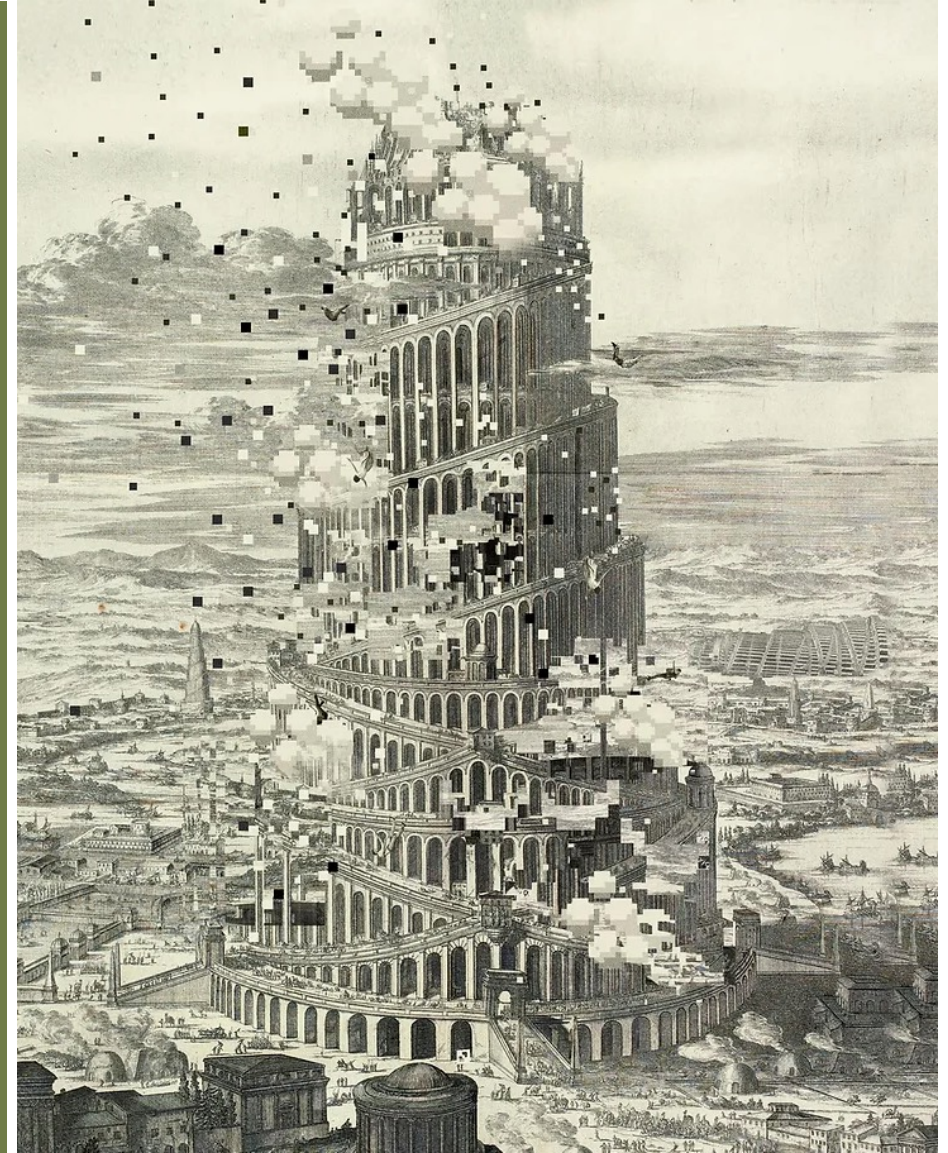


WHY THE PAST 10 YEARS  
OF AMERICAN LIFE HAVE  
BEEN UNIQUELY STUPID

“IT’S NOT JUST A PHASE.”

*By Jonathan Haidt Illustrations by Nicolás  
Ortega*



## GENESIS 11:16 THE TOWER OF BABEL

“Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another’s speech.”



