Chris Bail on BREAKING the SOCIAL MEDIA PRISM: How to Make Our Platforms Less Polarizing for the Princeton University Press Ideas Podcast

Marshall Poe
Welcome to the New Books Network.

Hello everybody. This is Marshall Poe. I'm the editor of the New Books Network and this is an episode in the Princeton University Press Ideas Podcast and we're very fortunate today to have Chris Bail on the show and we'll be talking to Chris about his book, BREAKING the SOCIAL MEDIA PRISM: How to Make Our Platforms Less Polarizing. It's just out from Princeton. Chris, welcome to the show.

Chris Bail
Thanks so much for having me--big fan!

Marshall Poe
Thank you. Could you begin the interview by telling us a little bit about yourself?

Chris Bail
Sure. I'm a Professor of Sociology and Public Policy at Duke University where I direct something called the Polarization Lab. We're a interdisciplinary team of social scientists, statisticians, and computer scientists who are trying to both diagnose the root causes of political polarization on social media and develop new technology to push back.

Marshall Poe
That's much more important work than I've ever done in my life. Trust me. I was a medieval Russian historian. Not a lot of call for that kind of thing. But yeah, you are doing very important work. And I think everybody should appreciate that because there's a lot of speculation about why people seem to forget themselves online and it's nice to see that people are actually looking at the data.

We always appreciate that exactly.

Chris Bail
Yeah, you know right now I think we've got so much speculation going on, you know, and some by very smart people. But a real lack of high-quality evidence and and that's one of our main missions in the Polarization Lab and in and in this book, BREAKING the SOCIAL MEDIA PRISM.

Marshall Poe
Are you polarized in the Polarization Lab?

Chris Bail

Well, you know, you know, we do have some affiliates from from the school down the road, UNC. So to the extent that basketball rivalries translate into political rivalry, yeah we do. We do. Yeah, exactly. Yeah, that's well. That's where I come from.

Marshall Poe

Yeah. Watch basketball. Can you tell us why you wrote this book and what you were hoping to accomplish with it?

Chris Bail

Absolutely. Yeah, you know, I'm really worried. I think we're on a course where, you know, there's serious threats to democracy all around; we've got, you know, existential problems from climate change to, you know, racial Justice and many many other issues, you know, to say nothing of the pandemic and other urgent challenges and, you know, I really see things headed in the wrong direction, especially on social media and I wanted to, you know, see if there's any way to get us out of this mess and above all try to empower, you know, real people to contribute to the solutions.

Marshall Poe

Well, it's as I say, it's vital work. I think many of our listeners have had let's call them "mixed experiences" on social media. I won't tell my story but I kind of come and go on it and when I kind of get fed up with it and leave for a while and I come back and I make pledges to myself. Like now I went back to Facebook after 4 years off of it and I pledged only to post about books and music.

Chris Bail

Uh-huh. That's fine.

Marshall Poe

I will not touch anything except books and music. So this book is about the echo chamber or the lack thereof or the common wisdom about the echo chamber and can you tell us about that idea and its history?

Chris Bail

Sure, yeah. Yeah, so the book starts out by introducing you to one of the people that we interviewed in the course of this research, which was going on for about three or four years. And this guy's name is Dave Kelly and Dave Kelly is kind of a moderate conservative, you know, he's, you know, not super excited about Trump, but he voted for Clinton and, you know, he has, you know, socially progressive views but he has some, you know, conservative and kind of libertarian views about the economy and so the book, you know, kind of launches by discussing scribing Dave and and particularly one night. He's up late arguing with someone on Twitter about what looks like, according to the media, a white supremacist march at a university near town where he's living and he gets in, you know, a debate on social media, which is I think all too typical where, you know, a bunch of extreme people were espousing extreme views and he got into a particular argument with a one liberal woman whom he he had concluded was, you know, just getting one side of the story that she was only hearing what the liberal media wanted to say. If only she could hear, you know, the other side that she would moderate her views.

