favor information and ideologies which adhere to their pre-existing beliefs, this does not necessarily mean they actively avoid non-partisan outlets (Cinelli, Morales, Galeazzi, Quattrociocchi, & Starnini, 2021). The available research on echo chambers is confusing and subject to frequent change. As mentioned already, the personalized algorithms of social media networks make it seamless to stay within a bubble of like-minded individuals. And this has adverse consequences as it instantiates environments in which the individual opinion, political stance, or belief is perpetually confirmed in discourse with peers and interaction with sources of similar conviction (Cinelli, Morales, Galeazzi, Quattrociocchi, & Starnini, 2021). Even those who actively seek out non-partisan news experience similar polarizing effects. A group led by Duke University's Christopher Bail paid a small fee to roughly 1600 Twitter users to follow an automated account that would retweet figures spanning the entire political spectrum (Robson, 2018). What was found was that these users developed less nuanced, more radical beliefs than before and were, in fact, more confident in their prior beliefs (Robson, 2018). Some have speculated that this stems from the psychological tendencies motivated reasoning and moral licensing (Robson, 2018). For context, motivated reasoning is when one devotes more cognitive resources to dismiss evidence that violates their views, causing ideological obstinance. On the other hand, moral licensing is the unconscious belief that open-mindedness in one situation entitles prejudice later. An example of moral licensing could be found in the findings of a 2008 study, in which participants were more likely to show a racist stance if they voted for Barack Obama during the previous election (Robson, 2018). Notwithstanding the scattered data on the matter, one fact remains — that

we are now more polarized than ever before. Conversely, one of the foremost symptoms of this grander issue is its ability to create political binaries (Cinelli, Morales, Galeazzi, Quattrociocchi, & Starnini, 2021).

Such political binaries are evident when thinking about the conventions of broadcast media, in which oppositional guests present their arguments in tandem to elucidate either side of a problem (Rowson, 2020). Yet, such issues are never so dualistic in response, and approaching them in this way gerrymanders the crises to limit reactive imagination. This convention is the essential fallacy the mainstream finds itself. The margins for holistic discourse are so slim in public debate that attendees are subject to choosing either end of the ideological spectrum. One is rarely allowed "to be curious but disinterested"; instead, it is imperative that one side of the coin is chosen and subsequently advocated for or against (Rowson, 2020). This fact is evident in Peterson's aforementioned Channel 4 News debate, in which both he and Cathy Newman present their sides with conspicuous obstinance (Channel 4 News, 2018). That is to say, the arguments were not expressed dialectically, and neither side sought resolution, nor was it even slightly apparent that the dialogue was to serve the purpose of acknowledging, understanding, and analyzing the varying perspectives on the matter. It was purely a right/wrong, *either/or* narrative that could only prove which two could debate more effectively. Such is also the case in a BBC interview with Shapiro and conservative journalist Andrew Neil (BBC news, 2019). The moment Neil challenges the opinions propounded in one of Shapiro's books, he is swiftly met with a fast-paced diatribe, in which Shapiro attempts to polarize the conversation. He does this by pegging Neil, and BBC as a whole, as a left-wing opinionative platform — as opposed to what it claims to be, which is centrist — refusing to answer the questions posed (BBC news, 2019). This subtle quality is found in many of the debates with Peterson and Shapiro. A perfervid *either/or* mentality: "defining to exclude, reducing to explain, and narrating as if there was one story, and they are up against the *both/and* insistence of postmodernism," in which convictions are significantly more malleable (Rowson, 2020). The result of this discrete approach typically incites a sense of truth and authority in their remarks. It so too vindicates the rightfulness of the status quo, which comforts those who find themselves averse to change — this will be discussed further later in the paper.

Such binary thinking can be found in both figures' distaste for postmodernism. This disdain is expressed plainly in the 2017 Manning Centre Conference in Ottawa, Ontario, which Peterson spoke at:

Peterson: ...and what you're up against [postmodernism] is far more than you know or think, and it's a much more well-developed and pervasive, pernicious, nihilistic, intellectually attractive doctrine than has yet come to public realization. It absolutely dominates the humanities and increasingly the social sciences and universities (Peterson, 2017).

