

LEARNING TO AVOID EXTREMISM

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ABSTRACT. Democracies are calling on schools to respond to a rise in extremist ideologies and actions. In this article Sigal Ben-Porath situates the rise in extremism within the broader context of political polarization. She suggests that the latter is a more appropriate target for school intervention than the former. She further suggests that addressing polarization can result in a reduction in extremism, and that polarization can be addressed by refocusing the use of existing teaching and learning tools, rather than by instituting new forms of intervention such as the Prevent strategy used in the UK. Tackling polarization through media literacy and the development of democratic habits can help rectify false beliefs, which contribute both to broad political polarization and to individuals' slide toward extremism. Focusing on strengthening knowledge as well as social ties can fortify individuals' and communities' resilience against extremism, as well as build bridges and connect people to a sense of shared fate across political divides. These practices are more effective and more justified than targeting individual students who are suspected of holding radical beliefs.

KEY WORDS. Prevent strategy; youth extremism; free speech; civic education

INTRODUCTION

Launched in the UK in 2003, the Prevent strategy was meant to address public concerns regarding "home grown" terrorism. The strategy aims "to stop people becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism."¹ "Prevent 2" was launched in 2011 and focuses on identifying individuals at risk of, or vulnerable to, radicalization, and referring them to an antiradicalization mentoring program. In 2015, legislation created a statutory Prevent duty on schools, universities, and National Health Services trusts, among other public sector entities, to have "due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism."² This duty requires teachers, among other professionals, to identify individuals at risk of being drawn into terrorism, including violent and nonviolent "extremism," for referral to a police-led multi-agency program that purports to support such individuals.³ The pressure to respond to extremism is understandable, but the focus on referrals to law enforcement is misguided. Given the eroding basis of knowledge and values

1. HM Government, *Prevent Strategy*, June 2011, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/97976/prevent-strategy-review.pdf. See also the more current CONTEST, see *Counter-Terrorism Strategy (CONTEST) 2018*, June 2018, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/counter-terrorism-strategy-contest-2018>.

2. HM Government, *Prevent Strategy*, 6, para. 3.8.

3. See the discussion in the Open Society Justice Initiative's publication, *Eroding Trust: The UK's Prevent Counter-Extremism Strategy in Health and Education* (New York: Open Society Foundations, 2016), https://www.justiceinitiative.org/uploads/f87bd3ad-50fb-42d0-95a8-54ba85dce818/eroding-trust-20161017_0.pdf.

in many contemporary democracies, both polarization and extremism are on the rise, contributing to an increasing democratic erosion. After discussing these disturbing trends in a bit more detail, I turn to discussing what schools can do in response. The role I suggest for teachers in addressing these concerns is more robust, less individualized, and more legitimate than the one demanded by the Prevent strategy.

Policymakers and researchers are scrambling to find out the reasons for the growth in extremism, and to develop ways to address it and to minimize its impact, including through interventions that aim to identify and report extremists in schools. Most work countering violent extremism has focused on improving law enforcement or surveillance and monitoring efforts, or on de-radicalization programs — all of which target individuals and groups already at the core of such movements.

Extremist political views are commonly understood through the spatial metaphor of individuals or groups standing far to the edges of mainstream social-political views. They are located at the extreme ends of the political spectrum and can be understood as the tails or margins of a bell curve. The Prevent definition describes extremist views as standing in opposition to key liberal democratic values or “fundamental British values.” Their definition is based on this spatial metaphor: most citizens’ views are crowded in the middle, covered by a set of shared values that they endorse, while extremists sit at the edges of the spectrum, outside the cover of shared political visions and values. Those who adhere to “common British values” believe in “democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs.” Extremists, on the other hand, express “vocal or active opposition” to these values.⁴

However, this understanding of extremism is based on two inaccurate assumptions. First, the assumption that a vast majority of citizens congregate at the center of the political spectrum is no longer accurate in many democratic countries, if it ever was. Many democratic countries today, and particularly the UK and the US, which are the focus of my attention here, are living through a period of significant polarization. Hence the metaphoric picture we should have in mind when envisioning the political spectrum is better represented by two distinct peaks connected by a low center. The political spectrum today accommodates two significantly distant views, with attendant values, visions, aspirations, and sometimes epistemologies. The two camps are often at odds, and each of them — to varying degrees — gives rise to some extreme views.

4. HM Government, *Prevent Strategy*, 107.

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Furthermore, extreme ideologies are depicted by Prevent and similar policies as though they stand in opposition to a set of shared values (liberty, tolerance, etc.). Under this view, extremism is an adherence to values that stand in opposition to mainstream ones, values that run counter to the liberal-democratic aspirational (or real) order. I suggest that while low commitment to democratic values can be a defining feature of extremist views, one that can be addressed by schools, another key difference between those who espouse extremist views and those who do not is not solely a matter of values, but also an epistemological matter, or a matter of knowledge. The realities to which extremists respond are distinct because the information that they rely on and their knowledge of relevant realities are distinct and, more often than not, misguided and unfounded.

A focus on the influence of knowledge and truth (or their converse, ignorance and misinformation) on the development of political views, particularly on the extreme ends, can help explain the ways in which the fractured perception of reality that informs the polarized public sphere pushes those on its extremes further away from social, political, and scientific truths. As a result of polarization, extremism is more pronounced and more detached from the possibility of shared practices for acquiring knowledge. This epistemic phenomenon, along with differences in liberal values and democratic habits, animate extremism and should be the focus of social and educational responses.

