Getting the Trolls Under Control

Whether it's security, environmental protection, infrastructure or the internet – everybody has to play by the rules if we are to reap the benefits of collective goods. **Fabian Winter** of the **Max Planck Institute for Research on Collective Goods** in Bonn is studying the conditions needed for this to happen, and also providing surprising support for political intervention in social media.

TEXT **MARTIN TSCHECHNE**

Three men are standing on a platform waiting for a train. One finishes his coffee and carelessly throws his paper cup on the ground. How does the second man react? Sociologist Fabian Winter staged the entire scene. The man who throws the cup away is actually a member of his team, and Winter changes actors each time the scene is played out – sometimes his outward appearance is much like a typical German from Cologne or Bad Godesberg, sometimes he has a rather dark complexion and dark hair and looks like he could be Turkish or Syrian. A third man mingles among the other people waiting for trains and notes what happens – his job is to observe who reacts to this violation of the rules and how.

The sociologist, a Max Planck Research Group Leader at the Max Planck Institute for Research on Collective Goods in Bonn, has gone through a lot of tossed coffee cups. He was surprised to find that roughly one out of ten locals pounce on someone who breaks the rules when he looks like one of their kind, but about twice that number react when the person who litters looks like a foreigner. Conversely, only a very small number of people from southern Europe or the Middle East will let their displeasure be known to a blond and fair-skinned rule breaker, although they will be stricter with someone they perceive to also be a foreigner living in Germany.

GERMAN APPEARANCE PROTECTS FROM REPROACH

"I'm greatly interested in social norms," says Winter. "Under what circumstances do they change? When do they remain the same? That's what I'm investigating." The sociologist has many possible interpretations to offer for these highly varied reactions to a discarded coffee cup: the need to defend one's environs against foreigners; the fear of arguing in a language of which one might have only a limited command; the worry that an aberration in someone's own ethnic group could damage his or her own reputation; the concern that misbehavior from fellow countrymen could tarnish one's own reputation; a well-bred sense of respect; or a sense of responsibility that also extends to one's countrymen when abroad.

Although Winter's findings are easily confirmed and have been time and time again, every now and then the researcher still has doubts about his seemingly simple field study. "I feel there is a very sensitive subject that underlies all this," Winter explains, referring to the popular belief that ethnic diversity increases problems in social interaction. People don't look out for each other as much, their sense of responsibility dwindles, and norms and rules lose their binding character. Winter's empirical data tells a different tale: "It's generally Germans who escape unscathed. When foreigners commit a transgression, they're accosted more frequently, both by locals and by people of their own kind. If one aim is to punish as many violations of norms as possible – that is, to promote awareness in every-

Protected by anonymity: People are often less restrained when expressing themselves on social media than they are in public. Sociologists are investigating what general conditions stimulate or curb hate and agitation on the internet.

Social control under the microscope: Fabian Winter (in the background) observes how bystanders in a train station react when a member of his team tosses an empty coffee cup to the ground. What's striking in his study is that perpetrators who appear to be foreign are reprimanded much more often.

day life – then society ought to be more heterogeneous than it already is."

That's the problematic nature of collective goods, whether climate, water and infrastructure, networks, free trade or domestic security – anyone can partake of them, but not everyone has to contribute. Street lights light the way also for people who don't pay taxes. Fabian Winter brings up the notion of non-excludability, and recommends a quick skim through any newspaper – the argument over climate protection and the plight of refugees, the continually mounting attacks of the likes of Donald Trump against the Western system of economy and values, Poland, Hungary, Brexit, Turkey – the list is endless. The summit of G20 industrial nations in Hamburg sparked a long-running debate on what kinds of objects, people and neighborhoods were legitimate targets of violence – parked cars,

the police or the elegant district of Pöseldorf. Winter grew up in Hamburg and has some say in the matter. And in Berlin, neighbors hung small pieces of paper on trees and in hallways to make their thoughts on neighborhood life known – but given signs like "Hey! We're planning a home childbirth here. Could be a little loud" and "Go hang yourselves, you damn Swabians," no one could quite tell where sleepless despair ended and derisive joke began. Some people just enjoy causing trouble.

GLOBALIZATION CREATES MORE COLLECTIVE GOODS

The researcher sums it up thus: "Everybody benefits, but not everybody has to take part." For two years, he's taken great pleasure in getting together with his Institute colleagues every Monday. They spend the entire day in

an old villa on the banks of the Rhine – economists, legal experts, psychologists, computer scientists and political scientists, sometimes with guests – and stake out a small symposium in which their areas of knowledge and expertise overlap and complement one another. Whoever has something to report on gives a talk. As already put forth by Elinor Ostrom, a political scientist who was awarded the Nobel Prize in Economics in 2009, knowledge, too, can be a collective good: it increases through sharing.

Of course, differences in academic opinions can also surface at these Monday meetings. How far does community extend? And how free is participation in it? From an economist's standpoint, as sociologist Winter explains, the Hartz IV unemployment and welfare benefits program, for instance, would count as a collective good: everyone contributes to the program by paying taxes, and it's available to practically anyone in case of emergency. He himself sees things a little differently and feels that anyone who takes advantage of Hartz IV will find themselves moved to the margins of society and stigmatized. "These are issues that tend to be addressed more in sociological debates."

