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JUMP

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22-27 minutes

Back in elementary school a ‘scientific theory’ hit the playground that blew my mind: if every person in China jumped at the same time, their impact would knock our planet off its axis and the world would end.

I was always a sort of gullible person. I think I just liked to believe things, and in them. But this idea really captured me. It was the frightening image of it first, every single person in a country doing the same thing, at the same time. I didn’t even feel comfortable in Catholic Mass when the monotonous, somber group prayer started. But at the scale of a billion people? I used to watch a lot of Star Trek with my dad, and this was Borg shit. It was also just confusing on a practical level because the billion jumpers weren’t drones. They were people, just like me, and I didn’t want to die. Why would they? Naturally, I assumed, they’d have to be fooled into doing it by a megalomaniacal supervillain. *But how could he pull it off?* Information traveled differently in the nineties, and more slowly. To succeed at a scam so spectacular as the Jump, the time and place of the apocalyptic act would have to be announced by broadcast days in advance, and it would have to be framed as something not only beneficial, but essential. This would be the only way for the instructions to make it to the billion people required, and for them to go through with it. But by the time the information reached them, there would be an enormous media reaction. There would be counter information. There would be experts on planet stuff, probably, and they would tell people this was dangerous. If the megalomaniacal Jump enthusiast pirated a television signal (supervillains loved to do this), he could trick as many people as were watching a single, live broadcast. But hundreds of millions of people? Billions? Instantaneous, global mass hysteria was just not possible, let alone the direction of that hysteria to some particular end. I could rest easy, I decided, and it was back to my dreams of the Starship Enterprise.

But a lot has changed since 1993.

Today, almost half the global population is connected to the internet by the supercomputing smartphones that live in our pocket. That’s 3.5 billion people. More significantly, the way we access “news,” or live information about the world, has paradigmatically changed. Throughout the 2000s media was still in some significant sense balkanized. People did not just consume stories, they visited story sources, and the sources were numerous. Everything from trusted websites associated with legacy media institutions like the *New York Times* to popular aggregators like *Drudge* and blogs like the *Huffington Post* thrived, and all of them were separate places. They were not walled gardens, exactly, but in a sense they were fenced, and fences are impediments to sameness and to movement. Fences also guard value, and the value of these companies exploded. For a while, that value was even defensible. Paradoxically, the boom in new branded media investments didn’t peak until 2017, with VICE Media’s 5.7 billion dollar valuation. Of course, at that point most people had already torn their fences down. By the late 2010s we were consuming most of our news from Twitter and Facebook. These were not publishers or centralized aggregators. They were places where we talked to our friends. Ubiquitous mobile internet dramatically increased our immersion in media, but ubiquitous *social media* dramatically increased the speed at which ideas travel and, perhaps more significantly, deeply socialized the dynamic. We no longer learn about the world from institutions, or even the illusion of them. We learn about the world from people we care about. This binds our sense of truth to tribal identity, and that is a powerful, fundamentally emotional connection. It’s also now operating at the scale of a planet. Today, a single piece of information — a tweet from your president, an update from the World Health Organization, video footage of police brutality — is polarized and shared across our social network. From there, it can reach hundreds of millions of people, often furious, in less than an hour.

Jump.

Throughout the early years of social media it was obvious the dominant platforms had a problem with bullying. At least, this is what we called it then. Bullying morphed into mobbing, and an important question emerged: what is the difference between a mob and a righteous movement? More importantly, did any of it matter? In the late 2000s, people wondered openly if any kind of ‘revolution’ online could

manifest physically, in the real world. Did tweets actually change anything, or was it all just noise? Looking back, it's hard to believe anyone ever doubted the power of the social internet. It's also interesting the dawn of our well-tread "cancel culture," and the push for rapid, mass social change, did not precede, but rather followed our first, powerful example of the digital-physical connect, which ended in absolute tragedy. In 2011, with around thirty percent of the world connected by the internet, a series of political uprisings swept the Arab world. The Arab Spring was immediately characterized as a revolution for freedom by the American press. Journalists and pundits across the West were overjoyed. Many in the technology industry proudly credited themselves with toppling the Egyptian government. We have all had noticeably less to say about the military dictatorship now in control of that country. Since 2011, internet connectivity has doubled to over five billion people, or over sixty percent of the global population, and more than half of that connectivity is mobile. On the streets of San Francisco, even our homeless population is plugged in — forty percent own smartphones. For years, now, the stage has been set for a meme-induced global mass hysteria, and there is a kind of poetry in the viral moment's historic incarnation. Literally, it came as a virus.