As I argue below, addressing extremism is thus not simply a matter of introducing or inculcating values, but rather also a matter of helping students develop the skills that would allow them to discern facts from lies and the attitudes required to reject the latter. Note that these are two distinct steps here — first, recognizing true knowledge, reliable facts, or well-grounded assumptions,⁵ and second, accepting them as such. Both steps are tightly connected to the main goals of schooling, namely, the expansion of one's knowledge and the development of intellectual or epistemic strengths. Further, their cultivation is made possible in the context of an inclusive learning community, which enables the threading of the civic fabric, the creation of shared knowledge, and the reintegration of extremists into a shared public sphere. These processes are more relevant, and more easily incorporated, into educational relationships and existing learning processes than through imparting an externally determined set of values in school. It is vital to recognize that this view of education, and the role of addressing extremism within it, rests on a foundation of strong protection of open inquiry and open expression, and is therefore distinct in both principle and practice to the strategies advocated by the Prevent policy and similar anti-extremism acts. Thus, the fight against extremism, properly understood, can be seen as a dimension of the key educational mission of schools rather than an add-on political mission.

5. I remain agnostic here about the definition of true knowledge, which is why I offer alternative concepts along with it. Whatever one's position is about core epistemological (or ontological) questions, a democracy depends on a minimal shared perception of key facets of reality, and on processes for identifying, amending, and correcting those shared perceptions.

TWO CASES

An early adherent to the most bizarre current forms of conspiratorial thinking, 28-year-old Edgar Maddison Welch drove with his assault rifle from North Carolina to Washington, DC, in December 2016, intent on saving children from sexual slavery in the basement of a popular pizza joint. He was arrested after firing his gun into the restaurant and served about three years in federal prison.

As I was reading the news about this incident, I had the odd feeling that his beliefs were familiar to me. Almost a decade ago, a close friend started sharing with me similar “realizations” she was exposed to online and through some of her new friends. An engineer by training and profession, she was going through a period of personal crisis when she started sending my way YouTube videos, DVDs, and various lectures and “proofs” reflecting an amalgam of strange ideas: some people are in fact lizards in disguise; the lizards are aliens, or maybe a cabal of globalists who are looking to control the world’s population. Though Jewish, like me, she did not hear the anti-Semitic tones of these revelations. These lizard would-be rulers feed on a hormone produced by fear. They control the results of elections, so there is no point in voting or looking to politics or the government for solutions. No matter my response, she kept going, and was quickly far beyond discussion, beyond the reach of my reason and arguments, beyond our years-long friendship. While the obsession with pedophilia and sexual exploitation, so central to the QAnon conspiracy, was not a part of her newly acquired worldview, many of the elements that would later typify this extremist cult were right there, a decade earlier, circulating on the internet and saturating the “wellness community” sphere of communications. In workshops on well-being and meditation, in yoga retreats that I kept avoiding despite exhortations from my friend to give them a try, the same messages were repeated. The world is not what it seems — it is more dangerous and full of sinister forces. Do not trust official information, or even your own eyes. Trust only the messengers of this alternative truth, whose voices echo in their own information circles, revealing more and more of their imagined reality as you keep on digging.

The insistence that the true facts presented by experts or by testimony are not facts at all but rather hoaxes, lies, or mistakes characterizes many politicized debates today. Such rejection leads to the development of echo chambers, both online and in direct interactions. As Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Joseph Cappella note, those who inhabit an echo chamber distrust those outside of it and work to systematically isolate themselves and those who share their beliefs from outside epistemic sources.⁶ In differentiating echo chambers from information bubbles, C. Thi Nguyen focuses on the intentional rejection by members of the former of contradictory information when it is presented or becomes available, and the centrality of mistrust in this rejection. As he notes, an echo chamber depends on more than mere participation in a partisan, limited, or one-sided context, and

6. Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Joseph N. Cappella, *Echo Chamber: Rush Limbaugh and the Conservative Media Establishment* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2008).

requires active discrediting of alternative (truthful) information. An echo chamber is an “epistemic community which creates significant disparity of trust between members and non-members ... by excluding non-members through epistemic discrediting. ... [G]eneral agreement with some core set of beliefs is a prerequisite for membership.”⁷

My friend’s journey into conspiracy-laden echo chambers represents a break from reality, and the views she continues to espouse rely on ongoing amplification from the virtual and real-life echo chambers she chooses to inhabit.

My friend is very different from Edgar Welch, although both seem to be garnering their information from echo chambers and willingly accepting it as true. She never threatened or planned, let alone executed, any violent action. While she tried to convince me and others to accept her misguided vision, the conversation never turned confrontational. Still, if you analyzed her views side by side with his, you would find many similarities. Surely, if they were both just a few years younger, sharing a classroom bench and disclosing their views, their teacher might not find reason to distinguish between them, at least until Welch packed a gun and drove off to DC.