Now, the irony of course is that, you know, Dave himself is also mostly only hearing one side of the story. He almost, you know, uniquely listens to Republican media and, you know, he's mostly connected to other Republicans on social media. And so I think we're all familiar with this idea that, you know, social media can enable ideological segregation, you know, this is what we usually mean when we talk about echo chambers—our all too human tendency to surround ourselves with like-minded people. And if you like, you know, the filter bubble, the kind of more modern extension of that which describes how algorithms might reinforce this human tendency, you know, creating an even stronger echo chamber effect.

Marshall Poe

And so what is the history of the idea of the echo chamber? I'm a historian. So I'm always interested in the history of ideas. When was it coined?

Chris Bail

Yeah sure. The earliest mention I could find was by the political scientist V.O Key (Jr.) who used it to describe how exposure to the same type of media might shape someone's voting behavior, but I think, you know, people got much more concerned about echo chambers with the rise of cable news and market segmentation in the 80s and 1990s. You know, [it] used to be there's just three or four main television networks, and you know, they mostly had to cater to both Republicans and Democrats. So if they said something extreme, they might lose their audience, but then you know, you go into the 1980s and 1990s and, you know, FOX News and and CNN and MSNBC and so on [and] all of a sudden [you] have a smaller market share and kind of have an incentive to take it to the extremes. And so, you know, to the extent that then these 24-hour news networks generate large followings. [The] concern of course was that repeated exposure to only one side of the story would deepen political polarization.

Marshall Poe

I remember. I'm an old guy. When I first heard about Rush Limbaugh on the radio and I listened to it and I kind of couldn't believe it because I grew up in the era of Walter Cronkite and the Fairness Doctrine. I'm kind of out of my depth here about the Fairness Doctrine, but it used to be the case that the media really did kind of try to go right down the middle of the road. And Rush wasn't doing that.

Chris Bail

Yeah, and you know, with social media the concern of course is there's no longer any producers or there's no longer any gatekeepers that get to say what a legitimate view is and that anybody can say anything and that anybody can tailor their, you know, their views to the subject at hand, but we discovered, you know, as is so often the case when we try to scrutinize common wisdom, is that, you know, sometimes common wisdom becomes so strong because it's just unscrutinized and, you know, difficult to study but in this case, we were really surprised to find evidence that suggests that this idea of echo chamber really doesn't go very far in explaining political polarization and in taking people outside their echo chamber might even make political polarization worse.

Marshall Poe

Yeah, I want to stop you right there and ask you the question about the experiment you ran, and this was absolutely fascinating to me because it's such a clever experiment. I really admire the construction of it. Can you talk about the experiment you ran and how you worked with the

media companies themselves or did not work with the media companies what rules they have about these things because there's human subjects involved.

Chris Bail
Yeah all this.

Marshall Poe
Yeah. So if you just talk us through that that would be great.

Chris Bail
Yeah. So, you know, it's back in 2017 and a bunch of surprising events had just happened--the Trump election, the Brexit referendum and the idea of the echo chamber was, you know, first and foremost in most conversations about what had happened [was], you know, how did we fail to see this coming while we were experiencing different realities, right?

And so, you know, my students and I and my colleagues and I in the Polarization Lab, you know, we thought, "Well, let's try to take people out of their echo chambers. And of course that's a tricky thing to do what you might like to do. If, you know, if you had no ethical concerns or logistical concerns is, you know, lock people in a room and show them, you know, social media for, you know, some long period of time, right? We don't want to do that.

But you know, it's an exciting moment in social science right now, you know, some people are calling it the golden age of social science because we have more kind of naturally occurring data than ever, you know, social media is kind of intimidating us with data. And so there, you know, there's more data, but there's also new opportunities to experiment and we were watching, you know, concern about bots spreading misinformation, but we began to realize, you know, [that] bots could also be repurposed to do social science research.

And so what we wound up doing is we recruited about 1220 Republicans and Democrats who use Twitter and we sent them a survey about their political views and then about a week later we invited them to make money by following a Twitter bot that they were told would retweet 24 messages each day. And, you know, gradually that Twitter bot began retweeting messages from the opposing political party, especially politicians journalists, even media outlets and advocacy groups.