COVID-19 was a household story long before it made its way from Wuhan, China to the sandy shores of America, and while the nations of the world were absolutely crippled it was never technically by the pandemic. Our governments shut the world down, and regardless of whether or not it was wise to do so, they were motivated, as we all were, by what we read on social media. A series of memes — stories, photos, random pieces of incomplete data — coursed *the entire world,* one after another, spurring immediate action. On the ground, people across the world hoarded personal protective equipment, food, and toilet paper. Our global leaders forced people inside, shut down airports, and quarantined cities. The government of Hungary declared a de facto temporary dictatorship. It's notable how often the information we shared was wrong. In February, China had contained the virus. Closing down air traffic was ignorant. Parades were fine. By late March, the tenor of coverage shifted. Without a mask, you will die. The virus lives on surfaces for days — weeks, maybe. Hydroxychloroquine will cure you. Hydroxychloroquine *will kill you.* Hydroxychloroquine will maybe cure you. Nothing short of a complete and total lockdown, for an indefinite amount of time, could save the world, and you were either with us, or you were with the virus. COVID-19 was a biological crisis. But it was also a global information disaster.

There are two reads on how we reacted to the pandemic. First, thank God for the internet. We acted rapidly, shut the world down, and saved tens of millions of lives. In 1918, when the Spanish flu emerged, the speed at which we shut down civilization was not even possible throughout most of the densely populated, undeveloped world. But a hundred years ago, even across the United States and Europe, information was far more difficult to catalogue, to track, and to share. People were cautious. Millions died. The second read on our reaction to COVID-19 is we should never have shut the world down. We didn't understand the virus, and we still don't. Now our economy teeters on the brink of global depression, which may itself precede any number of horrors from famine to war. Hundreds of millions could die. The question of how we should have acted, and how we should act for some future, hypothetical pandemic, will undoubtedly consume pundits for years. But neither frame on global paralysis is nearly as important as the fact that it was possible. An idea is now capable of almost immediately crippling the world. There is only one question that should be consuming us today:

What else is possible?

Short of any kind of truly global, meme-induced disaster, there is the potential for as many personal- or national-scale disasters as can be imagined. The danger, at every scale, is large numbers of people acting rapidly and emotionally on information they just received. The information will almost certainly, by the very nature of new information, be incomplete or inaccurate. Individuals are now routinely targeted by massive, online mobs, sometimes millions strong, after doctored or incomplete information is shared with the malicious intent of evoking such reaction. In 2016, a Reddit user published an evidence document sourced from the hacked emails of John Podesta, Hillary Clinton's then-campaign manager, which went viral and mainstreamed the now infamous Pizzagate conspiracy. It argued a well-known pizza parlor in Washington D.C. was fronting an underground child prostitution ring servicing many elite, mostly-Democratic politicians. The story was debunked. In January 2019, amidst heightened racial tensions, a video clip was shared on social media that depicted what appeared to be a group of teenaged Trump supporters mocking a Native American political activist at a protest. When the full video was shared, it became clear the boys were confronted by the activist, not the other way around, and the entire drama was provoked by a nearby group of Black Hebrew Israelites, an anti-Semitic hate group. In both cases of misinformation, the victims of the media distortions were immediately targeted by outraged online mobs that did not limit themselves to strong words of condemnation, but rather tried to destroy the lives of their storybook villains. Personal information was leaked. Death threats were made. In the case of the pizza parlor, there was an actual shooting. Both stories were shared rapidly along tribal fault lines, the central nervous system of social media. People who already believed the story

behind the stories — that people who didn't think like them were evil — shared it, demanded justice, or themselves attempted to deliver justice. Today, there are vocal members of both mobs who still, despite all vindicating counter evidence, refuse to adjust their feelings on the matter. If the dynamic is left unchecked, people will absolutely, in our lifetime, be murdered in direct consequence of online hysteria. But we have much more to worry about than witches targeted by mobs for burning, an ancient impulse in people now technologically mutated. Whole communities, cities, and nations are at risk. Let's talk about politics.

