

The Shouting Class

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In response to the tragic Portland stabbing, I wrote a Twitter thread praising the two men who died defending Muslim women on a train. I pointed out that one of the heroes was a Republican army vet, while the other was a liberal hippie type. I lamented that our current national political discourse so often sets decent guys like this against each other, and wished that liberals and conservatives could put aside their mutual suspicions and unite at the political level to defend the country against white supremacism, fascism, and the general madness brought on by the age of Trump. This thread was very well-received, getting about 2000 retweets, 3300 likes, and numerous mostly favorable quote-tweets.

Nevertheless, there were some who were dissatisfied with the thread. A few dozen people on the left wrote to complain that I was engaging in "both-sides-ism", i.e. putting too little of the blame for the country's woes on the average Republican voter. Some accused me of being an apologist for racism and fascism. A smaller number of responders were alt-right types wrote that the stabber had been a leftist, not a rightist. Some of these responses reached 100 likes.

Seeing this, a thought suddenly occurred to me: the ratio of people who expressed support for the thread to those who expressed annoyance with it was over 20 to 1. But if you scrolled down the thread, the ratio of *words* devoted to support vs. words devoted to annoyance would be more like 1 to 100. Or pixels, or square centimeters of screen space, or whatever. In other words, the "annoyed" group, though far far smaller than the "supportive" group, grabbed a vastly larger amount of attention.

And this in turn got me thinking: All of social media is like that. Not for the first time, I started to worry that social media technology is hurting our popular discourse and our national politics. But for the first time, I could connect my worry to an identifiable and plausible phenomenon with well-known causes.

I call it the Shouting Class.

Who is the Shouting Class?

Everyone has problems with something in society. And everyone sometimes complains about those problems, which Albert Hirschman called "voice". But for many people, voice is contingent - as soon as the problems are satisfactorily resolved they stop complaining and go back to living their daily lives. But a subset of people will never stop complaining. When a problem becomes less severe, they switch to a different problem. And they will always find some problem that they feel requires their vocal complaint. That subset - the people who will never stop complaining and giving negative feedback - are the Shouting Class. (Of course, this isn't really a binary distinction; there are shades

of gray, as always.)

There are several reasons people may be part of the Shouting Class:

Reason 1: Idealism. Some people feel an emotional need to feel like they're improving the world. Since the world is never perfect, and fighting for a better world is intrinsic to these people's motivation (and probably their identity), they will always continue to speak up. Notice that there are many, many idealists who are not part of the Shouting Class - some express their idealism by building homes for the poor, or volunteering at an animal shelter, or working as a civil rights lawyer, or being a politician. Shouting Class idealists are only those idealists who see shouting as a key way to bring about positive change.

Reason 2: Personal Unhappiness. Research shows that negative moods make people much more likely to engage in online trolling. We also have good reason to believe that some people are just generally unhappy people - though life events make them relatively happier or sadder, their baseline is a negative emotional state that changes only very slowly. In other words, some people join the Shouting Class because they are giving vent to the negative emotion that they are constantly experiencing for reasons mostly unrelated to the problems they're complaining about.

Reason 3: Sadism. Research shows that many trolls are sadists, who delight in making other people feel uncomfortable. Since recipients of complaints and negative feedback often feel uncomfortable, joining the Shouting Class can be a way of indulging sadism.

Reason 4: Argumentativeness. Arguing is an intellectual activity, and many people enjoy intellectual activity. Some people enjoy argument specifically, while others just use it as a break from other kinds of intellectual activities (writing code, etc.). A subset of these people are "mansplainers" who just want to show off how clever they are or listen to themselves talk.

This is probably not an exhaustive list; I'm sure you can think of others. But it's pretty clear, from research and from personal experience, that there are a few people in society who fall under one or more of these categories.

Shouting Class case study: Me

I'm obviously part of the Shouting Class. I write a blog in which I often complain about stuff, and I have a Twitter account where I often complain about stuff. So some of my characterization of the Shouting Class is just introspection, coupled with the realization that there are other people out there who are like me in various ways.

So it's no coincidence that all of the above motivations for Shouting have applied to me at one time or another. I'm a fairly idealistic person. Like everyone, I was pretty unhappy in grad school, which I think had a lot to do with why I started blogging and tweeting. As a teenager, I delighted in flustering people in anonymous internet forums. And many people tell me that I am an argumentative guy. :-)

Although I feel a lot less of a desire to complain, criticize, and confront people online than I used to - I am not as much of a Shouter as before - I doubt this desire will ever completely go away. But when I look at my friends and family, very few are like me in this regard. They occasionally vent about their problems to people they know, but going on social media and giving people a hard time about things just isn't something they do.