## AN APT METAPHOR

- The story of Babel is the best metaphor I have found for what happened to America in the 2010s, and for the fractured country we now inhabit. Something went terribly wrong, very suddenly. We are disoriented, unable to speak the same language or recognize the same truth. We are cut off from one another and from the past.

## SOCIAL MEDIA AS BABEL

- Babel is a metaphor for what some forms of social media have done to nearly all of the groups and institutions most important to the country's future—and to us as a people.



# THE RISE OF THE MODERN BABEL

- there is a direction to history and it is toward cooperation at larger scales.
- We see this trend in biological evolution, in the series of “major transitions” through which multicellular organisms first appeared and then developed new symbiotic relationships.
- We see it in cultural evolution also.





# RISE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

- The early internet of the 1990s, with its chat rooms, message boards, and the first wave of social-media platforms, which launched around 2003 [Myspace, Friendster, and Facebook] made it easy to connect with friends and strangers to talk about common interests, for free, and at a scale never before imaginable.
- By 2008, Facebook had emerged as the dominant platform, with more than 100 million monthly users, on its way to roughly 3 billion today.

# TECHNO-DEMOCRAT OPTIMISTS

- The high point of techno-democratic optimism was arguably 2011, a year that began with the Arab Spring and ended with the global Occupy movement.
- That is also when Google Translate became available on virtually all smartphones, so you could say that 2011 was the year that humanity rebuilt the Tower of Babel.
- We were closer than we had ever been to being “one people,” and we had effectively overcome the curse of division by language.
- For techno-democratic optimists, it seemed to be only the beginning of what humanity could do.





## MARK ZUCKERBERG ON FACEBOOK

- “Today, our society has reached another tipping point,” he wrote in a letter to investors.
- Facebook hoped would “rewire the way people spread and consume information.”
- By giving them “the power to share,” it would help them to “once again transform many of our core institutions and industries.”





## NOT AS EXPECTED

- In the 10 years since then, Zuckerberg did exactly what he said he would do.
- He did rewire the way we spread and consume information; he did transform our institutions, and he pushed us past the tipping point.
- It has not worked out as he expected.



## THE TIES THAT BIND

- Historically, civilizations have relied on shared blood, gods, and enemies to counteract the tendency to split apart as they grow.
- But what is it that holds together large and diverse secular democracies such as the United States and India, or, for that matter, modern Britain and France?
- The answer: Sadly less and less.

## THREE MAJOR “TIES”



Social scientists have identified at least three major forces that collectively bind together successful democracies:



social capital (extensive social networks with high levels of trust),



strong institutions, and shared stories. *Social media has weakened all three.*



## EARLY INCARNATIONS OF SOCIAL MEDIA

- In their early incarnations, platforms such as Myspace and Facebook were relatively harmless.
- They allowed users to create pages on which to post photos, family updates, and links to the mostly static pages of their friends and favorite bands.
- In this way, early social media can be seen as just another step in the long progression of technological improvements—from the Postal Service through the telephone to email and texting—that helped people achieve the eternal goal of maintaining their social ties.

## BLITHELY SHARING INTIMATE DETAILS

- Gradually, social-media users became more comfortable sharing intimate details of their lives with strangers and corporations.
- Once social-media platforms had trained users to spend more time performing and less time connecting, the stage was set for the major transformation, which began in 2009: the intensification of viral dynamics.