What should this similarity tell us in terms of our expectations of teachers? If teachers are expected to identify extremist patterns of thought and belief, both cases I describe here could potentially represent students caught up in the net. And there is good reason to identify these students — they both seem to veer off from reality and toward a misguided, unfounded, and at least potentially antisocial view. But I want to suggest that while it would be prudent of their teacher to note these changes in their views and beliefs, a social and legal expectation of her to report these changes to administrators or to law enforcement would be unjustified in such cases (contrary to cases in which students are clearly posing a threat to their peers). The expectations of teachers with regard to students who are exhibiting other behavior changes can reasonably be related to trying to correct students’ views and help them reassess their perspectives, rather than to mark them as a social or political threat. There are two key reasons for this claim. The first is that to mark them as outside the realm of reasonable social debate is based on a mischaracterization of the current state of this debate. I address this reason in the next section, as I discuss the notion of extremism, its current manifestations, and the ways in which it is improperly described in the Prevent policy.

Another reason that policymakers should not expect teachers to identify and report students who hold extreme views has to do with the core mission of teachers and schools. This mission does require that teachers address misconceptions such as the ones held by (the student version of) my friend or Welch. However, legal, political, familial, and educational considerations call for a decidedly different response from the one required by Prevent, one focused on knowledge and

7. C. Thi Nguyen, “Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles,” *Episteme* 17, no. 2 (2020): 146.

understanding, and rooted in trust rather than based on suspicion and reporting of values and beliefs that are perceived to be a threat.

While this assumption is sometimes overly optimistic, and while there are contexts in which the effort to identify and respond to extremism are rooted in bigotry and especially anti-Muslim views, I will proceed with the assumption of good faith neutrality in the definition of extremism that is used in the Prevent policy and similar efforts in other democracies. The next section situates the discussion of extremism within the current context of polarization, for the purpose of assessing the educational policies and practices that might be useful in responding to both.

POLARIZATION AND THE LOST MIDDLE GROUND

The demand that schools address the rise of extremism comes at a time in which radicalization and polarization both dominate the public debate. Recent years have seen a rise in various measures that assess the number, influence, and positions of extremism (especially on the far right).⁸ In many democratic countries the number of hate groups and total members of hate groups, social media presences of white supremacist groups, and domestic terrorism arrests are all on the rise. To counter hate-based extremism and the violence it breeds it is important to clearly identify and define it. A clear definition of the target actions, memberships, groups, or behaviors is crucial for the development of an effective set of responses, but also to maintain a democratic standpoint. Addressing extremism — preventing it, punishing extremist acts, creating policies and practices that are aimed at minimizing its influence — requires actions that are on the boundaries of democratic permissibility. To preserve democracy while fighting its enemies, the latter have to be defined clearly and narrowly, lest the actions against them undermine the very causes of democracy. In other words, if democracies target individuals for their views, thoughts, and even general aims (as distinct from concrete violent plans or behaviors), democratic legitimacy erodes. Therefore, a clear understanding of what is extremism and who is an extremist is necessary for democratic institutions, including schools.

The effort to effectively identify and delineate what views and positions constitute extremism is complicated by the current climate of increasing polarization. Ideological polarization has drawn a lot of attention in recent years, as many democracies are experiencing political rifts around core policy issues, sometimes along with the rise of controversial political figures who elicit strong populist emotions among voters. Multiple culprits are identified in the literature on this process of polarization, including party elites who worry about primary challenges or are ideological hardliners; a rise in social sorting that hastens the

8. See, for example, Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Samuel Hodgson, *Skinhead, Saints, and (National) Socialists: An Overview of the Transnational White Supremacist Extremist Movement* (Washington, DC: Foundation for Defense of Democracies Press, June 2021), <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2021/06/14/skinheads-saints-and-national-socialists/>.

loss of civic friendship⁹ and drives like-minded groups further along the ideological spectrum,¹⁰ and information bubbles and echo chambers that assist in sorting or that draw people into propaganda networks.¹¹ The origins of this polarization process are not central to the current discussion, which focuses on the ways in which schools and teachers should address it. While they may have a role and ability to respond, it does not seem that schools and teachers can change in ways that would prevent or reverse these social processes.¹² Generally speaking, the literature identifies various conditions that promote stronger identification with one's in-group and hostility toward those perceived as members of the out-group, including multigenerational experiences of oppression, bigotry, and exclusion, as well as more recent local histories related to shifting economic opportunities.¹³ This increased hostility among identity groups is exacerbated by growing social mistrust, which itself increases as a result of the inclination to access information that aligns with one's identity, values, ideology, and convictions. Refusing to access challenging or corrective information, and rejecting it when encountering it serendipitously, escalates the process of social distancing (in the ideological sense), and supports motivated reasoning and willful ignorance.¹⁴

The complex origins and multiple descriptions of the process of polarization is indicative of the fact that ideological shifts cannot simply be characterized as citizens, spread along a left–right continuum, moving further toward the margins of the distribution. Questions of symmetry and asymmetry of the realignment remain, as well as the need to describe the changes more richly so as to understand them. Still, political realignment on policy matters as well as new coalitions of voters require a reassessment of the political map, especially in the context of

9. Alan Abramowitz, *The Polarized Public: Why American Government Is So Dysfunctional* (Boston: Pearson, 2013).

10. Robert B. Talisse, *Overdoing Democracy: Why We Must Put Politics in Its Place* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019); Cass Sunstein, *Going to Extremes: How Like Minds Unite and Divide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); and Bill Bishop, *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America Is Tearing Us Apart* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2009).

11. Nguyen, "Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles"; and Yochai Benkler, Robert Faris, and Hal Roberts, *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

12. A caveat: if the "eroding civic friendship" etiology of the current political state is accurate, then schools are one key institution that contributes to sorting by race, class, and other factors; integrating schools more effectively can contribute to reversing this trend. But this integration needs to be done at the legislative and political level, rather than be taken on by schools themselves.