Social media reduces the costs of joining the Shouting Class

Above I listed some of the possible reasons to join the Shouting Class - i.e., the benefits. But there are also costs. Time and effort are one cost. Reputation risk is another - if everyone knows you as a complainer, you may have fewer friends, build fewer useful business connections, or find yourself signing divorce papers. Also, trolling people in real life can lead to getting punched in the face.

Social media changes all this. First, there is no risk of getting punched in the face (though you may get doxxed). Posting on social media takes almost no time or effort. And with pseudonymity, there are no reputational consequences.

Twitter is obviously much more extreme than Facebook in these regards. It's a lot easier to be pseudonymous. Posts can get shared much more quickly. And you can talk to anyone you like, unless they block you. More importantly, you can talk to *the followers* of anyone you like - if I'm the first to reply to a Donald Trump tweet, most of the people who click on that tweet will see my reply as well. That's massive exposure.

So Twitter, especially, gives instant safe mass exposure to anyone who wants to complain about anything. In practice, this gives an enormous bullhorn to the Shouting Class, because they are defined as *the people who want to use the bullhorn*.

Consider life before social media. If you wanted to complain about something, you could do it in person, but you'd suffer reputational and other risks. You could write a letter to the editor, but it was subject to editorial filtering, and you could only get letters published occasionally. Same with calling in to radio shows. You could start your own media outlet and pass it around, but dominance of large newspapers, radio shows, and TV stations limited the circulation you could achieve. Even in the early age of the internet, shouting was a lot harder than it is now. You could make a website, but because of the lack of social sharing, it would be relatively hard to gain a large audience. Forums were highly fragmented and also lacked the sharing option.

In other words, shouting just wasn't nearly as easy in 1987 or even 2007 as it is in 2017. Social media, especially Twitter, has changed the game entirely.

The Shouting Class looks larger than it really is

It's important to realize that the Shouting Class isn't really that large. Most of the people out there in the world are *not* the kind of people you see commenting on your tweets or posting in your Facebook politics group.

In August of 2016, NPR disabled comments on their website, after finding the following:

I did find the numbers quite startling. In July, NPR.org recorded nearly 33 million unique users, and 491,000 comments. But those comments came from just 19,400 commenters, Montgomery said. That's 0.06 percent of users who are commenting, a number that has stayed steady through 2016.

When NPR analyzed the number of people who left at least one comment in both June and July, the numbers showed an even more interesting pattern: Just 4,300 users posted about 145 comments apiece, or 67 percent of all NPR.org comments for the two months. More than half of all comments in May, June and July combined came from a mere 2,600 users. The conclusion: NPR's commenting system — which gets more expensive the more comments that are posted, and in some months has cost NPR twice what was budgeted — is serving a very, very small slice of its overall audience.

This is why people say "Don't read the comments" - they recognize that blog comments are the domain of the Shouting Class. But social media, and especially Twitter, is like one giant comments section.

Twitter, especially, acts as an incredible force multiplier for the Shouting Class. A study by the Anti-Defamation League found that two out of three anti-semitic tweets sent in 2015 were sent by just 1600 accounts. That's an insanely powerful bullhorn for an incredibly small number of people. The advent of bots, of course, just makes the bullhorn even bigger.

My own Portland thread shows that even on Twitter, whose users are probably far more likely than the average American to belong to the Shouting Class, the ratio of quiet approvers to vocal complainers was something like 20 to 1. That's not as lopsided as the ratios for NPR comments, but it's striking.

In other words, the Shouting Class is a tiny minority of society that dominates much of our political discourse, thanks in part to the bullhorn created by the technology of social media.

The potential benefits of the Shouting Class

It would be unfair to paint the Shouting Class as a purely negative phenomenon. Many of the Shouters are not Twitter Nazis or compulsive mansplainers or pissed-off PhD students. Many are simply idealists who are sincerely trying to change the world for the better.

And sometimes that works. "Voice", to use Hirschman's terminology, is sometimes effective. For example, the marriage equality movement was quite effective in changing people's minds about gay marriage. That movement didn't rely very much on direct

action, threats of violence, civil disobedience, foreign political pressure, etc. Instead, it was basically just a bunch of people speaking up. And in my opinion, they changed the world for the better in a significant way.

