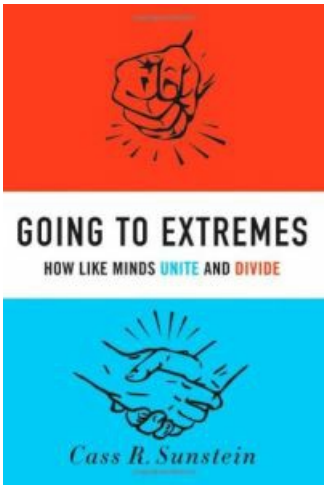

Book Going to Extremes

How Like Minds Unite and Divide

Cass R. Sunstein
Oxford UP, 2009
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Recommendation

This fascinating tour of the sociology of extremism provides a general description of its impact on society and describes specific tactics for leaders and managers who want to foster open discussion while promoting a democratic workplace. Harvard Law School professor Cass R. Sunstein addresses polarization by presenting results from numerous studies. Polarization affects every group interaction, including those of lawyers, judges, doctors, elected officials and the military. *BooksInShort* recommends this book to those interested in promoting open discussions or in preventing pathologies that create mob behaviors and even genocide.

Take-Aways

- When groups polarize and separate from mainstream society – either psychologically or physically – they can become extremist.
- People change their attitudes when they want a group to accept them.
- People will abdicate moral decisions to a recognized authority.
- Collective behavior, or "groupthink," provides a means of identifying decision-making processes that lead to extremism and mistakes.
- Information moves and amplifies among groups via "social cascades."
- Investment clubs making decisions by unanimous votes produce the worst investment returns.
- Group deliberation produces sounder decisions than individuals acting alone.
- Techniques to blunt extremism include traditionalism, consequentialism, and checks and balances.
- Informational cascades can affect markets and mass behavior.
- In a democracy, information, criticism and skepticism combine to improve an institution's performance.

Summary

When People Talk

When people get together to talk about an issue, do they find common ground and compromise? Do they consider all perspectives? In short, no. Hundreds of studies worldwide show that when groups discuss an issue, members take a more extreme position in the direction they were inclined before the meeting. The group confirms their predispositions and makes its members more extreme. This "group polarization" provides a good starting point for investigating extremism, which manifests across all cultures, religions and nations.

> "First, human beings often suffer from unrealistic optimism."

When groups polarize and separate from mainstream society – either psychologically or physically – they can become extreme. This accelerates when the group becomes suspicious of nonmembers and discounts their opinions. Group polarization can occur as people make everyday decisions regarding investing, evaluating others, deciding what to eat and where to live. It creates homogeneous groups intolerant of opposing viewpoints.

Patterns of Polarization

Polarization exists even among US federal judges. One study comparing the voting records in tens of thousands of judicial rulings by Republican and Democratic federal judges found that when judges of opposing parties worked together, the differences between their respective voting records were narrow. But when judges from the same party handed down their rulings, their votes stressed their party's viewpoints on gay rights, disability discrimination, environmental protection, affirmative action and gender discrimination. In studies of juries, people incensed about an injustice and favoring a tough response became more aggressive as a group.

> "A good way to create an extremist group, or a cult of any kind, is to separate members from the rest of society."

When people want a group to accept them, they change their attitudes. "Social comparison" occurs when individuals tend to conform their attitudes to a group. Like-minded supporters can encourage extremism in politicians, investors or business leaders, and can provide them with a false sense of reality.

> "It is tempting to wonder whether group polarization is a product of particular cultures and peculiar 'types'."

When people are unsure about their beliefs, they adopt more moderate views. But when others share their viewpoint, people become more confident and often more extreme. In countries that control their citizens' access to the media or to conflicting ideas, the population's attitudes reflect the information available. For example, 93% of Americans believe that Arab terrorists conducted the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks, but only 11% of Kuwaitis agree.

> "Terrorists are made, not born, and terrorist networks often operate in just this way."

