

Opinion | OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

# Social Media Is Making Us Dumber. Here's Exhibit A.

By JESSE SINGAL JAN. 11, 2018

This week, a video surfaced of a Harvard professor, Steven Pinker, which appeared to show him lauding members of a racist movement. The clip, which was pulled from a November event at Harvard put on by Spiked magazine, showed Mr. Pinker referring to “the often highly literate, highly intelligent people who gravitate to the alt-right” and calling them “internet savvy” and “media savvy.”

The clip went viral. The right celebrated; the left fumed. The neo-Nazi Daily Stormer website ran an article headlined, in part, “Harvard Jew Professor Admits the Alt-Right Is Right About Everything.” A tweet of the video published by the self-described “Right-Wing Rabble-Rouser” Alex Witoslawski got hundreds of retweets, including one from the white-nationalist leader Richard Spencer.

“Steven Pinker has long been a darling of the white supremacist ‘alt-right,’”

noted the lefty journalist Ben Norton. “And he returns the favor.” Others reacted to the rumor with simple exasperation: “Christ on a crutch,” said the liberal commentator and biologist PZ Myers, who also wrote a blog post denouncing Mr. Pinker for this supposed alliance.

The idea that Mr. Pinker, a liberal, Jewish psychology professor, is a fan of a racist, anti-Semitic online movement is absurd on its face, so it might be tempting to roll your eyes and dismiss this blowup as just another instance of social media doing what it does best: generating outrage.

But it’s actually a worthwhile episode to unpack, because it highlights a disturbing, worsening tendency in social media in which tribal allegiances are replacing shared empirical understandings of the world. Or maybe “subtribal” is the more precise, fitting term to use here. It’s one thing to say that left and right disagree on simple facts about the world — this sort of informational Balkanization has been going on for a while and long predates Twitter. What social media is doing is slicing the salami thinner and thinner, as it were, making it harder even for people who are otherwise in general ideological agreement to agree on basic facts about news events.

That’s because the pernicious social dynamics of these online spaces hammer home the idea that anyone who disagrees with you on any controversial subject, even a little bit, is incorrigibly dumb or evil or suspect. On a wide and expanding range of issues, there’s no such thing as good-faith disagreement.

The online anger aimed at Mr. Pinker provides a perfect case study.

The clip was deeply misleading. If you watch the whole eight-minute video from which it was culled, it’s clear that Mr. Pinker’s entire point is that the alt-right’s beliefs are false and illogical — but that the left needs to do a better job fighting against them.

The clip begins with Mr. Pinker saying he agrees with the other panelists (two journalists and a lawyer) that “political correctness has done an enormous amount of harm in the sliver of the population that might be — I wouldn’t want to say ‘persuadable,’ but certainly whose affiliation might be up for grabs.” This problem presents itself when it comes to “the often highly literate, highly intelligent people

who gravitate to the alt-right: internet savvy, media savvy, who often are radicalized in that way, who ‘swallow the red pill,’ as the saying goes, the allusion from ‘The Matrix.’”

Mr. Pinker goes on to argue that when members of this group encounter, for the first time, ideas that he believes to be frowned upon or suppressed in liberal circles — that most suicide bombers are Muslim or that members of different racial groups commit crimes at different rates — they are “immediately infected with both the feeling of outrage that these truths are unsayable” and are provided with “no defense against taking them to what we might consider to be rather repellent conclusions.”

That’s unfortunate, Mr. Pinker argues, because while someone might use these facts to support bigoted views, that needn’t be the case, because “for each one of these facts, there are very powerful counterarguments for why they don’t license racism and sexism and anarcho-capitalism and so on.”

He then goes on to carefully explain those counterarguments: For example, while at the moment it’s true that, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the homicide rate is higher for blacks than for whites, that doesn’t really tell us anything about a group of people since at different times in history, different groups have had elevated crime rates — at one point Irish-Americans did. By that same token, he says, “the majority of domestic terrorism is committed by right-wing extremist groups,” not Muslims.

It would be impossible for a reasonable person to watch the eight-minute video and come away thinking Mr. Pinker’s point is to praise the alt-right rather than to make a psychological argument about political correctness, alt-right recruitment and how to better fight that movement’s bigoted ideas

Now, maybe you disagree with certain parts of this argument — I do, in that I think Mr. Pinker overstates the intensity of campus political correctness — but it’s hard to have that debate in the first place when such a wildly skewed version of Mr. Pinker’s point is spreading like wildfire on the internet.

Steven Pinker will be O.K. A fleeting Twitter blowup isn’t going to bruise his long and successful career as a public intellectual. But this is happening more and

more — and in many cases to people who don't have the standing and reputation he does.

It's getting harder and harder to talk about anything controversial online without every single utterance of an opinion immediately being caricatured by opportunistic outrage-mongers, at which point everyone, afraid to be caught exposed in the skirmish that's about to break out, rushes for the safety of their ideological battlements, where they can safely scream out their righteousness in unison. In this case: "Steven Pinker said the alt-right is good! But the alt-right is bad! We must defend this principle!"

This is making us dumber.

Jesse Singal (@jessesingal) is a contributing writer for New York magazine and is working on a book about why social-science ideas go viral.

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