So, you know, if you're a Republican you might have seen a post from Planned Parenthood or Hillary Clinton and if you were a Democrat you might have seen a post from Rush Limbaugh, who we were just talking about, right, and then when we went to resurvey people at the end of the month we reason that we could kind of try to answer the question [of] what happens when you, you know, encourage people to step outside their echo chamber and unfortunately we did not find what we might have liked. We did not find that people tend to moderate their views when you take them outside their echo chamber. To the contrary, we found that liberals tend to become slightly more liberal, not a statistically significant effect, but slightly more liberal but conservatives became much more conservative and so a lot of the work we in this new book, BREAKING the SOCIAL MEDIA PRISM, presents some follow-up experiments we did with qualitative data interviewing people for quite a while before and after they follow the bots to try to get the perspective of people like Dave Kelly, the guy we were talking about at the beginning of this interview.

Marshall Poe

Yeah, I really liked the design of the experiment and then I really liked what you did next once you got the counterintuitive result because you had no explanation for it. Then you went and talked to people.

Chris Bail

Yeah the thought of it right?

It's really funny thing because like I think a lot of people, you know, we assume that, you know, more data, more machine learning, and we're going to hack these problems, you know, and really what we're learning is that there's a lot of hubris around machine learning and even though, you know, it's miraculous to me that, you know, machine learning can drive a car or detect cancer and x-rays…social science and human behavior is just enormously complex and the few attempts we've made a social scientist to try to apply machine learning have had pretty poor results and, you know, even more than that, you know, I began to wonder, you know, what's going on after these people log off social media, you know is part of the story here how social media is coming in and out of their everyday lives and that's where we knew, we just knew we had to talk to people. You know, we had to go back to old-fashioned qualitative research, which is actually oddly enough where my career began to try to answer this question.

Marshall Poe

Yeah, one of the things you point out in the book is that the Dave Kelly that you meet on social media is not Dave Kelly.

Chris Bail

Yeah, so, you know, he's really concerned about left media bias. And he thinks that the left is, you know, exacerbating racial conflict in the US and that's a common view among conservatives and so you might, you know, you might see him online complaining about liberal media bias. But what you wouldn't know is that you know, he's half Puerto Rican and that, you know, he experienced racial harassment as a child and that a lot of his concerns actually come out of genuine concerns about racial divisions, and he actually wants to solve them he but he would never talk about these online.

And so, you know, if we look at what's going on online, we're going to get a really distorted picture of what's going on?

Marshall Poe

It's funny because like on Facebook occasionally….of course Facebook uses some sort of algorithm, to try to figure out who I am and then they will put ads in my stream for, like, a Lexus.

Chris Bail

All those professors driving Lexus's, yeah.

Marshall Poe

Yeah. It's a nice car, but they get it totally wrong. So one of the things that you found out is that when they are exposed to the "other side" in air quotes on social media [it] tends to reinforce pre-existing beliefs rather than change minds. Well, I would put it this way. I would take a step back: they become to use a kind of lay word, defensive. Can you talk about how this happens?

Chris Bail

Sure, you know, I think so many people want social media to facilitate a competition of ideas and in its best format, you know, the idealized version of social [media], people are excited that social media might do that when it first came online, right, by inviting more diverse set of people to participate in conversation making it easier to find information and then almost seamlessly through rational deliberation, you know, the best argumentation would emerge and we'd have a much more vibrant democracy. But instead of a competition of ideas, I think it's really better to describe social media as a competition of identities. You know, very few people these days are going on social media to engage in rational debate. I think that's overwhelmingly clear, but then there's this interesting question that follows from that realization, which is why do we go on social media at all, you know if there's so much vitriol and extremeness and you know, so many people are having negative experiences. What keeps us coming back? And that's where, you know, at the heart of this book [is that] we really started to see in the data that what's motivating people is all too human and that instinct is something that that really makes us uniquely human. We all kind of knowingly or unknowingly each day present different versions of ourselves. We look at how other people react to them and then we tend to cultivate the identities that kind of make us feel good about ourselves and, you know, give us a sense of status and we, you know, we did this long before social media, of course, but the interesting question is how social media is now shaping this identity construction process in the book I offer kind of two big thoughts about how social media might be changing things.