As well as during a 2018 episode of Dave Rubin's show, The Rubin Report, where, in similar vituperative fashion, Peterson discusses this issue alongside Shapiro, who can be seen across from Peterson nodding in assent throughout:

Peterson: There really was an attempt on the part of the postmodernists, and this is allied, I think, with their fundamental Marxism, to demolish the idea of the autonomous individual...You have to believe in the autonomous individual, and the postmodernists and neo-Marxists, they don't. They believe that the individual is a mouthpiece for a power assembly and that there's no such thing as free speech, which is why they [have] no platform (Peterson, 2018).

These statements are contrary to what postmodernism actually is–a labyrinth of differing opinions that one must navigate through and learn from (Rowson, 2020). Peterson and Shapiro consistently bypass these nuances, or the *both/and* approach, restressing the absolutist *either/or* mentality to divide positions and gain authority over their counterpart. This rhetoric neglects the importance of context and the uniqueness of social issues. Nevertheless, it is highly coaxing for those who want simple, digestible answers to such questions (Rowson, 2020).

This *either/or* mentality further shows itself in both figures' advocacy of individual responsibility. Peterson and Shapiro explicate the notion that one must be hypervigilant in their life and discard concern for broader issues outside of their control (Rowson, 2020; The Economist, 2019). No one could argue that vigilance and personal responsibility are important traits in leading a successful life. But why is it unfeasible for the average person to have a sense of personal responsibility while also having a passion for issues they have little control over? For example, global warming is widely considered an environmental issue, but it is also in desperate need of communal change in every echelon of society. It does not solely call for personal tending but requires widespread cultural and democratic reform (Rowson, 2020).

Whether or not either Shapiro or Peterson would like to admit it, this *either/or* tendency aligns closely with facets of Manichaeism (Rowson, 2020; The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1998).[2] Although Manichaean views fail to coincide with the diverse, multivalent world in which we all reside, they are omnipresent in human behavior–as per the anthropological work of structuralist thinkers like Claude Levi-Strauss. Furthermore, this appeal towards binary thinking partially accounts for the

2 Manichaeism was a religious movement founded by the Persian prophet Mani in the third century; it teaches a dualistic cosmology of good and evil, light and darkness, and is used figuratively to refer to moral binaries (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1998).

widespread appeal of these two figures (Rowson, 2020; The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1998).

Attraction to the sensational
The virtual climate of today is saturated with differing opinions and ideological microclimates, which suffuse various media platforms and are typically processed into, and presented via, fragmented, digestible titbits to yield greater traction (Cinelli, Morales, Galeazzi, Quattrociocchi, & Starnini, 2021). One does have a degree of autonomy over how they present themselves online; yet, more often is the case that this is decided by exogenous variants — such as medium and context (Rowson, 2020). Shapiro and Peterson are placed within an environment where the agendas are predicated on hyper-sensationalization and political divisiveness–as highlighted above — and because of this, the ideas which are covered publicly are those which polarize issues most scornfully, further reinforcing echo chambers, extreme politics, and the dwindling of amicable dialogue (Cinelli, Morales, Galeazzi, Quattrociocchi, & Starnini, 2021; Rowson, 2020). In a recent research paper discussing the significance of echo chambers during the 2016 United States elections, it was found that the coverage of scandalous news was the most prevalent media category in contrast to policy, strategy, and event-based coverage by more than double (Peterson et al., 2017). This partiality towards dramatic discourse excites circumstances which would otherwise be monotonous; that said, it also distracts watchers, and inhibits adequate discussion on the most pressing of issues.

With these notions in mind, both figures are rendered mere performance acts (Rowson, 2020). One must be then wary to assume their entire following are by those who are entirely like-minded. Rather, it is much more likely to be a mixture of both conservatives and those who purely derive entertainment from their sophistry and personas. For example, an elderly Caucasian man who is averse to progressivism and the notion of white privilege may have no interest in politics, nor be ideologically congruent with right-wing reactionary figures, yet will nonetheless be able to receive vindication and entertainment value from a Fox News interview with Shapiro, in which he "dismantles" systemic racism and the indoctrination of neo-Marxism in universities. Although their ideas surely influence watchers' minds, millions follow along not for the content but the dramatic tenor of their work (Rowson, 2020). Regarding Peterson in particular, this also extends into his literary accolades.