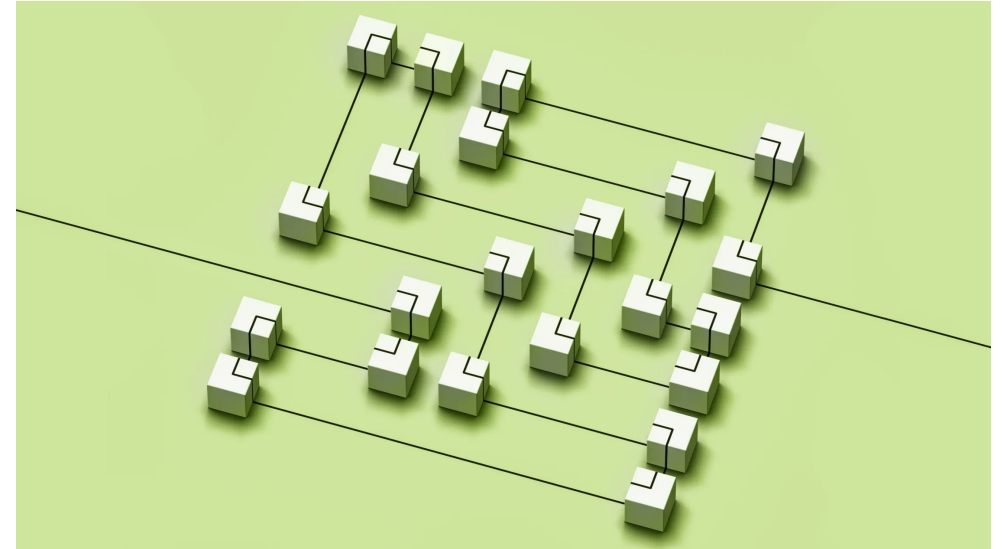
# VIRAL DYNAMICS IN SOCIAL MEDIA

- in 2009, when Facebook offered users a way to publicly “like” posts with the click of a button.
- That same year, Twitter introduced something even more powerful: the “Retweet” button, which allowed users to publicly endorse a post while also sharing it with all of their followers.
- Facebook soon copied that innovation with its own “Share” button, which became available to smartphone users in 2012. “Like” and “Share” buttons quickly became standard features of most other platforms.



# VIRULENT ALGORITHMS

- Shortly after its “Like” button began to produce data about what best “engaged” its users, Facebook developed algorithms to bring each user the content most likely to generate a “like” or some other interaction, eventually including the “share” as well.
- Later research showed that posts that trigger emotions—especially anger at out-groups—are the most likely to be shared.



# FAME OR IGNOMINY

- By 2013, social media had become a new game, with dynamics unlike those in 2008. If you were skillful or lucky, you might create a post that would “go viral” and make you “internet famous” for a few days.
- If you blundered, you could find yourself buried in hateful comments.
- Your posts rode to fame or ignominy based on the clicks of thousands of strangers, and you in turn contributed thousands of clicks to the game.





# HANDING A FOUR-YEAR OLD A LOADED WEAPON



This new game encouraged dishonesty and mob dynamics: Users were guided not just by their true preferences but by their past experiences of reward and punishment, and their prediction of how others would react to each new action.



One of the engineers at Twitter who had worked on the “Retweet” button later revealed that he regretted his contribution because it had made Twitter a nastier place.



As he watched Twitter mobs forming through the use of the new tool, he thought to himself, “We might have just handed a 4-year-old a loaded weapon.”

## BRINGING OUT OUR WORST SELVES

- The newly tweaked platforms were almost perfectly designed to bring out our most moralistic and least reflective selves.
- The volume of outrage was shocking.