Group behaviors can encourage generosity. When researchers gave subjects $10 each and told them to give some money to a stranger, most individually decided to give between $6 and $8. But once in groups, individuals become more generous because they didn't want to be perceived as greedy. Studies find that groups become more extreme as those with moderate views depart, leaving only the "true believers."

This Is Going to Hurt You More than It Hurts Me

The classic experiments of psychologist Stanley Milgram demonstrated that authority figures could direct people to act in ways that hurt others. Milgram asked subjects to administer electric shocks of varying intensity to unseen people in another room. The people pretending to receive the shocks were actors, but those delivering the jolts believed they were shocking other volunteers. In one iteration, 25 out of 40 people administered the maximum shock level even though they knew it was potentially lethal.

> "When groups move, they do so in large part because of the impact of information."

Ordinary people readily followed dangerous orders issued by a trusted authority – in this case, the scientist conducting the experiment. In another experiment, 20 of 21 nurses followed a doctor's directive to administer a drug dosage that exceeded the maximum. One experimenter concluded that individual personalities do not inhibit aggressive behaviors. Instead, the situations dictated aggressive, antisocial behavior by invoking "deindividualization," a process that makes aggressors and victims seem less than human.

"Homophily"

Preventing group polarization requires effort. Presidents Abraham Lincoln and Franklin D. Roosevelt solicited opinions from outside their circles of advisers. Today, Internet access offers those who are curious alternative points of view, though like-minded people tend to interact within a compatible social network. Sociologists call this homophily. In small groups, people congregate by age, education, race, religion and ethnicity. Larger groups unify along lines of intelligence, attitudes and aspirations. In the US, members of certain groups assume that others in the group share their political attitudes.

> "The very decision to wear a uniform can have significant behavioral effects; warriors who change their appearance in preparation for war are more likely to brutalize their enemies."

Sociologist Irving Janis identified this type of collective behavior as "groupthink." Janis studied this as a means of investigating decision-making processes, and how it can lead to extremism and mistakes. In his research, Janis noted that certain groups discourage alternative viewpoints, avoid discussions and emphasize consensus.

Groupthink

In history, groupthink contributed to such failures as the Bay of Pigs invasion, the Vietnam War escalation, Neville Chamberlain's Nazi appeasement and the Watergate coverup. The groups who made these decisions were insulated against outside advice, and had homogeneous backgrounds and a shared ideology. Janis found that groupthink played no part in the decisions to undertake the Marshall Plan after World War II, or in the Kennedy administration's peaceful resolution of the Cuban Missile Crisis. In both cases, the leader encouraged dissent and evaluated different proposals.

> "The shift toward extremism is often larger when the average person starts with a pretty extreme position."

To counter groupthink, group members must question their assumptions and discover why other people object. One way to test assumptions is to pose the same problem to different groups and outside experts without a vested interest in the outcome.

Information flows among groups through "social cascades." Cascades affect stock markets or real estate values as they generate rumors and buzz. Cascades can be

"informational" or "reputational." Informational cascades begin when people rely on data from those who hold strong, stated positions. This produces a contagious optimism that fuels market bubbles, such as the real estate euphoria of 2008 or the technology stock bubble of 2000. Reputational cascades occur when people stifle their opinions to concur with a group, and thus raise their own reputations. Politicians demonstrate this behavior on a daily basis.

> "A central task, in democratic societies, is for the print and broadcast media, and those who run and participate in Web sites, to combat self-segregation along political or other lines."

People participate in a group consensus to avoid hostility or maintain their self-esteem. Social pressure can suppress independent assessments and contribute to an opinion cascade. When social cascades develop in like-minded groups, they produce near unanimous consensus, even when based on factual errors. This may explain why investment clubs – primarily social groups whose members make decisions by unanimous votes – produce the worst investment returns. Clubs with the highest returns are characterized by frequent debates.

