"Give me Liberty or Give me Covid-19": Anti-lockdown protesters were never Trump puppets

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Abstract

Dismissing conservative participants in protests as duped fools or ranting ideologues who have fallen prey to fake news is a dangerous reaction that fails to recognize the essential and grassroots role they play in profoundly effective conservative messaging that continues to outfox progressive information campaigns. This article uses the collective action against Covid-19 stay-at-home orders and mask requirements as an example of the broader arguments in the book, The Revolution That Wasn't: How Digital Activism Favors Conservatives (Harvard University Press, 2019).

Soonafter the pandemic hit the United States, rallies against statewide shelter-in-place orders made headlines and Tweet storms. We saw dramatic images of guns and swastikas at state houses and local neighborhoods from California and Michigan to Kentucky and Alabama.

After appearing to be both shocking and spontaneous at first, other hot takes painted a picture of Trump's tweets or conservative elites stoking this anger. But these stories only provide a glimpse of a larger dynamic at work, and one that is far more fundamental than just wealthy donors fueling propaganda. Dismissing participants in these Covid-19 protests as duped fools or ranting ideologues who have fallen prey to fake news is a dangerous reaction that fails to recognize the essential and grassroots role they play in profoundly effective conservative messaging that continues to outfox progressive information campaigns.

For my book, *The Revolution That Wasn't: How Digital Activism Favors Conservatives* (Harvard University Press), I researched the complex array of factors that have allowed right-leaning groups to make far more effective use of the internet to foster their movements and propaganda. Anti-quarantine protests are the product of a long-standing and tightly networked conservative ecosystem of grassroots groups, political institutions, and news outlets. But these right-wing activists also succeed in part because the structures of social media platforms favor their approach to digital campaigns.

Watching images of protesters toting assault weapons, wearing military or biker gear, or carrying Confederate flags, the assumption is that many of them must be poor and uneducated, provoking no doubt snickers about "white trash." This is often the first and biggest underestimation of who these people are and what they represent.

When I first started studying this phenomenon, I measured the social media footprint of 34 groups spanning the spectrum from far right to far left. I found a distinct pattern of conservatives having higher levels of online participation. To find out why, I went to countless events, meetings, and protests involving far-right preppers and Tea Party groups. Trump supporters are often described as a rural factory worker tricked into voting for him. This portrayal maps onto redneck critiques of the conservative coronavirus protesters. The presumption is that these people, unable to think for themselves, would only be there because they are funded by the likes of the Koch brothers' Americans for Prosperity or Big Oil's Freedom Works. But my research made clear that these grassroots groups are composed of everyday people with more free time, more education, and more digital training than progressive groups.

While conservatives are, indeed, more likely to consume fake news, this does not automatically mean that they lack formal education. Leading activists read a lot of books —maybe not the ones that those on the left are reading—but consume mainstream media news, as well. I found that leaders of these groups were often college educated, and one Tea Party leader had a PhD.

This misperception about these activists' class is critical because middle- and upper-class groups, which tend to be conservative, use the internet far more than their working-class counterparts and generate much higher levels of online participation. In the case I studied, middle- and upper-class groups generated 50 times more Facebook comments, on average per day. Twitter had an even bigger class gap. The notion that these free tools allow anyone to overcome these entrenched barriers is illusory. Marginalized activists are much less likely to have internet access, digital skills, and empowered confidence, even more important in a shelter-in-place context. That in turn allows conservative activists to make greater use of the internet and master their increasingly sophisticated dynamics.

These grassroots actors may indeed receive critical infrastructure from well-funded conservative groups, such as resources for buses or for social media training. But these activists still often use their own funds (and fundraising) to organize their own meetings and events. In the conservative digital ecosystem, these people are neither astroturf nor passive, waiting to be led. They are critical participants.

Digital bureaucracies and infrastructure are also far more common on the right. That places them in a much better position to dominate online than loosely organized groups on the left. Years ago, the assumption was that the internet would be a great leveler,

creating the same opportunity for anyone to be heard or seen. But creating online content is labor. Groups that have a social media staff such as Freedom Works, or a large army of well-educated and dedicated volunteers such as local Patriot groups, have developed the expertise to create and maintain digital engagement. And those with centralized, top-down decision-making cultures are able to create more focused and consistent messaging.

And it's the nature of those messages that account for the right's third digital advantage. Those finely honed messages of "freedom" generated by conservatives resonate far more strongly than fragmented and diverse left-wing themes of "fairness," whether with gender, race, and class or with the environment, health care, and workplaces. Fairness means something different to everyone. And that, in turn, tends to mute its impact.

In contrast, the right's laser focus on freedom and its sidekick "liberty," work much better with a 280-character limit or a viral meme. It's not surprising that these terms have been the most common on anti-quarantine protest signs or shouted by patriot activists. They have harbored a growing distrust of mainstream media brewing for decades, well before Trump began ranting about fake news. Driven by a religious-like fervor to share the "truth" that they believe the news media hides. The internet becomes the perfect vehicle for this proselytizing. Focused on the spread of information, the right sees social media as its most powerful weapon.

A carefully crafted meme from a large, well-resourced think tank can be dropped into this powerful ecosystem of right-wing social media participants. It instantly starts ricocheting across the internet. The effectiveness of the left's messaging, in contrast, remains dampened. And during this pandemic, this digital activism gap risks widening even farther since digital organizing becomes even more vital.

In step with the protests, social media exploded by ridiculing the news media for overhyping a handful of protesters and giving them a disproportionate amount of news coverage in contrast to all of the Americans dutifully staying at home with their Netflix and toilet paper. While it is true that the total number of protesters was small in comparison to the general population, it would be a mistake to brush them off. They are likely just the tip of a far larger iceberg of right-wing resentment that is stewing at home as they read and transmit the tweets and Facebook posts, the "truth" as they see it, insisting the coronavirus lockdowns or mask mandates are violating their freedom and liberty.

This minimization of both the grassroots orientation of these conservative movements and the vast media ecosystem to which it is tethered was the same reason why so many were stunned when Trump was elected in 2016. He did not invent this dynamic, but

rather capitalized on a movement already in place. The first step toward stemming the conservative tide against public health measures is to recognize why and how it has become so powerful.