13. Brendan Nyhan, "How Misinformation and Polarization Affect American Democracy," in *Social Media, Political Polarization, and Political Disinformation: A Review of the Scientific Literature*, ed. Joshua Tucker (Menlo Park, CA: Hewlett Foundation, 2018).

14. Brendan Nyhan, "Why the Backfire Effect Does Not Explain the Durability of Political Misperceptions," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 118, no. 15 (2021): <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1912440117>.

identifying and responding to extreme views.¹⁵ New political camps have evolved, which can be described in terms of a rift between a coalition of citizens who favor current structures and institutions, and a coalition of those who are looking to build a new sociopolitical order. In both camps one can find members of what used to be called the left and the right. A different characterization of political realignment draws attention to the rift between those who align with global economic development and relations, and those who look to isolate the national economy and its workers (as represented in the new nationalism in the US, and in the separation of the UK from the European Union). Some see class as key to the redistribution of political affiliations, while others point to race as the main organizing force of the American political order. However described, it seems evident that the civic fabric in many contemporary democracies is being pulled in many directions, to the point of fraying. Individuals who can be described as extremists can no longer be seen simply as positioned on the far edges of a bell curve, with a stable and moderate central majority. Rather, they are more comfortably situated along the crowded edges of a shifting map.

Extremist views alone cannot therefore easily be identified spatially on an ideological map. In addition, the notion that a vast majority of members in contemporary democracies hold a shared set of values has no backing in empirical findings, and to the extent that there are some values that can be identified as shared, they are too thin to motivate collective action. That might be lamentable in some ways, but it is also a positive representation of value pluralism, a core commitment of liberal democracies. Holding diverse views and policy positions, including distasteful and misinformed ones, is not in itself a justification for punishment in a democracy. To address those individuals on the margins of the distribution of views, democratic principles demand that the focus remains not on policing thoughts or views, but rather on looking to identify individuals who find themselves drawn to act aggressively against others. To do that, what matters most is not so much policy views, but attitudes toward fellow citizens and the subsequent stances, such as lack of trust and increased disdain, that they engender. Significantly, it is important to attend to the *actions* that these stances motivate, such as the ones that were on public display in the United States during the insurrection at the US Capitol building on January 6, 2021. Negative attitudes about both some fellow citizens and democracy itself are rising, indicating that the rise in support for authoritarian populism continues to be a significant trend.¹⁶ These trends correlate with partisan antipathy¹⁷ or, more broadly, with negative

15. Liliana Mason, "I Disrespectfully Agree': The Differential Effects of Partisan Sorting on Social and Issue Polarization," *American Journal of Political Science* 59, no. 1 (2015): 128–145, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/ajps.12089>.

16. Yascha Mounk and Roberto Stefan Foa, "The Signs of Deconsolidation," *Journal of Democracy* 28, no. 1 (2017): 5–16.

17. See Pew Research Center, "Partisanship and Political Animosity in 2016," June 22, 2016, <https://www.people-press.org/2016/06/22/partisanship-and-political-animosity-in-2016/>; M. J. Brandt, Geoffrey Wetherell, and Jarret T. Crawford, "Moralization and Intolerance of Ideological Outgroups,"

attitudes toward people who hold opinions that are different from or opposite to one's own. Recently, Kevin Vallier has argued that "social and political distrust and partisan divergence are mutually reinforcing"¹⁸ — divergence, or the distance between ideological positions, and social and political distrust create a feedback loop. The more we feel that adherents to the other ideology are distinct from us in significant and deep ways, the more we tend to judge them as unfit for sharing decision-making power, and as unworthy of our good faith. Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart have warned that the spread of authoritarian populism and increased political polarization might undermine people's trust in the principles of liberal democracy itself.¹⁹ Ideological and geographic distance alone does not in itself undermine civic ties, but once groups are ossified into positions of rivalry, the spinning away from each other has begun. Then, antipathy and a sense of alienation develop — a sense that members of the other group are not just distant, but are different in some normatively and civically significant ways. This antipathy is entrenched and strengthened through exposure to ideological media that feeds on suspicion and mistrust, and in turn enhances them.²⁰ That results in reduced trust, because of an assumption of bad faith or bad motives on the part of members of the other group, or at least a sense that they are sufficiently different so as not to be properly understood. As a result of this process of distancing, alienation, and erosion of trust, groups find themselves in positions that offer limited incentives or capacities to act together for shared or common goals. These belligerent forms of partisan polarization — like other forms of belligerent citizenship — can erode the commitment to democratic principles, and to democracy itself.²¹

Within this context of polarization, the permission structures for extremism are expanding. Polarization as a collective epistemic practice denotes the distribution of beliefs across a group, and suggests a missing or diminished center in the distribution. Extremism places a person or sub-group holding certain beliefs at the far end of the distribution of beliefs. To address extremism, the broader distribution of knowledge and beliefs needs to be attended to; a response to extremism is made

in *The Social Psychology of Morality*, ed. Joseph P. Forgas, Lee Jussim, and Paul A.M. Van Lange (New York: Routledge, 2016), 239–256; and Shanto Iyengar and Sean J. Westwood, "Fear and Loathing across Party Lines: New Evidence on Group Polarization," *American Journal of Political Science* 59, no. 3 (2014): 690–707.