Constantly, Peterson is stated as a grossly misinterpreted intellectual, so much so that his followers can construe his doctrines as fascist, moribund, and conspiratorial on one end, or progressive and revolutionary on the other (Robinson, 2018). Now, arguments can be made that the former's interpretation of Peterson manifests within left-wing dogmatic parameters; yet, when one examines his literary work extensively, it

quickly becomes apparent that this could only account for part of these false impressions (Robinson, 2018). Peterson's proclivity, as mentioned earlier, to abstract and gerrymander ideas via the use of inaccessible jargon and incoherent prose leaves so much to the imagination that only he can honestly know what the meaning of his statements are. Furthermore, his academic verbosity allows him to produce lengthy manifestos extrapolating insights from convoluted, unprovable, yet un-disprovable hypotheses to rationalize virtually any epistemic issue (Robinson, 2018). What is essential to note here is that this rhetorical maneuvering masquerade universal truisms and obtuse assumptions as insightful, novel, and profound declarations. It is not to say that his work is devoid of utility, but instead that it materializes a tone of authority by which readers are then forced to overly extend the importance of parts of his work that ring true into the illogical arguments as well. The following proverb encapsulates Peterson's work nicely: "what's new in it isn't true, and what's true isn't new" (Robinson, 2018).

These points may be seen as a digression from the overarching argument, being the mainstream's attraction to sensational discourse; though, the connection arises when examining sociologist C. Wright Mills' book: *The Sociological Imagination* (Robinson, 2018; Gitlin & Mills, 2000). In his work, Mills reveals that most people tend towards this literary style, as it is received almost analogously to that of a puzzle in need of solving (Gitlin & Mills, 2000). Essentially, the invigorating quality of Peterson's work stems from its convolution because when one actually deduces what the major points being made are, the more accomplished and intelligent they will feel and appear, respectively (Robinson, 2018).

In sum, the current hyperbolizing nature of information diffusion highlights Western culture's predilection for sensational, divisive, and dramatic discourse over communicative, malleable, and resolution-based dialogue. This concern may not seem overly problematic, but when one considers the crises that existentially threaten the lives of billions worldwide, this tendency could not be more irresponsible.

Fear of change

The supposition that Canada and America are meritocracies is flawed. If it were not, then the work of eminent social-contract thinkers like John Rawls would be devoid of any syllogistic efficacy — which is not the case (Duignan, 2005). The systemic barriers that beset groups on society's margins are so abundantly visible that it would take a conscious effort to ignore them. These issues are not viewed within an ideological prism either — as both figures would like you to believe — but are, in fact, highly statistically consolidated notions that take shape in innumerable nefarious ways. Such crises as the prison-industrial complex, African-American academic male underachievement, a preponderance of single-parent households within Black populations, and higher rates of suicide

within transgender communities are not natural phenomena, nor are they based in the undesirable subcultural praxis of these groups (Cummings, 2012; Statista, 2021; Toomey, Syvertsen, & Shramko, 2018; Welch, 2008). Those living in the poorest regions of New York City, for example, are dying from coronavirus at more than double the rate of those in wealthy areas. Moreover, the affected neighborhoods are predominantly Black and Latino citizens (Durkin, 2020). But what exactly does this prove? It really depends on the assumptions one forms on the matter — there are many. A progressive would be inclined to think that centuries of systemic prejudice has rendered minorities' ability to create wealth and purchase real estate in affluent areas difficult. An example of such systemic impediments was seen in federally sanctioned housing policy, which allowed solely White citizens property in suburban areas at prices lower than inner-city rents paid by Black citizens during the twentieth century (Johnston, 2020). They may also reach the conclusion that these individuals likely have lived in the same region their whole lives, and escaping poverty is an even more insurmountable task than the former and typically causes — *is not the cause of* — the crises stated above, effectively reinforcing the vicious circle (Johnston, 2020). Alternatively, someone who is averse to change would attribute this issue to a culture of delinquency and negligence, or more extremely, a biological inability to act rationally. This idea is by no means presumptuous, as both Peterson and Shapiro avidly refute the basic existence of systemic racism, rendering the only cause of these problems as individualized, natural, or cultural inadequacies (Johnston, 2020). In fact, Shapiro has been completely forthright with this conviction. In a 2017 770KTTH Radio debate with Shapiro, alongside two Black Lives Matter activists/academics, he articulates the following sally when asked to explain the reasons why such drastic racial wealth disparities exist in America:

Mediator: Given this disparity, how can you argue that racism is not a driving factor in income inequality?