Now, it's important to realize that most of the people in the marriage equality movement were not, themselves, part of the Shouting Class. They were speaking up because of a specific problem, and once that problem was solved, their use of "voice" diminished. In other words, they could be satisfied.

But the members of the Shouting Class who joined that movement brought a lot of important resources to the table. They brought experience (which of course they had plenty of), energy, solidarity, time and money. Without them, it might have been much harder to win the marriage equality fight.

I'm sure if you look throughout history you'll see plenty of movements like this, where the Shouting Class served as the vanguard and the shock troops for a larger group of temporary activists. Without the idealistic Shouters always looking for new problems to be upset about, social progress might grind to a halt, and deep injustices or inefficiencies remain undiscovered for decades or even centuries.

Or it might not. Of course it's hard to know, since there's always a Shouting Class, so we don't really know what the world would be like without them. After social media has been around for a while, it'll be possible for political scientists to find natural experiments to tell whether its amplifying effect sped up social progress or not. But until then, I'd say we have to at least acknowledge the distinct *possibility* that a subset of the Shouting Class often does good for the world.

The Shouting Class and excess negativity

But now I'd like to talk about some of the costs of the Shouting Class and the bullhorn social media has given them. The most obvious cost is just negativity. People like it when other people agree with them and say nice things to them, and they dislike it when people disagree with them and say mean things to them. That's so obvious that I'm not even going to bother looking up research to confirm it!

So now consider how the Shouting Class creates an asymmetry here. Suppose I say something on social media that 100 people agree with and 50 people disagree with. If everyone gave me explicit feedback, I'd get 100 zaps of positive emotion and 50 zaps of negative emotion. And assuming (for the sake of simplicity) that those zaps are of the same intensity, I'll come away feeling happy on balance.

But the 100 agree-ers are much less likely to be part of the Shouting Class than the 50 disagree-ers, because the Shouting Class goes around disagreeing with stuff. So the agree-ers will simply click the "like" or "favorite" button, while the disagree-ers will write an explicit response to explain why they disagree. The way social media is set up means that the number of likes or favorites is just a number, which I can click on to show a face or profile. But all the disagreeing responses will be full, written-out things.

The negative emotional zap I get from each of those certainly outweighs the positive zap I get from my favorite count going one higher.

So I end up walking away feeling bad, because I got 50 very powerful negative zaps from the Shouting Class, and 100 very weak zaps from the majority who agreed with me.

Oh, but it gets much much worse. Instead of thinking of just my one post, let's think about 1000 people, each with their own post. It's here that we see the massive emotional destructive power of the Shouting Class.

The Shouting Class is always going around looking for something to shout at. This could mean they're likely to either follow more accounts, or read more posts, or both. If that's the case, then their negative emotional impact is multiplied even further. Imagine each of the 1000 people writes one post, each of which gets a like or favorite from 100 people, each of whom only reads *that one post*. But imagine there are 50 Shouters who go around reading all 1000 posts, and leaving a disparaging comment with each one.

In this extreme example, the positive emotional feedback of 100,000 positive people is vastly outweighed by the negative emotional feedback of just 50 people!

Now, that's an extreme example. But it shows how the greater energy, zeal, and time commitment of the Shouting Class, combined with the bullhorn of social media, tips the balance of social media's emotional effect dramatically toward the negative.

Much research has been done on the negative impact of Facebook on mood and mental health. Most of the explanations offered have involved excessive forced social comparison and isolation from real-world interaction. But I believe the impact of excessively negative discussions could also be a reason for the effect, and I suspect that it's much worse for Twitter.

The Shouting Class and excessive social censure

If your social group is small - a handful of friends, a social club, etc. - there's a good chance that everyone in it will like you. And there's a good chance that if you only mildly annoy someone, the chance that they will complain openly to the group is low, because of the costs involved. They might take you aside and say something privately, or say nothing, but they'll only take it to the whole group if you've very egregiously offended the.

But as your social group increases in size, the number of people who might be annoyed, offended, or upset by any given thing you do goes up. With a group of 5, there's a high probability that any given thing you do or say will be inoffensive to all involved. With a group of 500, the probability of you being offensive to someone is far larger, since A) 500 is a lot more than 5, and B) the 500 is going to be a less carefully selected set than the 5.