The first of course is that social media gives us unprecedented flexibility in how we present ourselves, you know, so in an offline interaction I'd have a hard time changing my age much as I might like to but, you know, online I can be, you know, I could be 21 or I could be, you know, 72. I can be completely anonymous. Or at the very least I can present very selective accounts of myself and things like that. So one, we have more flexibility in developing our identities, but two, we have more efficient means of monitoring our social environment. So, you know, we can quickly get a notification every time someone likes our posts. We can track our followers, you know, we have built-in metrics that actually help us do what is all too human monitor our social environment for clues about what is working. Now, of course these tools have are distorting reality. You know, we are seeing a very strange and unusual part of the landscape, one that I think fuels status seeking extremists and makes moderates seem all but invisible.

Marshall Poe

Yeah, this is sort of a gamification of status seeking; it turns all of at least online life into a game. And the goal of the game is to accumulate some sort of status among some group of people. I have to digress, there's a really great episode of the show Black Mirror. You may know this episode where people wander around with cell phones and people can vote on them instantaneously. And I'm like, "that's life online!"

Chris Bail

Yeah, that's it. That's what it is. It's really not so dissimilar, you know, and again the stories in this book are I think, you know, one of its most unique features because by comparing people online and off we were able to see just how different people can be and the story that sticks out to me. The most is a guy you know, who I'll call Ray. We use pseudonyms to protect everybody's confidentiality, of course, but this guy Ray, you know, we interviewed him. He's the most kind of polite deferential little guy, you know, I mean, you know just really, you know, a nice guy [who] even goes out of his way to decry racism and says, you know, online everybody's just a jerk and

they're probably all just living in their mom's basement, you know, are not right and, you know, so I went to find him on social media and I was like, well, you know as we did for everyone in the study and you know compared to what's going on online and off and I was shocked, you know, he was the most prolific political troll I've ever seen and I've been studying social media and extremism for more than a decade. It was meme after meme bemoaning liberal hypocrisy, you know, unspeakable images of Nancy Pelosi and Alexandria Ocasio Cortez and others in the most kind of vile way and, you know, he was each night, you know, transforming from Dr. Jekyll into Mr. Hyde and, you know, this shocked me. I was like, you know, this this can't be the same person.

Then, you know, we went through and dotted every I and crossed every T. It's the same guy and not only is it Ray but once we used survey data, which is another way we were able to kind of triangulate what people say online and off, we discovered that that Ray is actually a divorced middle-aged man who lives with his mom.

So, you know, he's literally sustaining two realities and social media is giving him a really badly needed sense of status. Why? Because he's a political minority in his offline life and he works in a liberal city and a liberal business. So this is, you know, really a refuge for him.

Marshall Poe
Yeah, there are a couple things that come to mind. One of the things you do is link people's tendency to go online and behave in extreme fashions in search of status and their real lives because we are kind of, I don't know about you, but I think I've probably seen in person six people in the last year. I see my kids, my partner, I go to the gym, I go at six in the morning, so I don't see anybody. I've absolutely no chance to interact with anybody. So if I wanted to create another identity online that was "Marshall the Troll" under some pseudonym? Sure. That might be fun.

Chris Bail
Yeah, and you know, I do think though it goes a little bit beyond entertainment because, you know, as examples in the world have shown, you know, people are willing to storm the Capitol. For some people, yes, it's entertainment, but for others, this is a vital source of social status and identity. You know, they view themselves as collectively, you know, protecting the country and the people. Trolls can be funny, of course, but you know the consequence in the bigger picture I think is really something that's pretty scary.

Marshall Poe
Yeah, the second thing that came to mind is it's one thing to go online--and I've seen this myself-- and say, "I think you're wrong. And here's the reasons I think you're wrong." But one of the things the people that you interviewed--if I have this correctly--were shocked about was the vitriol of the other side, the kind of school playground name calling, you know, "you're a Nazi" or a "communist" or, I mean, I can't even mention these things on air, but I'm wondering how you get from somebody who's a pretty well raised polite person to somebody who does that. How do they get worked up to the point where they are name-calling in a twelve-year-old like way?