Shapiro: Because it has nothing to do with race and everything to do with culture. And when you have a culture...you know what? You explain to me...why Black kids aren't graduating high school...Explain to me why Black kids are shooting each other [at] rates significantly higher than whites are shooting each other. Explain to me why thirteen percent of the population is responsible for fifty percent of the murder. Explain to me...why the number of Blacks and Black kids in prison — not for innocent reasons, not for walking down the street and getting pulled into a prison — is so high. If it has nothing to do with culture, explain to me why the single motherhood rate in the black community jumped from twenty percent to seventy percent in the same course of time that the civil rights movement has made such tremendous strides? Is America more racist now

than it was in 1960? And if it is, please explain to me how that happened (Shapiro, 2017).

The point being made here is that these issues are symptoms of broader, socio-historic maltreatment and nations founded on exclusionary laws and institutions. To assume that they manifest in a vacuum is to say that historical context has no bearing on the present day. This presupposition is not only vacuous and myopic but dangerous in the process of reform. But because these systems are so deeply seated within the cultural ethos, altering and ameliorating them can be incredibly daunting to those of whom benefit most from their existence (Rowson, 2020). Thus, it is understandable why two cis-gendered Caucasian men would put such a strong emphasis on individual responsibility and personal agency as they are the prime beneficiaries of said systems, and by admitting the need for higher-order change, they would effectively be jeopardizing their advantages.

The idea of systemic change clearly frightens both Peterson and Shapiro tremendously. Both can often be seen trivializing the issues postmodernist progressives bring to light, while simultaneously grossly overstating their negative ramifications on society. With respect to Peterson, such is evident in a lecture he gave in 2018, in which he discusses intersectionality. Here we see Peterson go from minimizing the sentiment of intersectionality by characterizing it as a mere "game", to then swiftly shifting tone, expressing the notion that it would "kill us all" if not immediately ousted (Peterson, 2018). This behavior is, so too, seen in a video posted by Shapiro in 2020, entitled: *Ben Shapiro Debunks Viral "Systemic Racism Explained."* The title is obviously self-explanatory, but for context regarding the dissonant rhetoric, Shapiro is seen attacking every point raised for the existence of systemic racism, while further claiming that Democrats want Black citizens to be rejected for better educational facilities; and moreover, that if it was up to the repugnant "Left", this would be the reality for minorities (Shapiro, 2020).

Scholars like Edward Said illuminate in their work this palpable intransigence of culture (Said, 1993). And moral psychologists like Jonathan Haidt further consolidate this idea via experimental studies. Haidt found that conservatives exhibited a keen antipathy to anything which threatens the existing cultural praxis. Moreover, that personal survival dwarfs social-justice issues in their constellation of worries in contrast to liberals (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009).

It is not to say that reform in this capacity is impossible. But when prominent field leaders tell younger generations that they should look to those of whom are ostensibly considered most competent, the population's propensity to change weakens. This weakening stems from the fact that those with the most economical and political dominion have historically acted with insincere objectives (Wilkin, 1997). As we have now seen, broadcast media has a proclivity to depict issues within binary terms; yet

this illustrates the paradoxical nature of this dilemma. The paradox which exists is this: broadcast media aims to amuse first and foremost, and the means to this end is divisive material; that being said, the agenda that underlies this discourse is encrusted with the interests of power, which is fundamentally one-sided. Therefore, in the absence of censorship, media can be seen fervently dissenting, competing, and occasionally exposing institutional malfeasance, so as to portray themselves as spokespeople for free speech and egalitarianism, but simultaneously operate within stringent parameters, which effectively limit the nature of such critiques. This, conversely, creates stark disparities in command of resources. In their book *Manufacturing Consent*, Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky elucidate what these parameters are:

The essential ingredients of our propaganda model, or set of news "filters," fall under the following headings: (I) the size, concentrated ownership, owner wealth, and profit orientation of the dominant mass-media firms; (~) advertising as the primary income source of the mass media; (3) the reliance of the media on information provided by government, business, and "experts" funded and approved by these primary sources and agents of power; (4) "flak" as a means of disciplining the media; and (5) "anticommunism" as a national religion and control mechanism. These elements interact with and reinforce one another. The raw material of news must pass through successive filters, leaving only the cleansed residue fit to print (Chomsky & Herman, 1988).