In particular, with 500 people rather than 5, your social group is much larger to include at least one member of the Shouting Class, who by his or her nature goes around looking for things to complain about, argue with, or be offended by.

Social media expands social groups enormously. That has, pretty predictably, resulted in the development of what young people refer to as "callout culture." Conor Friedersdorf has some good interviews with college students, where they discuss the stress and social isolation of knowing that you're always vulnerable to being "called out" by a member of the Shouting Class. Some excerpts from his article:

Today, so many people are declaring so many things problematic on college campuses that the next controversy is almost impossible to predict; it is increasingly common to have done something without any fear of giving offense (say, urging a sushi night in the dining hall) only to subsequently read that the thing you're on record having done is the object of a huge controversy elsewhere. Does the faraway story portend a future where you'll be the one in the hot seat?

No wonder so many students are stressed out by this. And the risk-averse have it especially hard. "I probably hold back 90 percent of the things that I want to say due to fear of being called out," another student wrote. "People won't call you out because your opinion is wrong. People will call you out for literally anything. On Twitter today I came across someone making fun a girl who made a video talking about how much she loved God and how she was praying for everyone. There were hundreds of comments, rude comments, below the video. It was to the point that they weren't even making fun of what she was standing for. They were picking apart everything. Her eyebrows, the way her mouth moves, her voice, the way her hair was parted. Ridiculous. I am not the kind of person to be able to brush off insults like that. Hence why I avoid any situation that could put me in that position. And that's sad."

This seems like much more of a Facebook problem than a Twitter one, given that Facebook represents offline social ties far more. It's never happened to me, but I went to college before the Facebook age (yes, I'm that old). But I know a lot of people seven or ten or fifteen years younger than me who all loudly bemoan "callout culture" in very similar terms to what Friedersdorf's article describes. Even though some of them engage in it themselves.

I should note that something like this *can* happen on Twitter too. On Twitter, people tend to form groups not by real-life friendships, but by political affiliation. I'm a generally left-leaning kind of guy, so my followers tend to be left-leaning folks as well. So when I write something that seems vaguely nice, conciliatory, or even non-condemnatory about any Republicans, it's highly likely I'll be "called out" by left-leaning people elsewhere in the Twitterverse. On Twitter, as in the Facebook-real life nexus, many people respond to this ever-present threat by staying silent; others, by trying to hunt down and shame anyone who calls them out. Fortunately for me, I don't much mind, but I think most people mind more than I do.

Anyway, for centuries, humans have tended to have small, strongly tied inner social circles and larger, more weakly tied outer circles. We tend to respond strongly to any vocal criticism within the inner circle. But social media has thrown this concentric pattern of social circles into disarray, by making the inner circle just as "strong" as the outer one in some ways. So criticism from someone in the outer circle now often carries the social weight and destructive power that only the inner circle should really have. The Shouting Class have thus gained inordinate power over who gets liked and who gets ostracized, and much of the result seems negative so far. I'd like to see a lot more formal research on this, however, before we draw firm conclusions.

The Shouting Class and social discord

If you don't know what the Availability Heuristic is, you should! Basically, it means that when you see some examples of a thing, it makes you think that thing is common. That's a fallacy, of course; it's a case of selection bias, and is related to base rate neglect. It's easy to come up with hand-wavey evolutionary explanations for the Availability Heuristic, most of which boil down to the old adage "where there's smoke, there's fire." But research has found this bias again and again. Here are some examples of how it applies to media exposure:

After seeing news stories about child abductions, people may judge that the likelihood of this event is greater. Media coverage can help fuel a person's example bias with widespread and extensive coverage of unusual events, such as homicide or airline accidents, and less coverage of more routine, less sensational events, such as common diseases or car accidents. For example, when asked to rate the probability of a variety of causes of death, people tend to rate "newsworthy" events as more likely because they can more readily recall an example from memory. Moreover, unusual and vivid events like homicides, shark attacks, or lightning are more often reported in mass media than common and un-sensational causes of death like common diseases.

Now apply this heuristic to social media and the Shouting Class. If you see a bunch of people arguing and shouting about stuff, and you *don't* see the people who *aren't* arguing and shouting about stuff, you're probably going to think that society is a lot more discordant and divided than it really is.

To this, add the fact that the Shouting Class shouts at each other. In fact, because the Shouting Class' appetite for shouting is infinite, they will shout at each other infinitely if they encounter each other.