18. Kevin Vallier, *Trust in a Polarized Age* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2020), 9.

19. Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

20. See a theoretical framing of this media phenomenon in the current age, and a large-scale data analysis of traditional and new media showing how it operates, in Yochai Benkler, Robert Farris, and Hai Roberts, *Propaganda Network, Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2018).

21. Recently, Matthew Graham and Milan Svoblik found voters with strong partisan identities were willing to vote for party-aligned candidates even when they promote values. See Matthew H. Graham and Milan W. Svoblik, "Democracy in America? Partisanship, Polarization, and the Robustness of Support for Democracy in the United States," *American Political Science Review* 114, no. 2 (2020): 392–409.

more democratically justified by attending to the broader conditions that make it possible. Similar to the necessity of attending to democratic practices during war and ensuring that its violence and inhumanity do not come to define social and political practice on the home front — what I described in earlier work as “belligerent citizenship”²² — so do nations experiencing a period of significant polarization need to attend to their democratic and civic practices.

Both polarization and extremism today are cultivated and enhanced through virtual networks and platforms. While these phenomena are of course not new, it is important to understand the current ways in which young people especially are recruited and radicalized through engagement online, through anything from wellness communities to gaming platforms. The centrality of these virtual contexts in the global spread of extremist ideas and actions is only beginning to be recognized by research.²³ Concepts like “fake news” and hostility toward the media, and conspiracy theories like QAnon, may often start in the US, but they readily spread through global virtual networks and can be found in similar forms in countries from Australia to Israel to Japan, and in many of the right-wing political forums in Europe. These online forums often serve as a key information provider for adherents — already converted, or newly curious — of extremist ideologies. These virtual connections support the spread of disinformation and cultivate radical thought, and they provide a sense of connection and affiliation. That connection mitigates the feeling of social isolation that is part of the process of radicalization.

Understanding these social processes can help craft an educational policy that responds to them by supporting the effort to overcome the sense of alienation, the grouping of “us” and “them,” and the social mistrust that these phenomena breed. The educational efforts discussed in the next section can help alleviate both polarization and some of the drivers of extremism. They are focused on the broad aim of creating a learning community that advances knowledge, and on the generation and expansion of this knowledge through a shared process of discovery. This shared process is part of the rethreading of the frayed civic fabric, taken up not in addition to the educational process or as a mandate and requirement to identify potential risks among students, but rather as part of the basic mission of schools to advance knowledge and social affiliation.

WHAT SCHOOLS SHOULD AND SHOULD NOT DO

In response to the processes described in the previous section, schools should focus in the vast majority of cases not on individual students who may espouse extremist or radical views (the method described as “deradicalization”), but rather on the larger effort to address increasing polarization, and especially affective polarization and the diminished trust it espouses. As other papers in this symposium

22. Sigal Ben-Porath, *Citizenship under Fire: Democratic Education in Times of Conflict* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

23. See Cynthia Miller-Idriss, *Hate in the Homeland: The New Global Far Right* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020).

note,²⁴ an approach that addresses all students and aims to cultivate both personal capacities and social ties is more justified than one that singles out students who are seen as outliers (and that therefore runs the risk of reinforcing their sense of alienation). Schools should focus on depolarization rather than on deradicalization, and their emphasis should be civic and universal to all students rather than punitive and individualized. This suggestion is even stronger for the younger ages.

Shifting attention to the early stages in which young individuals are drawn to consider extremist ideologies is meant to offer them an alternative path before they veer off course. Reaching young people before and during the radicalization process is suggested to help law enforcement through engagement with partners (coaches, teachers, school counselors, and others) who can help reconnect young people to their peers and to acceptable institutions, thus helping them avoid extremist ideation and especially action. This effort has parallels in various countries, including the United States (through the US Department of Homeland Security's whole-of-society approach to addressing terrorism, which directs law enforcement officials to work with local service providers and civil society partners).²⁵

In these ways, the charge that British schools receive from the government to identify and intervene in cases that raise their concern is appropriate in specific instances.²⁶ Extremist groups prey on the vulnerabilities, traumas, and unaddressed social needs of young people, and invite them to receive support by joining their group, while casting the blame for any suffering or loss on other recognizable groups (immigrants, racial groups, non-believers, etc.). Schools are well-positioned to identify young people who are experiencing such vulnerabilities, and the Prevent strategy might offer them a way to refer these young people to support services that can help mitigate these needs, which in itself is a benefit, and can also help alleviate some of the needs that could cause them to join radical groups. Beyond reporting and referrals, schools are positioned to implement what experts call bottom-up approaches, which focus on those who are vulnerable to extremist recruitment, and on building personal and communal resilience to resist radicalization.²⁷ The focus on vulnerabilities that can make people more receptive to extreme ideas draws attention to the need to offer alternative pathways for young

24. See, in particular, Dianne Gereluk, "A Whole-School Approach to Address Youth Radicalization," and Doret de Ruyter and Stijn Sieckelincx, "Creating Caring and Just Democratic Schools to Prevent Extremism," both in this issue.

25. See, for example, the Department of Homeland Security's 2021 budget request for Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention and Protection, available at https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/dhs_tvtp_omb_fact_sheet_10_feb_2020_final_0.pdf.

26. For information about how this duty is currently implemented, see Joel Busher, Tufyal Choudhury, and Paul Thomas, "The Enactment of the Counter-Terrorism 'Prevent Duty' in British Schools and Colleges," *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 12, no. 3 (2019): 440–462.

