

Have we forgotten how to disagree well?

I'm living with a contradiction in mind. On the one hand, I am worried about the lack of room for debate in society. On the other, I am worried there's too much.

I've previously written about how, in our efforts to protect people from harm, [free speech is sometimes at risk](#). University was once a time when young people forming their opinions could do so in a relatively safe environment. Through debating ideas in person, we could have our views challenged, and refined, without having to worry that if we said something we later came to reject it would forever haunt us.

Over the last year, many of us have had far fewer interactions with people outside of our household. This has meant that, during a time of great upheaval, we've been much less likely to observe and overhear other people's views, or to see people's reactions to what we've got to say about it all.

That said, even before the pandemic, people seemed to shy away from engaging in debates, whether on climate change, equality or the economy. There seemed to be a hesitancy to tackle difficult topics, and a preference for avoiding conflict at all costs.

It has now become far too easy to go about our daily lives never having to set out what we think about something to someone else, nor having to think critically about how to react to someone who disagrees with us (who may well have a point). How many of us spoke to people outside our households about our voting intentions ahead of last week's elections?

Yet, whatever has led to us having fewer opportunities to disagree in person, anyone who has an Internet connection will quickly find themselves overwhelmed by the strength of opinion online. No-one using social media, search engines or streaming services is immune to the influence of these algorithms. If you regularly see negative posts, search results or news coverage about a particular issue, you are likely to internalise some of what you're subjected to. Our teenagers are no exception, subjected as they are to the echo chambers of TikTok and YouTube.

For those who actively engage in online debate, it must be really disheartening. You only have to look at the comments under the Government's Facebook or Twitter posts about the Covid-19 vaccination to see the level of vitriol with which people attack not only the Government but complete strangers who comment. In such a hostile environment, how many of these interactions can be productive? Does anyone ever change their mind as a result of someone insulting them? Or as a result of the expert you have cited being personally attacked, rather than the argument itself being critiqued?

Many of our politicians are no better. There's too little heartfelt debate on the issues that affect people's daily lives, and too much name calling and one liners. On top of our Punch

and Judy parliament, what does it say when MPs vote 100% of the time with their party? Presumably, they can't all agree with every single policy. Yet, when they are wheeled out for the media, they repeat the lines given to them by their party, rather than engage openly with the questions and issues put forward.

If our leaders aren't talking about the different choices or strategies in front of us, how can we expect people with busy lives to have the knowledge and language they need to improve the quality of discourse online? The public is robbed of the tools needed to have informed debates, because all we're given by politicians is more ammunition to pitch us against each other in a perpetual slanging match.

This all combines into a new moral totalitarianism. It's almost as though we now believe that people who don't agree with us must be 'bad people'. No longer do we hear people out and, at the end, if neither person's view has changed at all, just agree to disagree. In some heartbreaking instances, you see people so unable to process the difference of opinion that they wish real harm on others.

No wonder why, then, so many people who consider themselves to be good and reasonable people choose to keep quiet. More than ever, people are holding their tongues in real life, all the time, for fear of saying the wrong thing.

So, by shifting much of our discussions and debates online, talking to strangers whose lives and motivations we can't know from the short messages typed out; and by retreating from real, difficult conversations that require us to really listen to someone else, to reflect on what they've said, to keep our emotions intact, and to form a sincere response, it feels as though we're at risk of forgetting altogether how to disagree well.

This matters.

One reason being able to disagree well matters is because the truth matters, and we need to be able to debate topics effectively in order to find and agree on some basic truths, as well as to come to a consensus on topics which are less clear cut.

Which is why I have a bone to pick with the idea of people sharing 'their truth'. In a world in which too many people distrust experts, and politicians readily claim that a story they dislike is fake news, we should take care not to muddy the waters around the meaning of truth. That said, I understand that the phrase is used to encourage people to talk about their experiences without feeling cross examined – something we definitely need to do more of if we are to relearn how to see things from someone else's point of view.

This is the second reason we need to be able to disagree well; so that we can really try to see the world through the lens of someone else's experience.

One fantastic example of this can be found in the friendship of Derek Black and Matthew Stevenson, as documented in Matthew Syed's book [*Rebel Ideas*](#). Black was a staunch white supremacist who hid his views at university so he wouldn't become socially isolated. He soon became friends with a group of other students including Stevenson, an Orthodox

Jew. Black's views came to light when one of the group discovered the daily far right radio show he presented. While the rest of the group ostracised Black, Stevenson continued to invite him to regular dinner parties, initially asking other guests not to discuss politics.

Some months later, one friend did bring up politics, and Black listened. They discussed scientific studies linked to white supremacy. Over subsequent months, as the group learnt about each other's backgrounds and influences and views, Black "came to the realisation that the evidence didn't support the ideology of white nationalism". Without Stevenson's willingness to see Black as a person worth investing in, whose upbringing and influences were worth taking account of – including having David Duke as his godfather – Black would probably still be a leading white nationalist.

How many of us in Black or Stevenson's position would have been able to agree to disagree so cordially, and to remain friends knowing how polarised their political views were?

So how can we disagree better?

One way is to break down our own echo chambers, so that the same views are not being relentlessly reinforced. Subscribe to influencers, commentators, news outlets and organisations that you don't agree with. Try to reflect on how different news outlets present the same story, and why that might be.

Another way is to rub up against people in real life whose opinions or experiences are unlike your own. Talking in person is so much more valuable than engaging in debate with strangers online. Find out what people care about, and why. If you can empathise with the human in front of you, it's much more difficult to dismiss them as 'bad people'.

Barack Obama wrote at the beginning of the century about how polarised America had become. As is often the case, America's exports often find their way to our shores. But Obama also recognised that ordinary, moderate citizens are out there, finding a way "to make peace with their neighbours, and themselves". He wrote: "I imagine they are waiting for a politics with the maturity to balance idealism and realism, to distinguish between what can and cannot be compromised, to admit the possibility that the other side might sometimes have a point".

As we continue on the Government's roadmap I have a new motivation to visit the pub; to meet people with different ideas, to hear them out, to consider whether they might have a point, and to enjoy disagreeing well.

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