Before social media, it was difficult for members of the Shouting Class to find each other. I remember walking by a protest in October of 2001 and seeing pro-war and anti-war protesters shouting in each other's faces. I was stunned at the intensity of the discord. Today, I wouldn't even bat an eye. Social media, especially Twitter, immediately puts shouters from all over the world in contact with each other. The shouting is continuous.

This fuels the perception that society is irrevocably and deeply divided. Americans these days are saying that their society is more divided than ever before, and they have little optimism that the divide will be resolved any time soon.

Of course, part of that is just because of American politics - partisanship, partisan geographical sorting, and other trends have certainly contributed strongly to this feeling of division, along with things like changing racial demographics and the fallout from the Great Recession, 9/11, and Iraq.

But I bet that social media is exacerbating the effect. There was plenty of partisanship, racism, anti-immigrant xenophobia, economic pain, fear of terrorism, geographical sorting, etc. in 2012 and 2008 and even before, but we never saw anything like the bitterness and anguish and hate of the 2016 election. And that bitterness, anguish and hate has not dissipated during Trump's presidency, and it would not have dissipated during Clinton's if she had won. There is something structural at work here, and I believe social media is a part of it. Facebook's "fake news" problem gets by far the most attention, but I wouldn't underrate the toxic impact of Twitter, or the infinite, eternal battles of the Shouting Class on both platforms. More than one writer referred to 2016 as the "Twitter Election," and I think there's more than a grain of truth to that description.

The problem is not just that the Shouting Class creates the illusion that the country is more deeply divided than it is, but that this illusion can then become fact. Research shows that trolling is contagious; when people see other people complaining and fighting, they get the urge to join. If society is irrevocably divided, even people who aren't members of the Shouting Class feel the need to fight for their side, or risk being overwhelmed by the enemy.

But 2016 won't be the last Twitter Election. Remember, because the Shouting Class' appetite for shouting is insatiable, nothing that happens at the wider political level will make them stop shouting. So there will always be a baseline level of discord and anger visible to everyone on social media, and there will always be the danger of that discord spreading like a contagious disease.

The Shouting Class and the exhaustion of sympathy

Imagine that you are walking through a city and a hungry homeless person comes up to you and asks for money to buy food. You might give him money and walk away feeling good, imagining how now he won't go hungry. But now imagine that you walk past a row of 100 hungry homeless people, and you don't have nearly enough money to give all of them. Even if you now feed 5 hungry people instead of just 1, you'll probably walk away feeling bad, knowing that there are more hungry people out there than you can help.

That's not a perfect analogy for the way the Shouting Class overloads our empathy. Hunger and homelessness could be completely solved if we had the social will to pony up the money. But the anguish of the Shouting Class is a hole that will never be filled.

Most of the Shouting Class, with the exception of those who are just there to mansplain, blow off steam, or have a good argument, express deep dissatisfaction with society. But unlike those who join movements temporarily in order to get concrete results, the Shouting Class' disaffection is not something that can be fixed.

Idealistic Shouters will continue to find something to crusade for, but their ideals will differ, so they can't all be appeased at once. Moving in the direction of a liberal idealist's vision will not diminish his hunger for further social change, even as it drives conservative idealists to rage and despair.

Unhappy Shouters will continue to have problems with society because they are displacing negative emotion that really doesn't come from society at all. An angry, unhappy person can't be made happy by living in even the most utopian of feasible societies. What they need is not utopia but a hug, and possibly some therapy.

Sadistic Shouters don't actually want social change, but merely to give people a hard time, troll them, or "trigger" them. Sometimes they do this by pretending they have deep problems with society.

So no matter how much we change society, or in what direction, there will be a baseline level of publicly expressed social disaffection that we can't get below. With social media giving the Shouting Class a bullhorn, that baseline level is far higher than

For those of us who feel sympathy for victims of social injustice, this can be maddening. Most of us are basically good folks - when we see someone who appears to be victimized by society, we want to help them. We want to improve society, to make it better. We don't want to be part of a system that hurts even one single person.

So when nothing we accomplish can diminish the seeming anguish of the Shouters, what are we to do? We can exert ourselves ever more mightily to change society, but when we look at the past, and see that all our past successes have failed to diminish the shouting, we are liable to fall into despair and a feeling of powerlessness.

Which brings me to the final potential problem with the Shouting Class...What if it forces us to become callous?