Chris Bail
Yeah, I think, you know, so much of it is that there's a kind of cult like dynamic to extremist circles on social media. You know, one of the interesting things about running a field experiment

where you have, you know, real people interacting with the content you're trying to, you know, "treat" them with in this case, you know, "out party" messages, is you can see kind of collective dynamics that you wouldn't see in a lab. So we saw people like Ray, you know, they might sarcastically or maybe troll the bot a little bit (you know, the bot, by the way, was just retweeting messages). They might be actually trolling the people who made the messages originally, you know, someone like Nancy Pelosi or something like that, but then we also saw kind of people pile on and there's this, you know, tendency for extremists almost like, you know, church sect dynamics trying to, you know, "out-extreme" each other and so there's a normalization of extremism that happens as people, you know, increasingly encounter other extremists but, you know, they also go after the moderates, you know. It's almost like leaving the cold, you know, we saw evidence of this in the data, is one of the worst things you can do. Some of the most extreme vitriol is reserved for moderate people on your side.

Marshall Poe
Yeah, a lot of this leads back to, and this may be somewhat of a digression of my own study of evolutionary psychology and the theory of signaling and especially costly signaling. I don't know if you've ever studied it. You know, the peacock has its feathers, which is very dangerous to have those feathers because you're going to attract a lot of predators that way but it's signaling that it's a fit mate.

But the thing that strikes me about social media is it makes what would be costly signaling in real life very low-cost, right?

Chris Bail
Right. Yeah, and you know, I want to emphasize that I'm not arguing in this book that we all have the potential to become Ray. In fact, you know, Ray is the outlier. So if we look at political discourse on a platform like Twitter what we see is that about 73% of all tweets are created by 6% of people and that 6% of people have unusually extreme views.

So they're actually, you know, most people are moderates, you know. We could talk about how we defined moderation but more or less people who take more centrist positions and they hardly ever talk about politics and there's good reason for that. You know for a lot of us the status incentives are actually the opposite of the Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde character I was just describing. So a great example of this is a woman I call Sarah in the book and Sarah is another moderate conservative, you know, but again, she's got some complexity like Dave Kelly who I mentioned at the beginning. She's half Puerto Rican. She's from New York. Her dad is a cop and she went to an Ivy League college. So she has a lot of liberal friends, you know, she reads the New York Times; she has very complex and nuanced views about things like race and policing, probably exactly the type of person that we really need if we're going to try to pull the debate about say race and policing back to the center, if there is a center. And the problem is you'll never see her talk about politics online. And here's why. So when we first met her we asked her and everybody else we talked to, you know, "tell us about the last few times you used social media." We kind of wanted to understand the role of social media in their lives. And she says, "Well, about a month ago I was putting my kids to sleep and I finally got them down and then I was up late on Twitter just kind of scrolling around. I saw a post by the National Rifle Association, you know, advocating for Americans' rights to own handguns and she replied to that post saying something like, you know, "my husband is a responsible gun owner who

deserves the right to protect our family." Something, you know, fairly innocuous in the landscape of American discourse on guns.

She says that within minutes people had discovered in her Twitter feed that she had kids and posted, you know, "I hope your kids find your gun and shoot you" and unfortunately, this is all too typical. The Pew Research Foundation recently concluded that the number one reason people are harassed online is for sharing their political views.

And for people like Sarah, you know, there is, you know, the threat of extremism from the other side. There's the threat of retribution from more conservative members of her own family and she's actually got a great life. You know, she's got two great kids. She tells us she lives in a comfortable suburb, you know, she's got a great job. Social media and posting about politics on social media in particular is a liability for her. It's not a source of status at all. And this is one of the ways that what I call the "social media prism:" though it fuels status-seeking extremists, it also mutes moderates like Sarah.

Marshall Poe
Yeah, I found this part of the book very interesting because I think I'm a bit like Sarah. I have real stakes in the real world. And what I discovered--this is many years ago now in the kind of infancy of social media--is that I was saying things to people that I would never say to them in real life and they were saying things to me. These are people that I know and love and work with. What am I doing here? This is nuts. I like these people! Um, but you find yourself driven in this way. And so I came back with the pledge, "only books and music."

Chris Bail
And you know, there's a lot of people like you, Marshall so, you know, if you look at, you know, few years back, you may remember the kind of Delete Facebook movement. Yeah and it became a thing, you know. So Elon Musk, Will Ferrell, you know, other people were saying, you know, publicly announcing their deleting Facebook and it trended on Twitter and gained a lot of traction on Twitter.

