Programme

Thursday, 23 January

08.30–09.00  Registration
09.00–09.15  Welcome address
09.15–10.00  Michael Bang Petersen – Introducing ROPH: Framework and Findings
10.00–10.30  Coffee Break
10.30–11.30  Diana Mutz – Assessing Incivility in Political Discourse: Problems and Prospects
11.30–12.30  Patrícia Rossini – From Tone to Substance: Towards a nuanced approach to toxic discourse online
12.30–13.30  Lunch (Provided on site)
13.30–14.30  Stephan Lewandowsky – “Post-truth” and “Fake news”: What, why, and how do we respond?
14.30–15.30  How to counter online disinformation? – Roundtable with Lisbeth Knudsen (Mandag Morgen), Martin Ruby (Facebook), Anja Bechmann (Aarhus University)
15.30–16.00  Coffee Break
16.00–17.00  Sander van der Linden – A Psychological Vaccine against Fake News
17.00–18.30  Poster session with rosé and beer
19.00–...  Dinner at No16
Friday, 24 January

08.30–09.00  Arrival & coffee

09.00 – 10.00  Michael Hogg – Who are we? Identity-Uncertainty Fuels Populism and Intergroup Hostility

10.00 – 10.30  Coffee break

10.30 – 11.30  Alexandra Siegel – From White Nationalist Trolls to Saudi Clerics: Hate Speech in the US and Arab Twitterspheres

11.30 – 12.30  Luke Glowacki – The deep roots of political hostility: what primates and tribal societies can tell us about political hostility

12.30 – 13.30  Lunch (Provided on site)


14.30 – 15.30  How to counter online hate and harassment? – Roundtable with Maria Ventegodt (Institute for Human Rights), Claus Noer Hjorth (Media Council), Ann-Sophie Hemmingsen (Centre for Prevention of Extremism), Lasse Lindekilde (Aarhus University)

15.30 – 16.00  Coffee break

16.00 – 17.00  Jason Reifler – The Distorting Prism of Social Media: How Self-Selection and Exposure to Incivility Fuel Online Comment Toxicity

Keynote Speakers

Alphabetical order by last name

Luke Glowacki
Assistant Professor of Anthropology, Penn State University

The deep roots of political hostility: what primates and tribal societies can tell us about political hostility

While political hostility seems to have reached new levels, its origins are much deeper. The evolutionary origins of intergroup hostility are found in the socio-ecological environments in which our species evolved. Studies of primate relatives and small-scale societies provide insight into these conditions. This talk explores the psychological and biological precursors of political hostility by focusing on primate behavior and tribal societies. I review the evolutionary basis of intergroup divisions drawing on comparative research across species. I then use case studies of intergroup hostility among tribal societies, showing how cultural factors, including social organization, network structure and group-identification contribute to divisions that fuel intergroup hostility. Rather than being solely a source of pessimism, knowledge of social dynamics also provides insight into the processes and mechanisms by which political discourse can become more productive. Specifically, increased interdependence, multiple social identities, and changes in network structure can all potentially ameliorate intergroup hostility.
Michael Hogg
Professor of Social Psychology and Chair of Social Psychology Programs, Claremont Graduate University

Who are we? Identity-Uncertainty Fuels Populism and Intergroup Hostility
People need a clear sense of who they are. This allows them to understand the world and their place within it, and to plan their behavior and predict the behavior of others. People strive to resolve feelings of self-uncertainty. One of the most effective ways to accomplish this is to identify with a distinctive social group that has a consensual, unambiguous and clearly defined collective identity. This social psychological analysis, which is presented by uncertainty-identity theory, has far reaching implications for our understanding of populism and intergroup hostility. Rapid and significant social change (associated with, for example, governance, technology, migration, or globalization) can pose a threat that undermines people’s sense of who they are and makes them feel alienated from and marginalized in society. This is a dangerous mix that can strengthen preference for and identification with ethnocentric and xenophobic groups that are intolerant of dissent and have autocratic leaders. Such groups are often associated with populist ideologies that promote conspiracy theories and victimhood beliefs oriented around how the “will of the people” is subverted by the malevolent actions of outgroup “experts” and “elites”. Because such groups and identities very effectively reduce uncertainty, and also promote intergroup hostility and distrust, people seek only identity-confirming information – a process of confirmation bias that is very readily satisfied by the internet. Based on this analysis I suggest some general social psychological considerations that might protect against populism and intergroup hostility.

Stephan Lewandowsky
Professor of Cognitive Science, University of Bristol

“Post-truth” and “Fake news”: What, why, and how do we respond?
Imagine a world that considers knowledge to be “elitist”. Imagine a world in which it is not medical knowledge but a free-for-all opinion market on Twitter that determines whether a newly emergent strain of avian flu is really contagious to humans. This dystopian future is still just that---a possible future. However, there are signs that public discourse is evolving in this direction: Terms such as “post-truth” and “fake news”, largely unknown until 2016, have exploded into media and public discourse. I explore the implications of the growing abundance of misinformation in the public sphere, how it influences people and how to counter it. I argue that for countermeasures to be effective, they must be informed by the larger political, technological, and societal context. Misinformation in the post-truth era can no longer be considered solely an isolated failure of individual cognition that can be corrected with appropriate communication tools. I suggest that responses to the post-truth era must therefore be multi-pronged. I focus on technological solutions that incorporate psychological principles, an interdisciplinary approach known as “technocognition”, and on psychological techniques such as inoculation or boosting that enhance people’s resilience to being misinformed.