The cost of immunity to the Shouting Class

Ultimately, all of these problems - negativity, social censure, social discord, and empathy exhaustion - can be dealt with by developing an immunity to shouting. In other words, by becoming callous toward people's expression of approbation, dissatisfaction, anguish, irritation, etc. In fact, people on social media say this all the time: "Grow a thicker skin!"

But what are the costs of having a thick-skinned society? One potential cost is that elites and social institutions become unresponsive to legitimate calls for social change.

I saw this in action in college, with the protest community. At one point I joined some protests demanding higher wages for Stanford custodial workers. We marched, we yelled outside the president's office til he came out and talked to us. They raised the workers' wages.

But after that victory, I was astonished to see the protest leaders sit down and immediately start planning their next campaign. I asked them why they didn't intend to reward the establishment for giving ground on the wage issue. They just sort of gave me disparaging looks, except for one guy who told me "Frankly, I go to protests to hook up with hot anarchist chicks."

The Shouting Class is mostly not looking to hook up. But like those protesters, social media's Shouting Class has adopted criticism, anger, and disaffection as ways of life - not the means to an end, but the end in and of itself. Eventually, just as Stanford's administrators mostly stopped paying heed to the protest community, the powers that be will learn to accept and ignore a very high baseline level of popular disaffection. And that will raise the bar for movements whose needs are more urgent and realistic and capable of being satisfied - it'll be hard to tell real grievance from grievance-as-a-lifestyle.

(I sort of think suspect something like this happened with the Tea Party and Obama. The theory is that when Democrats saw that nothing could possibly appease the Republicans, they stopped paying attention to them at all, which I think drove GOP voters to amp up the extremism to levels previously unheard of, in the form of Trump.)

I worry that the costs of evolved callousness could go way beyond political protest movements, though. When people shout "We are in pain!" after seeing chalk slogans for a political candidate they don't like, it teaches lots of people to just ignore anyone who says they're in pain. Even if you're ripping them away from their children and shoving them into detention centers. Even if you're watching them get beaten up on the street. Even if you're hacking them up with a machete or machine-gunning them into a mass grave.

Not a pretty picture, is it?

The Shouting Class, with the bullhorn of social media, is forcing us all to grow thicker skins. But I don't want to live in a society of thick-skinned people.

Social media as a prison and the Shouting Class as the prison guards

At this point, I think I've explained enough potential downsides of the Shouting Class where it's time to start talking about potential solutions. So far, I've portrayed the problem as a negative externality caused by the advent of social media technology. So why not just quit social media?

The answer is: Strong network effects. The very thing that makes Facebook so much profit, and would make Twitter so much profit if they could figure out how to put advertisements in a Twitter feed, is also the thing that makes these networks impossible to leave. You're on Facebook because your friends are on Facebook, and they're on Facebook because you're on Facebook. You're on Twitter because your colleagues, readers, customers, voters, etc. are on Twitter, and they're on it because you're on it. In other words, everyone is locked in because of the network effect.

To the extent that that network effect creates social value (and it does), it's a positive network externality. But to the extent that everyone being on social media creates net negative value due to the depredations of the Shouting Class, then that network effect is a negative externality, and it would be better not to have social media at all.

If, as studies suggest, social media has a deleterious overall effect on people's well-being, but they can't afford to stop using it, that means that social media is a prison. Rorschach once said "I'm not locked in here with you, you're locked in here with me!" On Twitter, and often on Facebook, all the non-shouters are locked in with the Shouting Class. It's a Stanford Prison Experiment, and the Shouting Class are the prison guards. Except the experiment never ends. Maybe Satre's *No Exit* is the better analogy.

OK, OK, that's probably way too dystopian. But if the very worst-case scenario comes true, and social media causes civil wars and a breakdown of national institutions due to the discord created by giving a bullhorn to the Shouting Class, well...maybe it wasn't too dystopian.

Why blame the technology? The Shouting Class and Revolutionary France

It's important to note a couple of things here. First, social media may have given the Shouting Class a bullhorn, but it didn't create the Shouting Class; they have always been with us. Second, the Shouting Class has caused enormous disasters before, even without social media. One fairly clear-cut case is the French Revolution.