And so, you know, there were there were polemics written, you know, about why we need to leave social media and, you know, the irony is, you know, as a data scientist I wanted to look for trends and public attention to this issue, so I turned to Google search data and one of the things that I discovered is a few weeks after Delete Facebook became a popular search term, how to undelete Facebook became a popular search term, you know, several weeks later.

And so, you know, what does that say? I think unfortunately it means that, you know, social media is here to stay and if we look at young people in particular, you know, the rates at which they're online constantly is really staggering and we could talk about how that's probably bad for them. And I actually personally think it is but we're stuck in in a system that, you know, especially in an age of social isolation, not only the pandemic which is had as you mentioned earlier an obvious effect on separating us from each other, but even before the pandemic, you know, a recent study out of Harvard looked at voter file data and developed very fine-grained geographic resolution of where Democrats and Republicans live and concluded that the majority of Republicans and Democrats are actually never going to or very rarely going to encounter each other in their offline lives. So, you know, I'm worried that social media is here to stay—that it's going to become one of the only places where we can have cross-party conversations and, even

worse, that people like you, Marshall, are going to leave and then it's just going to be a hotbed for extremism, which is only going to push us further towards the brink.

Marshall Poe

I want to give a plug, which I think will surprise people, for Facebook because they did what I think is a terrific job of, to use it in that metaphor, "cleaning it up." They had this policy called the Friends & Family policy. Do you remember this? This was three or four years ago where they, I don't know how they did it, but they tried to move people essentially to posting pictures of their kids and their dogs and talking about their aunt who was sick and removing---I don't know if they removed it--I don't know if there's any censorship--but when I left for four years and then I came back I found it much safer and much better and I guess I don't know if it was Facebook that does it but I'd like to present this to you as a hypothesis: that actually we're learning how to use it. That originally, you know, I remember you know, these free speech fanatic friends who wanted to go on there and show they could say any damn thing they wanted, which wasn't very sensible. But now don't a lot of people just know not to do that, like me? I just don't want to talk about politics on Facebook.

Chris Bail

I think this is the problem. You know, you and many others like you are exactly the people who we need to be engaging more online, you know, and I get it. You know, I'm the same way, you know, I don't want to have uncomfortable conversations at Thanksgiving dinner anymore than anyone else but, you know, I think we really need to, you know, rethink civic education and really rethink, you know, what the place of social media is and, you know, it's easy to I think, you know, come up with some kind of self-help e-solutions here, you know, like we should all be better to each other. We should all go bowling together, or whatever, right? And these are fine solutions and I would never say, "we shouldn't go bowling together," you know, maybe and there is evidence that, you know, offline encounters have strong polarizing effects, but it's just not practical in the long term and we're going to be stuck for better or worse with Facebook and Twitter for a long time. And even though I do absolutely think that, you know, the platforms could do better.

My concern is that the root cause of the problem is *us* and until we collectively change our behavior we're not going to see the scalable types of shifts that that we need to, you know, find some common ground.

Marshall Poe

Yeah, you have a great line in the book---let me see if I can find it here in my notes. Here it is write here. I wrote it down; I liked it so much. "How can we be sure that people's echo chambers shape their political beliefs and not the other way around?" That's profound because it kind of reminds me of research that I read, and you can tell me if this is accurate or not, I don't know, about the way in which college educations change people's political beliefs and the results of the research was "it doesn't at all. So these tremendously liberal academies being taught by people who are, you know, on the left of the hard left, apparently. According to this research, people come out of college with the same political beliefs they entered college with.

Chris Bail

The take-home message for me is "it's really hard to change someone's mind." Yeah, you know like, you know, and it's funny because like, you know, take like COVID right now. I think a lot of public health departments try to think about messaging as kind of a hypodermic needle, you know. Like the great sociologist Paul Lazarsfeld used to say, you know, it's not a hypodermic needle. We can't just inject opinion into the masses. In fact often when we do that it has no effect. And sometimes it has the opposite effect.