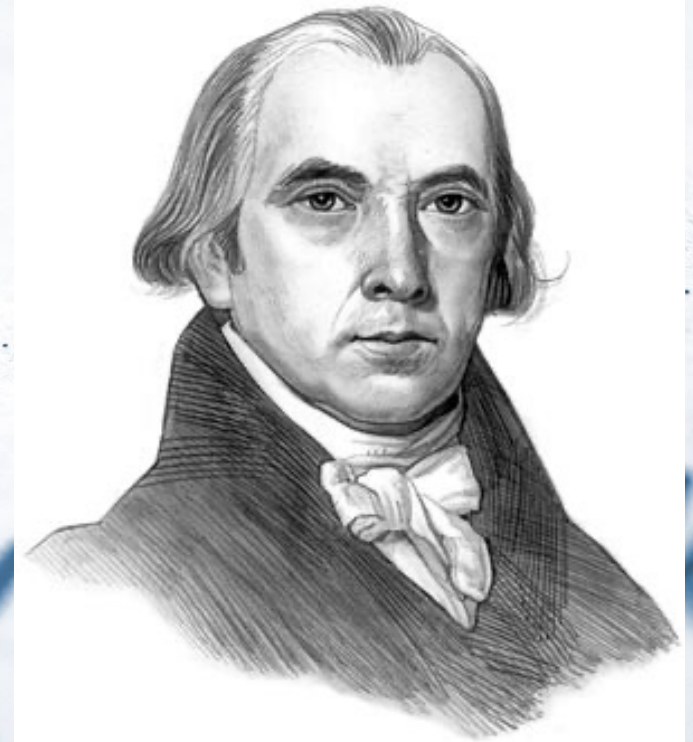
## A WARNING FROM CONSTITUTIONAL FRAMERS

- The Framers of the Constitution were excellent social psychologists.
- They knew that democracy had an Achilles' heel because it depended on the collective judgment of the people, and democratic communities are subject to "the turbulency and weakness of unruly passions."
- The key to designing a sustainable republic, therefore, was to build in mechanisms to slow things down, cool passions, require compromise, and give leaders some insulation from the mania of the moment while still holding them accountable to the people periodically, on Election Day.



## A DESTRUCTIVE PROCLIVITY

The tech companies that enhanced virality from 2009 to 2012 brought us deep into Madison's nightmare regarding "the the innate human proclivity toward "faction," by which he meant our tendency to divide ourselves into teams or parties that are so inflamed with "mutual animosity" that they are "much more disposed to vex and oppress each other than to cooperate for their common good." In fact, people are so prone to factionalism that "where no substantial occasion presents itself, the most frivolous and fanciful distinctions have been sufficient to kindle their unfriendly passions and excite their most violent conflicts."





## MAGNIFYING AND WEAPONIZING THE FRIVOLOUS

- It's not just the waste of time and scarce attention that matters; it's the continual chipping-away of trust. An autocracy can deploy propaganda or use fear to motivate the behaviors it desires, but a democracy depends on widely internalized acceptance of the legitimacy of rules, norms, and institutions.
- When citizens lose trust in elected leaders, health authorities, the courts, the police, universities, and the integrity of elections, then every decision becomes contested; every election becomes a life-and-death struggle to save the country from the other side.

## LOSING TRUST IN OUR CULTURAL STORIES

- When people lose trust in institutions, they lose trust in the stories told by those institutions.
- That's particularly true of the institutions entrusted with the education of children. History curricula have often caused political controversy, but Facebook and Twitter make it possible for parents to become outraged every day over a new snippet from their children's history lessons—and math lessons and literature selections, and any new pedagogical shifts anywhere in the country.
- The motives of teachers and administrators come into question, and overreaching laws or curricular reforms sometimes follow, dumbing down education and reducing trust in it further. One result is that young people educated in the post-Babel era are less likely to arrive at a coherent story of who we are as a people.



# MARTIN GURRI ON U.S. SOCIETY

- During the “pre-digital” period Gurri notes a constructive feature was a single “mass audience,” all consuming the same content, as if they were all looking into the same gigantic mirror at the reflection of their own society.
- “The digital revolution has shattered that mirror, and now the public inhabits those broken pieces of glass. So the public isn’t one thing; it’s highly fragmented, and it’s basically mutually hostile. It’s mostly people yelling at each other and living in bubbles of one sort or another. “



# DISSOLVING THE MORTAR OF TRUST

- Mark Zuckerberg may not have wished for any of that. But by rewiring everything in a headlong rush for growth—with a naive conception of human psychology, little understanding of the intricacy of institutions, and no concern for external costs imposed on society—Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and a few other large platforms unwittingly dissolved the mortar of trust, belief in institutions, and shared stories that had held a large and diverse secular democracy together.