Not every revolution is a net disaster, just most of them. Political violence around the world has far more often led to destruction and widespread human misery than it has to peace and prosperity. France, Russia, China, Cuba, Venezuela, countless nations of the Middle East, and Africa — for most people in most nations on this planet, throughout most of recorded history, revolution has preceded authoritarianism, poverty, and death. Americans have a unique blindness to the subject, as our own violent insurrection preceded directly the founding of our nation, the most stable liberal government in history, and that story is a central part of our mythology. We are a prosperous, heroic country, and we credit our existence to a righteous founding war for freedom. But history is more complicated than legend. The U.S. Founding Fathers did not just change their government. On victory they set immediately to separating powers and guaranteeing that future change, while possible and expected, would come slowly in increments. Today the word "democracy" is sacrosanct among Americans, but we don't and never have had a democracy. This is an absence by design. An inherently unstable form of government, our Founding Fathers believed, without exception, democracy would lead to chaos, and that chaos would lead to tyranny. The architects of our nation therefore designed a democratic republic, with a representative democracy, and at founding that looked a lot like a system of firewalls between masses of people and power. Local leaders elected state leaders, and state leaders elected national leaders. With our rules for political change themselves drafted in such a way as redrafting them would be slow and difficult, it was checks and balances all the way down. The United States does not owe its prosperity to dramatic change, but to an historically rare stability.

Even absent social media, the speed at which rapid political change is possible in America has been accelerating for two centuries. Checks have eroded. Balances have become less balanced. At the same time, the federal government has grown more powerful, and the executive branch commands more of that power than ever. For years, support from the political establishment, itself a kind of moderating function, has not been entirely necessary to succeed in presidential politics. It was only a matter of time before the weakness was exploited. In 2016, America elected a reality television star to the most powerful edifice of political power, at the head of the largest economy, and in command of the most powerful military, in human history. Today, beyond all doubt, anyone can be the president. But even with so unpredictable an office as our presidency the United States is a more stable nation than most. In addition to the genius framework of our government and a couple hundred years of binding, national identity, we are supported by a strong economy, abundant arable land, and friendly neighbors. A far more significant concern is we are now living in a world of smaller nuclear powers with fewer resources that are many of them one trending hashtag away from violent insurrection, and there is no telling what governments, or gangs, will take power in their place. The threat of a fallen nuclear state would of course affect us all. In this way, a meme-induced international mass hysteria would not even be necessary for global cataclysm. A national hysteria, in almost any corner of the world, would do just fine. But there will be international crises. Twitter may have started as a fun place to share jokes, but it has long since morphed into a virtual battleground for ideological war. While most of the conflicts are civil, at least a few have pit governments against each other, and such conflicts will undoubtedly proliferate. We have already watched national leaders threaten each other on the platform, in real time, egged on by crowds of millions. The question is not if a real war, in the physical world, can be started in this environment. We all know it can. Without some dramatic course correction, the question is only when.

Many people correctly intuit something is wrong with social media, and they wonder if it can be fixed with government regulation. It cannot. A federal law prohibiting all politicians at every level from sharing to the popular platforms would be a compelling, partial solution to the specific threat of state-backed, mob-initiated conflict. Legislation of this kind would also be positioned to survive a consumer shift to disintermediated, decentralized social media. But it would not address the central problem with social sharing at scale, and is anyway not the sort of regulation being prescribed. Our loudest regulatory enthusiasts are almost entirely censorship oriented, and they suspiciously tend to map their censorship prescriptions to their personal politics. This alone should be enough of a warning that we shut the notion down. Alas, the conversation rages on, and no one is focused on the principle issue. Content moderation is irrelevant. The greatest possible danger of social media is the catalyzation of mass, relatively instant global action on incomplete or incorrect information. It is true our next information disaster could conceivably take color from whatever sort of speech is at the moment socially unacceptable. But if an idea is already perceived as socially unacceptable to so dramatic a degree as top-down censorship of its discussion is politically feasible, it almost certainly lacks the cultural support

for any kind of rapid global movement. The hysteria we're most at risk of will likely relate in some misguided way to an idea most people already generally value, but it will also be, in some aesthetic sense, new. To be so swept up emotionally as one is moved to immediate physical action, in the physical world, a person must be either very scared or very angry, and the mundane inspires neither of these emotions. We're not in danger of painful speech, we're in danger of temporary madness, and the only madness we are existentially vulnerable to is almost impossible to predict with any kind of specificity. It is from this unpredictable madness we need protection. But how can we protect ourselves from an idea that doesn't yet exist?