And so I think, you know, really thinking about, you know, I think a lot of people have some blind faith in technology--that we just need to go deep inside Facebook's full source code and kind of flip a switch and we can we can right the ship here. But I don't think it's that simple. I think we need, you know, mass scale bottom-up reform among social media users.

But I also think we need to ask the big question, you know, "If we could redesign social media from scratch, what would it look like and what should platforms do?"

Marshall Poe
Yeah, let's bracket that for a second. I want to return to that, but before we do I want to talk about the kind of technological determinist take on this and that is that there's just something about the form of social media--the threaded discussion, I think I would call it, that pushes people in this direction. It's quite different from a live conversation? Can you speak to that? Is there any truth to that? That there's something about the way in which the threaded discussion works that pushes people in this direction?

Chris Bail
Well, let's stay on the top-down solutions first and maybe we can come back to the bottom down solutions because we did some research on it--exactly this issue. So, you know the challenge in trying to work something out like that…like how is the design of social media shaping how we treat each other? What you would really love to do is go to Facebook or Twitter and say, "Hey we want to, you know, we want to turn off threaded commenting for, you know, a month and see how people, you know, behave. Sometimes this is possible and these types of things can be done within companies, but they are very rarely shared.

Luckily for a lot of different reasons and researchers like me, you know, have very little capability to experiment upon the core design features of social media. And I think this is a really big problem because we've been content to deal with the chaotic ad-hoc evolution of social media from for example, you know, tools that undergraduates were using to rate each other's physical attractiveness to, you know, the principal forum for democracy in the 21st century and we never stop and ask the question, you know, "were these things designed right?"

We knew that collaborations with social media platforms were not going to happen, especially in the wake of controversies like the Cambridge Analytic affair, and so we decided to build our own social media platform for scientific research. Yeah, you know and I'm hopeful, you know, that this allowed us or this will allow others to really start to ask these deep questions about, you know, what's going on in the guts of social media, you know. So for example, we can do things like control who's brought into conversation with each other or control aspects of the design of the platform itself and together this can really let us gain some traction on answering this question, "If we could redesign social media from scratch, how should we do it?"

 And let me tell you about the first study that we ran on this platform because I think it's

relevant to the question you asked earlier about "is the design really the key problem here." And we wanted to study anonymity first and we wanted to study anonymity for two reasons. So one, we knew about people like Ray, the Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde character I mentioned earlier who kind of hides behind anonymity and becomes extreme precisely because of anonymity, but on the other hand, you know, to the extent that identity is shaping all of our behavior on social media, especially our tendency to defend our in-group and attack the out-group anonymity also has an interesting feature of sort of taking identity out of the equation and perhaps allowing people to focus on the content of ideas instead of the identities of people who are delivering them.

And so what we did is we hired a bunch of people to take a long survey, ask them all sorts of questions, and then later we invited some of them to "help us" test a new social media platform. We later told them that they were part of an academic study, but they used a real social media platform. They were given an invite code that unbeknownst to them paired them with a member of the other political party to have about an hour long discussion, a chat discussion anonymously about either immigration or gun control and then we surveyed them, you know, we picked up all the data they produced in the app. We ask them some questions in the app, and then we followed up with them a week later and what we discovered though, even though we ran this experiment during one of the most polarizing moments in US history, maybe during the impeachment trial of President Trump, we found that a simple one hour anonymous conversation had substantial depolarizing effects. And not only were they substantial but they were even stronger for Republicans. And because our first study, the one where we paid Republicans to follow bots that retweeted Democratic messages and vice versa, it showed that Republicans became more extreme than Democrats when you do this.

We were particularly excited to see that that Republicans were moderating their views even more and I interpret this finding as follows. You know, if you think about the strength of the Republican identity and then norms against violating the orthodoxy, they're just so strong, you know, exploring an alternative viewpoint in public on something like guns or, you know, other divisive issues like abortion or, you know, these types of things, it's really risky for Republicans and I think, you know, a lot of them are asking themselves, "What is the Republican Party? What does it mean to be a Republican right now?"--some of the same questions that by the way liberals were asking themselves after Trump and so, you know, it's really, you know, it's fascinating to see that, you know, simply moving the conversation to a new platform--and we didn't give people any incentive to compromise or to behave well, you know--depolarized people.