The French Revolution started well, with an outpouring of republican sentiment, democratic reform, and positive institutional change. And it ended well, with the creation of the French Third Republic. Unfortunately, those events were 81 years apart. And during those 81 years, France was almost continuously riven by atrocities, social upheaval, large-scale war, civil war, and a political climate of paranoia, denunciation, and mutual distrust. During that upheaval, France was permanently displaced as Europe's greatest power and conquered multiple times. In fact, even the Third Republic didn't really calm France down, as the Dreyfus Affair of 1894 proved; it took the epic disaster and national unifying struggle of World War 1 to do that.

I highly recommend reading a history of the French Revolution, or listening to one on audio. You'll learn all about the Sans-culottes, the Muscadin, the Enrages, and other groups of angry French people who battled each other over the course of those

turbulent years. You will undoubtedly see some parallels between those tribes and the factions trolling each other on Twitter in America today.

And you will also learn about the explosion of newspapers and other publications that sprung up in the long revolutionary century. Many of these tried to be voices of reason, but many others were radical and incendiary. There were radical journalists who urged yet more revolution, and reactionary journalists who prompted people to assassinate the former. It was informational anarchy.

The journalists, activists, firebrands, and organizers of France's century of revolution were the Shouting Class of that day, and newspapers were their Twitter. We think of the age of newspapers as one of cozy oligopoly, with men in hats reading the Paper of Record over their breakfast. In fact, that was only the end of the newspaper age; its beginning was chaos. And France, a society primed for social division and discord, took the brunt of that chaos.

The Shouting Class and media industry concentration

That history suggests that even without all the fancy sharing and matching and instant-response technology of Twitter and Facebook, media fragmentation can give a bullhorn to the Shouting Class. It hints that there are cycles of media fragmentation and concentration, where new information technologies create an explosion of independent producers that gradually (or suddenly) gets crushed back into oligopoly.

Decentralization, of course, was the original idea. The people who built social media were primarily techno-libertarian types who believed that information wants to be free. They sought out to use the new technology of the internet to smash the established oligopolies - broadcast news, cable news, major newspapers. Evan Williams, one of Twitter's founders, created Blogger - the platform on which I'm now typing this lengthy rant - to create "push-button publishing for the people." Social media titans like Mark Zuckerberg and Jack Dorsey have all publicly committed to the ideal of "free speech" - but unlike Thomas Jefferson, they mean much more than simply having the government get its hands off the press. They saw social media as a way of democratizing information - of allowing everyone to be a part-time journalist and op-ed writer.

Of course, the self-interested part of this vision was that the slaughtering of ABC News and the New York Times would put billions of dollars into the pockets of whoever owned the social media platforms. But there was also a real idealism there. Many people were jubilant over social media's role in the Arab Spring. The little people, with their tweets and blog posts and cell phone cameras, were overthrowing vile dictators!

But fast-forward to 2017, and it doesn't really feel like the world's dictators have been overthrown, does it? All the shouting that the Shouting Class is doing on social media doesn't seem to have made America - or almost anywhere, really - a more free place.

Maybe it just takes time. As Zhou Enlai apocryphally said of the French Revolution, it's too early to say. Nobody really knows how technology affects society until well after the

fact.

But I think we're now learning that the simple, decentralized information utopia envisioned by social media's creators and early boosters is not quite what we get. When Big Media's power was shattered, that power passed to a wider group of people, but not all The People. It passed to the Shouting Class.

So what do we do if we decide that rule by the Shouting Class is suboptimal? The old titans of old media aren't coming back - we will see no return to Edward R. Murrow, and the big newspapers will probably continue to drift toward their future as niche publications.

But as I see it, *some* kind of concentration is needed. Informational anarchy is always ruled by the Shouting Class, so the only way to curb the Shouters' power is to end the anarchy. Maybe social media platforms themselves will become the new quality filters. Maybe algorithmic blocking will use robots to shut down the Shouters. Maybe people will just stop using Twitter, and stop joining political argument groups on Facebook. Maybe everyone will make their profiles more private, and learn to unfollow people who engage in callout culture.

Or maybe everyone will just grow a really thick skin and we'll all just sort of learn to ignore each other.

Or maybe I'm wrong, and the Shouting Class really isn't that big a problem, and social media doesn't really make people that unhappy, and American or world politics are just going through an inevitable turbulent phase, and callout culture is vastly exaggerated, and I just spend way too much time on Twitter.

Or maybe the country will fall apart and our new totalitarian leaders will nationalize social media like they effectively have in China. I must say, I hope that doesn't happen.