27. Miller-Idriss, *Hate in the Homeland*; and Michele Grossman, Kristin Hadfield, Philip Jefferies, Vivian Gerrand, and Michael Ungar, "Youth Resilience to Violent Extremism: Development and Validation of the BRAVE Measure," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 34, no. 3 (2020): 468–488, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2019.1705283>.

people to address their needs, instead of turning to violence or joining extremist groups.

At the same time, this preventive approach has to be mindful of a few shortcomings and risks it poses, which together provide decisive reasons against making schools responsible for identifying and addressing specific students' potentially extremist views.

First, the demand that teachers identify and refer these young people to law enforcement or similar official interventions can undermine the trusting relationship between teacher and student, which is necessary for learning (and which is also a precondition for the student confiding their needs to the teacher).²⁸ Many minority and immigrant communities, as well as communities of color, already have strained relationships with law enforcement, and a referral can reasonably raise concerns for the student and their family members, regardless of the justification for the referral.²⁹

In addition to concerns about community/law enforcement relations, addressing potential vulnerability to extremism requires that teachers (and others) attend to the cognitive aspects of radicalization, or in other words, that they assess what is happening inside students' heads. Of course, this process is already a regular part of a teacher's role, whether she is attempting to assess a student's understanding or is concerned about their mood or motivation. But when it comes to assessing views, beliefs, and positions for the purpose of referral to law enforcement, or raising concerns and reporting in other ways, teachers are put in a difficult position.

Given common contemporary processes of radicalization, it is evident that schools have limited access to detecting and understanding students' state of mind and political leanings.

Moreover, and practically speaking, most of these behaviors are happening online in contexts that schools would have a hard time accessing and monitoring. The two examples provided at the start illustrate this complication. How would assessing what is happening in each of these young person's heads benefit the effort to prevent the decision that one of them has made to act in a violent manner? The content of their views and ideas was quite similar. Likewise, younger children who openly share their views in school, in person, might easily be misinterpreted when the framework provided for the teacher is one that focuses on identifying extremist ideology, as was the case of the four-year-old child who was referred after discussing Fortnite with his friends.³⁰

28. See Open Society Justice Initiative, *Eroding Trust*.

29. Marie Breen-Smyth, "Theorising the 'Suspect Community': Counterterrorism, Security Practices, and the Public Imagination," *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 7, no. 2 (2014): 223–240.

30. Joshua Stein and Mark Townsend, "Muslim Boy, 4, Was Referred to Prevent over Game of Fortnite," *The Guardian*, August 31, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/jan/31/muslim-boy-4-was-referred-to-prevent-over-game-of-fortnite>.

Legally speaking, speech protections vary widely across national boundaries, and legal protections for student speech vary even within national borders. But a normative legal account would recognize that policing students' views, beliefs, and attitudes can significantly chill their democratic and civic rights to express their views. As a result, they would not be able to develop their voices in such a way that would permit them to see themselves as current and future equal members of a democratic society.

Additionally, monitoring and punishing student speech does not happen on an equal basis. Students who are members of racial, ethnic, and religious minorities tend to be over-policed and over-punished for their expressive behavior. This inequity is true both within and outside of schools, and relates to the responses of diverse authority figures to young (and older) members of marginalized groups. Thus, giving school authorities greater powers over students' expression would further permit discriminating actions against these young people.³¹

As a matter of democratic and civic practice, students should feel free to express and share their views in and out of class. The knowledge that they are monitored and could be subject to reporting and punitive measures would hinder the free exchange of ideas, which is necessary both for the development of knowledge and for the airing and possible correction of mistakes, including extremist, bigoted, or even violent views. The framing of the intervention as a form of "safeguarding" akin to maintaining children's safety from abuse is unhelpful here, as many have noted.³²

In addition to these school-based and student expressive rights arguments, parents too might have a claim against schools intervening in their children's views and beliefs. Sometimes these views would be learned at home, shared by parents, or possibly supported by parents who do not share them: what the school might see as extremist views, parents might see as a phase their child is going through, as an exploration, or even as laudable forays into political engagement. If the student is merely thinking and speaking about ideas, and their parents are supportive (whether or not they share the views), a response by the school could overstep the family's legitimately protected boundaries.

Given all these limitations, can schools legitimately respond to concerns regarding students who might be developing extremist views?

The response to concerns about extremism in schools, or about students who might be prone to radicalization, has to be rooted in general democratic and educational principles. It should advance the schools' mission in democratic ways and, at best, be connected to its epistemic and social goals. The most important goal for schools, at any time and especially in times of polarization and rising

31. See Lee Jerome, Alex Elwick, and Raza Kazim, "The Impact of the Prevent Duty on Schools," *British Educational Research Journal* 45, no. 4 (2019): 821–837.

32. See, for example, Lee Jerome and Joel Busher, *The Prevent Duty in Education* (London: Palgrave Pivot, 2020).

extremism, is to prepare students for their roles as citizens. Strengthening students' capacities to make their voices heard in the democratic context in an informed and effective way, and to listen to others and work in collaboration with them, are at the heart of the work of schools.

A legitimate approach to addressing concerns about youth radicalization, therefore, would be rooted in an understanding of the epistemic and social conditions of this process, and respond to them using tools that stem from the core mission of schools. I next suggest a key component of responding to the epistemic aspects of radicalization and extremism — implementing shared uses of media literacy tools — along with a response to the personal and social conditions that tend to engender extremism.