Marshall Poe

One of the things that I've done or rather people that I know have done is essentially vet who can participate in your group--whatever group it is--and I'll mention a couple of examples. One is I'm on a couple of Facebook groups that are heavily vetted, almost it's hard to get in, and you kind of have to prove your bona fides. I'm on another threaded discussion group, a Google group. I order to get into this one you actually have to talk to the founder on a Zoom call.

Yeah, so he wants to make sure that everybody obeys the kind of general directives of the group and I think more and more of this is happening on places like Facebook where you can start groups and you know, it's disappointing in a sense because you would like to let anybody talk. But that may not be possible.

Chris Bail

Yeah. Yeah, and you know, I think we'll continue to see…I mean one thing that I think is really interesting again, if we take the long view for a moment, you know, we're really at the early, you know, earliest part of the story of social media, you know, and any kind of paradigmatic technological transformation has growing pains and even in the early history of social media, we've seen every three or four years a new player comes on, you know Facebook displaced Myspace, and Instagram threatened Facebook so much that Facebook bought Instagram and, you know, Tik-Tok is now threatening Instagram's market share. But above all and maybe more importantly I think most social media users are not happy with their options, you know, there's a real desire for something new and you know, Facebook's market share right now is astounding; it's difficult to imagine it going away anytime soon.

But I do think to the extent that we're all kind of segmenting ourselves into, you know, two communities I do think some clever entrepreneur or some existing platform could create a space where we kind of change the status incentives instead of rewarding people when their posts resonate with their side, which is what the engagement algorithms currently do, we think, in most social media platforms.

We could reward people whose posts resonate with different types of people and in this way, we could actually use technology, you know, and it's an ideal way, you know, to optimize for democracy, to expose ourselves to the full panoply of alternative views, you know, maybe even outside politics, you know, what is resonating across racial groups? What is resonating across gender groups, you know, let's find those common denominators and let's use technology to get us there.

Marshall Poe

I think you're totally right that people are unhappy with what's on offer now; I hear lots of complaints about Facebook and particularly about Twitter and I know many people that have abandoned Twitter entirely. I also agree that the data itself shows that these companies have life cycles. They you know, I'm old enough to remember when people thought Japanese cars were really bad and GM or Ford had 93% market penetration.

Yeah, so these things do change and I think as entrepreneurs and people such as yourself offer solutions or better prospects that the things will change. At least I'm hoping that they will.

We've taken up a lot of your time and I really appreciate it. We have a kind of traditional final question on the New Books Network. And that is, what are you working on now?

Chris Bail

Well, you know, I'm really excited to tell your listeners about the tools on polarizationlab.com that can hopefully help us all learn to see the social media prism and break the social media prism. So these are tools for example that allow you to identify and avoid extremists, to find moderation. We've created a bipartisanship leaderboard and bots that retweet people who our research suggests are depolarizing tools to track issues where there's emerging consensus among Republicans and Democrats and the goal here is really to try to empower social media users. Again, if social media users are such a key part of the problem, and an underappreciated

part of the problem, we may have our most scalable impact by empowering social media users to transform their own behavior and depolarize at scale.

Marshall Poe

Well, that's just it, you know. A lot of the time I look at people's political posts and I just see a profound lack of humility. They just think they're right exactly. And I don't know how old you are, but I'm old enough to know that I'm wrong a lot. I've been wrong. I've been wrong many many many many times, so I just don't really know. Yeah oftentimes and it's nice to talk to people such as yourself and on the New Books Network with researchers that look deeply into these questions so that maybe I can, you know, reduce the percentage of time in which I'm totally off base.

Chris Bail

Well, thanks so much, Marshall. I mean, it's a pleasure to be on. Like I said, I'm a big fan and love to connect with your audience about the new book or the new tools and thanks for having me.

Marshall Poe

Well, thanks very much Chris. Today we've been talking to Chris Bail about his book, BREAKING the SOCIAL MEDIA PRISM: How to Make Our Platforms Less Polarizing. This is just out from Princeton University Press. I urge you to buy a copy. I'm Marshall Poe, the editor of the New Books Network. Chris, thanks for being on the show.

Chris Bail

Thanks so much for having me.