"Social Contagion"

Economist Robert Schiller described such a phenomenon as a social contagion, with both an "infection rate" relating to optimism and a "removal rate" describing the return to a normal perspective. When the media broadcast stories about rising prices for certain stocks, or real estate or gold, for instance, that accelerates an informational cascade that spurs a growth in value. Similarly, ethnic conflicts are less likely to spring from ancient historical feuds than from extreme polarization ignited by recent events. People who have incorrect information and limited general knowledge often hold conspiracy theories and can be susceptible to what others tell them. Conspiracy theorists are not delusional; they usually are ill-informed, sometimes as a result of limited civil liberties or a reliance on government for information.

> "Different people have radically different thresholds that must be met before they will be willing to harm others."

Contrary to popular belief, terrorists do not always come from poor, ignorant backgrounds. Many are educated and from middle-class families, but live in authoritarian countries with limited civil rights and few opportunities for social protest. Some experts contend that democratic nations offering opportunities for self-expression and the free flow of information prove infertile ground for producing terrorists. Alternately, studies have found that people who are prone to political violence try to recruit like-minded followers, prevent dissent and demand unanimity. One common recruiting tool relies on emphasizing how a perceived oppressor humiliated a target group. This fuels the victims' "shared hatred" of a specific group, thus encouraging group activity.

Facing Extremism

Societies attempt to prevent the spread of extremism by using the following techniques:

- **"Traditionalism"** – This approach relies on the collective experience of generations to curtail extreme behaviors. People generally acknowledge earlier successes and when presented with an alternative, more radical vision of the future, contrast that against established, accepted traditions.
- **"Consequentialism"** – This process determines the consequences of certain actions by examining key facts. In the case of global warming, for instance, many hold polarized opinions while knowing few specifics. Asking basic questions and sorting fact from myth can help bring people back from extreme positions. Consequentialism works well for sorting out complex issues, such as gun control and the death penalty.
- **"Checks and balances"** – When the Founding Fathers created the US Constitution, they developed the idea of checks and balances as a means of limiting legislators' passions. This gave rise to the idea of a bicameral legislature – the House and Senate – to prevent extreme viewpoints from becoming law. The presidential veto is another tool for keeping the bicameral structure in balance.

> "The exchange of information and ideas can and does breed unjustified extremism."

US federalism features other "circuit breakers," including Congress's ability to declare war. The framers of the Constitution considered this decision too important to be left to the president alone. They did not want the country's leader bypassing open debate and public deliberation about such a critical national action. In contrast, repressive societies lack moderating influences. Without alternative debate, audiences tend to adopt the viewpoints of the vocal minority.

Like-Minded People

Deliberation alone cannot prevent extremism or produce the best possible answers. Still, group judgments tend to be sounder than individual judgments. The "Condorcet Jury Theorem" finds that groups that answer questions based on their members' majority rulings reach increasingly accurate conclusions as the group grows. But if individual members choose wrong answers, then the probability increases that the group also will be wrong. Informed individual members are more likely to make correct decisions, thereby increasing the group's performance.

> "Groups often blunder precisely because they put a high premium on deliberation."

The probability of being wrong increases when the individual or group is prejudiced, confused or incompetent. This becomes more evident with group (including jury) deliberations, which can alter the judgment of individual participants. Deliberation works well with a diverse gathering whose members have differing information, styles of thinking and positions. In a democracy, the open flow of information, criticism and skepticism combine to improve an institution's performance. When organizations become insular, they become immune to criticism and increase their chances of making bad decisions.

> "Cognitive diversity is crucial to the success of deliberative democracy and its analogues in the private sector."

Like-minded people, such as economists, the disabled, scientists and entrepreneurs, must congregate to advance their ideas so that others can decide which issues have merit and which don't work. It's an approach that uses free speech, public forums and open access to diverse ideas in order to advance society at large.

About the Author

Cass R. Sunstein is the Felix Frankfurter Professor of Law at Harvard University. He served as administrator of the White House Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs during the Obama administration. His other books include *Can It Happen Here, The Cost-Benefit Revolution, Going to Extremes, On Freedom, How Change Happens, Infotopia and The World According to Star Wars,* and he is also the co-author of *Nudge* (with Richard Thaler).