Anger is the binding agent of every mob, from the scale of a few to the scale of a few billion. It feels good to be angry, and when we're in it we don't want to let it go. Our greatest defense against madness, then, would be calming down while on some powerful, primal level wanting the opposite. This is something small groups of men have struggled with for as long as we've existed, but it has not been until the last few years that a single fit of rage could almost instantly infect the planet. Social media has been an integral part of culture for a period of time that represents seconds of human existence, and we have already seen the emergence of globally-destabilizing conflict because of it. Conflicts of this kind will continue to emerge, and there is no reason to believe we've seen the most destructive of them. For the first time in history, we actually have to find a way to manage our impulse toward meme-induced hysteria. At its simplest, a little mental hygiene might be helpful. The notion we all suffer from confirmation bias needs to be normalized, and discussed. When relaying some emotionally-charged story, it is worth relaying first how this kind of story makes you feel in general, and the sort of things you might be missing. Admittedly, in the fever of rage, this will be incredibly difficult. But what about the other end? When receiving a piece of information that evokes anger, could one reflect on the bias of a source, be it a journalist or a friend? Who is the bearer of this bad news, and what are their values? If you had to guess, how would you think they wanted this piece of information to make you feel? Angry? To what end? Getting comfortable with being wrong would also help, as would expecting people around us to be wrong. This, by the way, is something that happens more than it doesn't. *People are constantly wrong*. Stories are constantly corrected. That we are not yet skeptical of every new piece of information we receive, with so much evidence all around us now that misinformation is not the exception but the rule, is indication that skepticism of this kind is simply not something we are meaningfully capable of on our own. But might there be some solution in technology?

It would be helpful to know when we're spending an unusual amount of time focused on a topic. Is this a new interest, or is it an obsession? More importantly, how many other people are focused on the topic? Is that number growing? How fast? I'm not sure what a fire drill for global madness looks like, but an alarm alone — just the knowledge we may be in the middle of a mass hysteria — is something Google could build in a week, and it would have tremendous benefit. The early-stage introduction of a counter-narrative to rapid social sharing would introduce doubt, and that would encourage self-reflection. This would blunt the spread of any possible madness and invite closer examination of the meme from anyone still sober enough to think it over critically. I can't imagine anything more frustrating while overcome with meme-induced hysteria than a pop-up warning that I might not be thinking clearly. But of course this is precisely when I'd most need the warning. A tool like this would undoubtedly produce all manner of embarrassing false positives. But a goofy, minor irritation is a small price to pay for averting cataclysm. We need to name these concepts, we need to talk about them, and we need to make the act of calming down a cherished cultural institution. We also need to do it now.

Without some significant action, people around the world with low public profiles will continue to be destroyed by mobs, at random, for decades to come. Their lives are at risk. But a future where weekly witch burnings is as bad as things get is something of a best-case scenario. Politicians, journalists, and celebrities will be doxed and found at home. Misinformation and disinformation alike will lead to the local targeting of small businesses of every kind, for every conceivable reason, in the heat of every conceivable hysteria. The security of warehouses, factories, and critical infrastructure — from power plants to bridges and tunnels — could all conceivably be jeopardized *along with the lives of their owners and operators*. And if supply chains are affected, trade will be compromised. As socialism has recently spiked in popularity among young people who don't read, consumerism has become a dirty word. But the danger here isn't that Americans lose access to cheap jeans from Vietnam. Not every country produces its own food, energy, or medicine. Chronic, pandemic-like fits of fear and rage will make the stabile functioning of human civilization impossible. If that happens literally billions of lives will be impacted. Righteous anger is a powerful drug, and it clouds our judgment in relation to its scale; the more people there are around us shouting, the harder it is to think for oneself. Everything inside of us is drawn to group consensus, and when the group is angry we frame the impulse as thinking with the mob. Intuitively, when we're not inside of it, we know it's dangerous. We even have a word for it — groupthink. But thought, here, is only an illusion. Mobs don't think at all. They only burn, and when the burning stops there's nothing left. Human civilization can weather a fire in pockets every now and then. It's even on

some rare occasion better for them. But a world on fire? That's an existential threat we are not prepared for.

People often joke you can't change the world with a tweet. But it's more apparent now than ever that you can. The problem is, in practice, a meme at rapid global scale doesn't often look like freedom, or justice, or prosperity. It looks like a billion people doing the same thing, at the same time, in a temporary state of madness.

Jump.