So, it is true that a progressive attendee of a nationally broadcasted outlet can be watched disagreeing with Jordan Peterson or Ben Shapiro on issues such as healthcare policy in America. However, the conversation can never cross into "communist" territory, as that would undermine the firm's underlying interests. Or another example, one can portray themselves as a liberal thinker in America; however, on issues such as the Israel-Palestine debate, their convictions will almost undoubtedly lie within the dominative interest — notwithstanding the ideological contradiction it may present. This narrows the scope of intellectual discussion in the West, but it also allows watchers the ability to convince themselves that they interpret the material objectively, wholly irrespective of the filtering constraints present (Chomsky & Herman, 1988).

Regarding intellectuals, Chomsky in particular explicates the privileges which have been, and currently are honed by this group, and further, how their disconnect from the masses contributes to their consistent labors in the service of power (Wilkin, 1997). Moreover, since activism arises when those who lack these privileges — and any effective authority for that matter — sense this abdication and resort to collective action, Shapiro and Peterson's consistent attempts to eschew their successes offer weight to Chomsky's hypotheses (Rowson, 2020).

Ultimately, these theories materialize one necessary potentiality, and one essential implication. Firstly, a possibility exists in which Shapiro and Peterson's agendas are self-serving and that their doctrines are simply vehicles to maintain the current order of society. Both figures–but Peterson especially, being a clinical psychologist–are equipped with the tools needed to view issues from alternative perspectives and use this ability to produce convictions that benefit the greatest number of people. Yet, both continuously exhibit a shrewd disinclination to do so (Rowson, 2020). It may not be entirely malignant agendas that prompt them to espouse what they do, but by refusing to view issues through the lens of others, the consequences remain the same regardless. The implication, resulting from the former, is that we, as a collective, should be somewhat wary of their instruction and penchant to unwaveringly refer to those most competent for advice and corresponding reactions.

Opportunity for improvement

Earlier on, a question was posed regarding whether or not the presence of "The Intellectual Dark-Web" proves any autotelic value. Hitherto, it may be challenging to realize how this could be. Yet, its utility presents itself in the opportunity it provides for individual and cultural growth and the insights gatherable from analyses. In this sense, it is not as much of an autotelic value as it is a figuratively testing one.

As we have now considered, the echo chamber effect — which is fostered by the platforms these figures reside in — has dramatically narrowed the scope of intellectual discourse (Cinelli, Morales, Galeazzi, Quattrociocchi, & Starnini, 2021). One's first inclination is to be reactive and ideologically binary rather than open and resolute. What is more, the conventions of mainstream media have historically worsened this issue by concertedly limiting reactive imagination in the service of elites and by their hyper-fixation on scandalous content. Concerning Shapiro and Peterson, the former insight is clear, as they are either avidly supported or wholly rejected with very few in between. This divisiveness is a detrimental problem within today's culture because it exacerbates groupthink, eschews complexity, and pushes belief systems to conservative extremities (Cinelli, Morales, Galeazzi, Quattrociocchi, & Starnini, 2021; Rowson, 2020; Peterson et al., 2017). That being said, change is possible if the individual focuses on understanding those they fundamentally oppose — their agendas, the breadth of their beliefs, et cetera. This undertaking is how to mitigate this issue, and "The Intellectual Dark-Web" provides a favorable opportunity to practice this.

Ideological maturation

Thinkers such as Robert Kegan assert the evolution of consciousness theory as the mechanisms by which people create meaning from their memories (The University of Tennessee Health Science Centre, 2021). Moreover, if a degree of maturation is not reached, one will tend towards

obstinate modes of thinking. The first stage — "self-authorship" — is possibly where Peterson and Shapiro lie, as seen by their unidimensional patterns of thought. But what this manifests is a cogent exhibition and opportunity for followers — dissenting and assenting, alike — to utilize their presence to reach the "self-transforming mind" or "inter-individual stages of consciousness" (the subsequent modes to self-authorship) (Rowson, 2020; The University of Tennessee Health Science Centre, 2021). Tantamount to the philosophy of Fallibilism, in the later stage of growth, one develops a deep comprehension of the numerable perspectives on their perceptual processes, and consequently, begins to decipher their personal ideologies (Fieser & Dowden, 1995; The University of Tennessee Health Science Centre, 2021).