Lilliana Mason
Associate professor of Government and Politics, University of Maryland

Radical Mass Partisanship: Prevalence and Correlates of Political Violence in American Politics
U.S. historical accounts of partisanship recognize its competitive nature and its inherent, latent threat of violence, but social scientific conceptions of partisan identity developed in quiescent times have largely missed that dangerous dimension. We rebalance scholarly accounts by investigating the national prevalence and correlates of 1) partisan moral disengagement that rationalizes harm against opponents, 2) partisan schadenfreude in response to deaths and injuries of political opponents, and 3) explicit support for partisan violence. In two nationally representative surveys, we find large portions of partisans embrace partisan moral disengagement (10-60%) but only small minorities report feeling partisan schadenfreude or endorse partisan violence (5-15%). Party identity strength, social sorting, and trait aggression are related to each type of extreme party view. We conclude with reflections on the risks of radical partisanship in democratic politics, even as parties continue to serve as essential bedrocks of democracy.
Diana Mutz
Samuel A. Stouffer Professor of Political Science and Communication, Director, Institute for the Study of Citizens and Politics, University of Pennsylvania

Assessing Incivility in Political Discourse: Problems and Prospects
Automated measurement of incivility is frequently motivated by a desire to monitor the quality of political discourse. Thus far, such efforts have been directed primarily toward detection in online contexts, in part because text from online tweets and comments is easily available as training data, and in part because of growing concern about online incivility. In this study we question whether this approach is the best way forward for several reasons. For one, the distinction between online and offline content is somewhat artificial. In addition, we find that systems developed for assessing discourse in one context often do not work well in others. Further, developing systems that are specific to one context prevents cross-media comparisons. We also report the findings of our investigation of the Stanford Politeness API and the Google Perspective API, two of the most widely used systems for purposes of accomplishing this goal. Importantly, these systems were developed for purposes other than assessing political discourse in particular, and their problems reflect this genesis. The talk covers joint work with Ani Nenkova, Professor of Computer Science at University of Pennsylvania

Michael Bang Petersen
Professor of Political Science, Director of The ROPH Project, Aarhus University

Introducing ROPH: Framework and Findings
Extreme hostility is entering political debates, especially on social media. Professional politicians have become frequent targets of online threats and citizens find online discussion dominated by extremist viewpoints. Democratic societies are thus facing a new challenge: Frequent and intense online political hostility. The Research on Online Political Hostility (ROPH) Project will meet this challenge by identifying the (1) causes, (2) consequences and (3) counter-strategies related to online political hostility. In this talk, I will outline the framework and objectives of The ROPH Project. In addition, I present initial project findings that underscores how online political hostility cannot be understood without considering the offline environment. Much online hostility emerges from deep-seated frustrations rooted in the offline world.

Jason Reifler
Professor of Political Science, University of Exeter

The Distorting Prism of Social Media: How Self-Selection and Exposure to Incivility Fuel Online Comment Toxicity
Though prior studies have analyzed the textual characteristics of online comments about politics, less is known about how selection into commenting behavior and exposure to other people’s comments changes the tone and content of political discourse. This article makes three contributions. First, we show that frequent commenters on Facebook are more likely to be interested in politics, to have more polarized opinions, and to use toxic language in comments in an elicitation task. Second, people who comment on articles in the real world use more toxic language on average than the public as a whole; levels of toxicity in comments scraped from media outlet Facebook pages greatly exceeds what is observed in comments we elicit on the same articles from a nationally representative sample. Finally, we show experimentally that exposure to toxic language in comments increases the toxicity of subsequent comments. In this way, the process of selection into online commenting behavior and exposure to the resulting toxicity greatly amplifies the incivility of political debate.
From Tone to Substance: Towards a nuanced approach to toxic discourse online
Incivility is broadly seen as an innate component of social interaction online. For the past two decades, researchers interested in studying online discussions have examined the nature and causes of uncivil discourse, as well as the potential effects of these behaviors. Due to the complex nature of identifying uncivil discourse, automated approaches have often reduced it to dimensions such as profanity, vulgarity, name-calling, and cursing. These approaches have limitations, mainly because they reduce “toxicity” to the tone, and not to the function, of online discourse. Based on my research, I will provide a multidimensional solution aimed at developing a better understanding of the role of incivility online in the context of the Twitter Conversational Health project, as well as of my research with the Illuminating project on digital campaigns.

From White Nationalist Trolls to Saudi Clerics: Hate Speech in the US and Arab Twitterspheres
Once relegated to the dark corners of the Internet, online hate speech has become increasingly visible on mainstream social media platforms. This talk will explore when and how online hate speech spreads, drawing on examples from the US and the Arab World. In particular, I will show the effect of Donald Trump’s divisive 2016 election on the spread of online hate speech in the US Twittersphere, as well as research from the Arab Twittersphere demonstrating that although religious and political elites play an outsize role in amplifying the spread of sectarian hate speech, they are also particularly well positioned to combat it.

A Psychological Vaccine Against Fake News
Much like a viral contagion, false information can spread rapidly from one mind to another. Moreover, once lodged in memory, misinformation is difficult to correct. The theory of inoculation therefore offers a natural basis for developing a psychological ‘vaccine’ against fake news. Originally developed in the 1960’s, our research group has provided evidence that the theory can be extended and effectively leveraged within the context of fake news and misinformation. For example, in a series of randomized empirical studies we show that it is possible to pre-emptively “immunize” people against disinformation by pre-exposing them to severely weakened doses of the techniques that underlie its production. This psychological process helps people cultivate cognitive antibodies in a controlled environment. During the talk, I’ll showcase an award-nominated social impact game (“Bad News”) we developed and empirically evaluated (N= 15,000) in 15 languages—with governments and social media companies—to help citizens around the world recognize and resist unwanted attempts to influence and mislead.