MEDIA LITERACY AND SHARED INQUIRY

The mandate to assess student beliefs and refer them to law enforcement is hence not a productive response to concerns about rising extremism. I suggest instead a broader focus on shared knowledge, and a secondary focus on shared democratic values, as more justified and feasible responsibilities of teachers. One key characteristic of extremist views is the intensifying rejection of accepted knowledge and shared social perceptions. These can take the form of bizarre theories such as the ones exemplified at the outset (Pizzagate, lizard people controlling the world), or they can take to an extreme level the vilification of members of some out-group. This epistemic predicament operates in a feedback loop with the broader epistemic crisis democracies face today as we lose our shared foundational perception of reality as a result of increased polarization. Quassim Cassam suggests that to overcome these developments we must use arguments and evidence to rebut conspiracy theories, and educate our children to do so, equipping them with critical thinking skills and intellectual virtues so that they are inoculated against conspiracism. He further suggests that we unmask the propagandistic nature of conspiracy theories, which might lead to embarrassment among those who hold unfounded beliefs.³³

But the focus on critical thinking skills, while itself important, will not do as a solution to the democratic erosion that results from the decaying state of truth in contemporary democracies. Arguments alone, and the strengthening of children's (or adults') epistemic capacities, will not remedy the social and political conditions that led to the current fraying of democratic ties. Motivated reasoning leads many to reject available evidence and to harden their unfounded views,³⁴ at the same time, the like-minded community made possible by adherence to fantastical conspiracies proves for many too attractive to resist. Fact alone cannot stem this tide.

33. Quassim Cassam, *Conspiracy Theories* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2019), chap. 4.

34. Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler, "When Corrections Fail: The Persistence of Political Misperceptions," *Political Behavior* 32, no. 2 (2010): 303–330.

The habits of democracy, which are shared, civic, and social, need to be mended before children can use any newly developed critical thinking skills to argue their way into a stronger political union. If democratic habits are developed through a shared process of truth-seeking and open discussion, they can overcome the single-minded pursuit of conspiracies and the polarizing effects of sorting and mistrust. Sharing the process of information production, assessment, and distribution — sharing the judgment of what is reliable and what should be shared — can produce trust, if done within broad and clear norms of speech and exchange.

As many have noted, media literacy is essential to creating a shared epistemology, which can counter some of the ills afflicting current media platforms, in particular the tendency of users to participate in creating a spectacle by believing and sharing misinformation.³⁵ A shared foundation of facts must start early; as a part of this process, the youngest members of a political community need to be ushered into the practice of evaluating their sources of information and assessing the trustworthiness of claims. This approach is being taken already, most notably in Finland where a curriculum that advises students about identifying lies, mistakes, and hoaxes, and encourages them to engage in news consumption but also in civic action, has become mandatory in recent years with some clear positive results.³⁶ Similar curricula are available in the United States, and implemented in some school districts, although they are not universally used.³⁷ Arguments such as those elaborated by Laura D'Olimpio for the importance of evaluating sources through critical perspectivism further ground the importance of shared, detailed engagement with both information and works of art as a way of coping with the constant flow of online stimuli.³⁸ If there ever was a time in which students could be expected to rely on encyclopedias and newspapers for reliable information, that time is long gone because answers online to many questions are at students' fingertips, for better and worse. The broad availability of information of varying quality is also affecting older generations, who were not trained in learning to discern the reliability of information from online sources.³⁹ While younger people may be more

35. See, for example, Julian McDougall, Marketa Zezulkova, and Barry van Driel, *Teaching Media Literacy in Europe: Evidence of Effective School Practices in Primary and Secondary Education* (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2018).

36. Jon Henley, "How Finland Starts Its Fight against Fake News in Primary Schools," *The Guardian*, January 29, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/28/fact-from-fiction-finlands-new-lessons-in-combating-fake-news>.

37. See, for example, University of Oregon Libraries research guide focused on "Fake News and Information Literacy," which is intended "to help you be a better consumer of news," <https://researchguides.uoregon.edu/fakenews/sift>.

38. Laura D'Olimpio, *Media and Moral Education: A Philosophy of Critical Engagement* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

39. Nicole M. Lee, "Fake News, Phishing, and Fraud: A Call for Research on Digital Media Literacy Education beyond the Classroom," *Communication Education* 67, no. 4 (2018): 460–466, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03634523.2018.1503313>.

adept at understanding the online environment, it is still misguided to portray them as “digital natives” who need no guidance as they peruse information, news, and data; in fact, studies continue to show that many youth are having a difficult time assessing digital sources.⁴⁰

Traditional media literacy programs cannot address the issues raised by insulated information bubbles, where ideologically motivated misinformation spirals and echoes without check. To be relevant in the current media landscape and polarized debate, media literacy programs need to address intentionally manipulative media⁴¹ by engaging further sources in a collaborative rather than merely analytic fashion. Team efforts to review sources as well as to learn more about the information the team seeks allow members of the team to connect, compare notes, and help each other in the process of debiasing, especially in the context of teams that have members of diverse views and backgrounds. An additional benefit of this social process is its contribution to building trust in each other and in sources, and assessing their outcomes together, thus addressing some of the epistemic and social alienation that enable radicalization.⁴²

Media literacy helps young (and older) people learn to identify facts and distinguish them from lies and mistakes. But for their education to be civically meaningful, it cannot focus on facts unmoored from their social meaning and the ways in which they are created and shared, or the impact they have. Assessing facts and assessing other people’s views and understandings, as well as their motivations for holding those views, can advance both the epistemic and the social conditions that provide a counterweight to extremism. The guardrails against antidemocratic pressures such as disinformation about issues of interest and about fellow citizens include careful attention to the boundaries of speech. Within the school community, in addition to such guardrails, educators need to be supported in fostering civic connections focused on meaningful conversations about hard topics. Within these conversations, students should be able to trust their teachers and peers, at least in the basic dignitary sense that ensures they will not persecute them for their beliefs and views.