From this point, the capacity for empathy and connection with broader groups of people expands, seeing as the individual no longer filtrates others' experiences through their own lens (Rowson, 2020). Practically speaking, this can be enacted via actively pursuing dialogue with those you disagree with and working to create a *both/and* mentality rather than an *either/or* one. If all attain this, those with varying ideologies and beliefs would see others as people who have been placed in and inculcated into an environment where they believe their convictions to be accurate and with whom they must resolve issues collectively. A twelfth-century monk from Saxony, Hugo of St. Victor, wonderfully encapsulates this sentiment in the following excerpt:

It is therefore, a source of great virtue for the practiced mind to learn, bit by bit, first to change about in visible and transitory things, so that afterwards it may be able to leave them behind altogether. The person who finds his homeland sweet is still a tender beginner; he to whom every soil is as his native one is already strong; but he is perfect to whom the entire world is as a foreign place. The tender soul has fixed his love on one spot in the world; the strong person has extended his love to all places; the perfect man has extinguished his (Hugo of St. Victor, Taylor 1961; Said, 1993).

Although this quote is referring specifically to imperial and provincial ideological limits, it nonetheless fits when thinking about the politico-social ideologies we hold. Of course, the world in which this conception exists is a naive one; notwithstanding, smaller, incremental steps can be — and have been — taken to progress towards this panacea. An instance of this is seen in a 2014 ABC News Q&A with several panelists, which all arrive with drastically different ontological convictions. The three which contrast most are: Lawrence Krauss (esteemed author, astrophysicist, and atheist), Gene Robinson (the first openly homosexual man to be ordained in the Catholic church), and Fred Nile (leader of the Christian Democratic Party). The special showcases a spirited back-and-forth regarding epistemological and political questions between all five attendees.

However, at one point, Robinson is posed with a question as to whether or not he could convince Krauss of the existence of God. His response was as follows:

I have no need to convince Lawrence Krauss of anything…I am delighted to affirm the appropriate role of reason; I don't see it as an either/or. I see it as a both/and. I think we can be reasonable, logical, scientific people…and be religious. There is no conflict between religion and science. Science tells us what happens, and religion tells us who made it happen (Robinson, 2014).

Agree or not with this response, it is clear that Robinson overcame the dualistic makeup of the question by illuminating the inherently unrelated service both studies enact practically and epistemically on society (ABC News, 2014). It may seem as though this answer is inconsequential in the grand scheme of things, but what needs to be realized here is that conflicting beliefs do not always have to divide people, and by transcending this Manichaean tendency, solutions are reached much faster.

Conclusion

To conclude, it is both true that religion has led to mass genocide, overwhelming crimes against humanity, contradictive behavior, *and* it has the potential to console those in need and instill positive morals into its followers. Conversely, climate change imminently threatens humanity, and things must change immediately to combat its spread; *and* unfortunately, inaccurate models depict specific details on the matter (Rowson, 2020). The axioms and conventions of democracy are abrogated incessantly within countries that practice it *and* it is still the paramount societal ideal to operate under but is nonetheless in need of refinement and repurposing for the current virtual age (Rowson, 2020). Communism has failed in some countries and has been gerrymandered by the powers that be, *and* theoretically *as well as* ideologically, it is a noble idea that can benefit all in society. As issues — such as the four above — continuously disorient and beset those in every echelon of society, the need for malleable thinking and the discontinuation of an *us/them, either/or* mentality are crucial to reach solutions effectively. In the words of Raymond Williams: "*unlearning...the inherent dominative mode*" (Said, 1979, pg. 28). What is more, when the realization occurs that putting preconceived notions aside and approaching opposing groups with a sense of humility does not infringe moral judgment, nor change objective truths, all will benefit incalculably.

Points for further inquiry

The purpose of this paper was not to completely encapsulate the issues posed, nor did it, by any means, contain all pertinent information of either Peterson or Shapiro. It was simply to elucidate a number of problems

which manifest in work produced by "The Intellectual Dark-Web" and cultural insights gathered from their rise in recent years. If the subject is of interest to you, it is crucial to look beyond this paper to grasp the scope of the matter. Two notable documents, which this piece took significantly from, are: Nathan J. Robinson: "The Intellectual We Deserve;" and Jonathan Rowson's: "An Epistemic Thunderstorm: What We Learned and Failed to Learn from Jordan Peterson's Rise to Fame."

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