This process of shared civic development can counter the epistemic and social isolation that sometimes breeds extremism. It can be advanced by creating opportunities to discuss hard topics in class, a practice that aims not to sharpen political divides but rather to reduce the affective polarization among students — in other words, to help them see others with opposing opinions as acting for reasons

40. Joel Breakstone, Mark Smith, and Sam Wineburg, *Students Civic Online Reasoning: A National Portrait* (Stanford, CA: Stanford History Education Groups, 2019).

41. Renee Hobbs, *Mind Over Media: Propaganda Education for the Digital Age* (New York: Norton, 2020).

42. On the centrality of trust (in addition to knowledge) for tackling belief in misinformation and motivated reasoning, see Joanne M. Miller, Kyle L. Saunders, Christina E. Farhart, “Conspiracy Endorsement as Motivated Reasoning: The Moderator Roles of Political Knowledge and Trust,” *American Journal of Political Science* 60, no. 4 (2016): 824–844.

that are acceptable (even when one continues not to accept them).⁴³ The goal thus is not to persuade, but rather to create a sense of shared fate, or of shared civic goals, among students, both as members of the classroom community and as members of the same nation. As Paula McAvoy notes, this approach is particularly relevant in times of significant polarization and civil strife: “The appeal of shared fate is that it attempts to shift how one identifies with politics.”⁴⁴ Thinking about what binds a nation together, in particular thinking about the institutions, histories, languages, and geographies that make up a nation, is a way to create a shared foundation of both reality and identity — a shared understanding of facts, a shared vision of the issues the country faces, and a shared sense of the unique capacities that can propel a nation into a shared future. Clearly this is an aspirational description, but the educational endeavor, rooted in boundless optimism about what investment in young people can produce, can commit to establishing a shared sense of knowledge and of fate. To do so, students and teachers should not shy away from hard conversations or paper over differences with abstract visions. Rather they should engage in an open exchange across the real differences that divide the nation — ideological, racial, and other — to find ways to share both knowledge and values across these divides.

Educational practices within and outside the class can facilitate the development of a sense of common good, solidarity, and shared fate. These not only can alleviate some of the pressures presented by a polarized age; they are also more broadly a necessary aspect of democratic culture. This idealized culture can be reflected in schooling practices intended to build the habit of thinking about others — including others who are different in their identities, experiences, or beliefs — as part of one’s political and social in-group. The representation of a vision of the common good is possible not only in curricular decisions and pedagogical practices; even disciplinary decisions can be used to reflect a commitment to democratic values. Thus, for example, as Campbell Scribner and Bryan Warnick note, “A central goal of restorative justice is the restoration of dignity.”⁴⁵ Maintaining, or restoring, dignity for all students (and teachers) is a key aspect of the learning and moral community that schools need to sustain, if they are to promote their democratic goals. Censorship and silencing, much like other forms of exclusion, cannot serve this goal.

To enable the development of democratic civic skills, which are critical for preventing radicalization and addressing extremism, schools need to provide a robust context for students to voice and share their views. Punitive boundaries,

43. See Rachel Wahl, “On the Ethics of Open-Mindedness in the Age of Trump,” *Educational Theory* 69, no. 4 (2019): 455–472, <https://doi.org/10.1111/edth.12379>.

44. Paula McAvoy, “Can Schools Combat Partisan Belligerency?,” *Dewey Studies* 4, no. 1 (2020): 128. In this article McAvoy discusses an approach to citizenship education during wartime as developed in my book *Citizenship under Fire*.

45. Campbell F. Scribner and Bryan R. Warnick, *Spare the Rod: Punishment and the Moral Community of Schools* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 105.

which focus on strict hierarchical structures of authority and which single out students with specific views or concerns, do not allow students to develop the connections and the capacity and inclination to engage across difference that are necessary for democratic revitalization. Rather, analytic and social tools that are offered to all students, rather than targeting some, are better suited to tackling both polarization and extremism among youth. Teachers may also continue to consider referrals for additional support for students who are struggling with difficult circumstances, and that too might help mitigate the conditions that lead to radicalization. Broadly speaking, a primary focus on the core learning goal of building shared foundations of knowledge and the analytic and critical skills of applying evidentiary and assessment tools, with an additional focus on introducing and encouraging civic democratic attitudes and values, can together provide a comprehensive, effective, and justified response to concerns about extremism.

There are no shortcuts to addressing the current democratic predicament. Demanding that teachers, along with health and other professionals, assess and report their charges for extremism will not address the threats of terrorism, extremism, or violence. Instead, it stands the risk of offering false relief while actually contributing to an erosion of trust and dismantling of shared social foundations. These conditions themselves give rise to polarization, and along with other personal circumstances can lead some individuals down a wrong path. Instead, we should support teachers and other professionals in taking on the longer task of building trust and working together toward the shared goals we can and must identify at the local and national levels.

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