Such contradictions are what attracts him: the fringes and points of transition where the terrain becomes uncertain and conflicts arise – and by no means just those between academic disciplines. While an agitated public at the G20 summit in Hamburg argued vociferously over such issues as how many emergency personnel it takes to protect parked cars from the black bloc, many more-significant problems got lost in the noise – once again. Why is it so difficult to unite industrial countries in the fight against CO_2 and global warming? How can a deal be drafted that will benefit everyone? What does it mean when public

hospitals, or even water companies or sections of highway, become privatized? "This creates not only wealth," concludes Fabian Winter "but increasingly also inequality."

Actual planning has long since caught up with what was, one or two generations ago, still a utopian idea. Exchanges are taking place at all levels – local, regional, national, continental and global – and in real-time. And even when goals still have to be defined retroactively, when setbacks, power struggles and corruption frequently complicate the process, the concepts are there, and often the means and the institutions are, too. Despite all the creaking and groaning, Europe is a reality. Even the declared opponents of globalization are proving themselves to be astonishingly cosmopolitan. They flocked to Hamburg in July for the G20 summit from as far away as Greece and Spain. They'll also journey to the next summit, more or less ready to resort to violence, in order to demonstrate their dissent. The range of collective goods is enormous and expanding, so what is causing the problems?

Fabian Winter is getting closer to an answer by following the trail of verifiable facts. His colleagues from the field of economics, at the time still in Jena, taught him, through their empirical studies and simulations, how to look at things from the viewpoint of economics. The researcher calls this experimental sociology, and he is also aware of earlier forerunners from social psychology. It's simply a fact: knowledge increases through sharing.

"I give you ten euros," says Winter, describing the basic form of a behavioral economics game in which he makes wealth and fairness the subject of negotiations, "under the condition that you give some of that amount to another player. If they accept your offer, you both get to keep the money; if they don't accept it, nobody gets anything."

Sense of community as a determining factor: Fabian Winter allowed test subjects sitting at a computer to choose how they would share ten euros with another person. Just a photo of their virtual opponent caused participants to act more generously.

How much of a loss will an opponent accept to ruin an unfair deal proposed by the donor? Offering just one euro would be risky, but who's going to be humble enough, generous enough or stupid enough to propose a straight 50-50 split with the money already in hand? Winter and others have varied this experiment in many ways – with people who were looking each other in the eye and with players who knew nothing about each other, with men

and women, students, children and senior citizens, with and without the possibility of telling the other person one's opinion afterwards. Of course the results confirmed again and again that community must first exist in order for the concept of collective goods to be recognized and seized upon as an opportunity. And if the money dispensed was still too moderate, all it took was a photo of one's opponent to make the person with the cash a little more cooperative in the unfair deal.

And then we have the World Wide Web, where anyone can confront anyone else and remain entirely unknown in the process – where every attack is met with applause and no one is ever accountable, where agitators, mobs and stalkers freely spread threats and slander, and where terrorists plan plots and finally give the signal to attack – a collective good that challenges the limits of comprehensibility and thus nullifies any kind of responsibility. "It's not exactly like that," Winter interjects, explaining that many forums and blogs establish conditions under which they grant access to users and punish cases in which these aren't followed. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Xing, a career portal, make sure their rules are followed and ban users who tolerate defamatory statements and slander, disseminate pornography and openly incite violence.

HATE AND AGITATION CAN BE CONTAINED

Winter used experimental sociology methods to examine the impact of control on the internet, which makes him a pioneer in the field of the sociological examination of hate and agitation on social media. How do members of a forum react to a photo showing a man carrying a child on his back and kissing another man? How do they react to images of violence, suffering refugees or political protest? And how do they react after someone else has already expressed their opinion on the same platform?

Winter sees social norms as a bundle of rules and conventions that are developed and consolidated through agreement with others. As a result, it's important for one to have experienced other people in at least similar situations, and to find such observations confirmed. But does that which appears to be self-evident in every marketplace apply in the anonymous, unprecedented expanse of the internet? The sociologist recalls a report by politician Renate Künast, who wanted to find out what kinds of living circumstances and personalities lie behind the abuse and threats she repeatedly found in her e-mail inbox. In the fall of 2016, the former chairperson of the Green party and parliamentary fraction set off to knock on the doors of some of these so-called trolls. She was surprised, she later confessed, at how well-to-do these trolls were and how reserved and even courteous many of the dreaded angry citizens were in their personal dealings.

"It's quite likely they didn't mean Ms. Künast personally at all," suspects Fabian Winter, "but just wanted to articulate some vague resentment of the distant elite and their own unmanageable and perhaps unfair conditions. It's also quite likely that they didn't have any inkling of how public their actions were."

But where did their anger come from, and what transformed these townhouse residents into vicious hellcats? In a series of independent experiments, the researcher varied the environment in which posts regarding internet debates are formulated, as well

Controversial topic
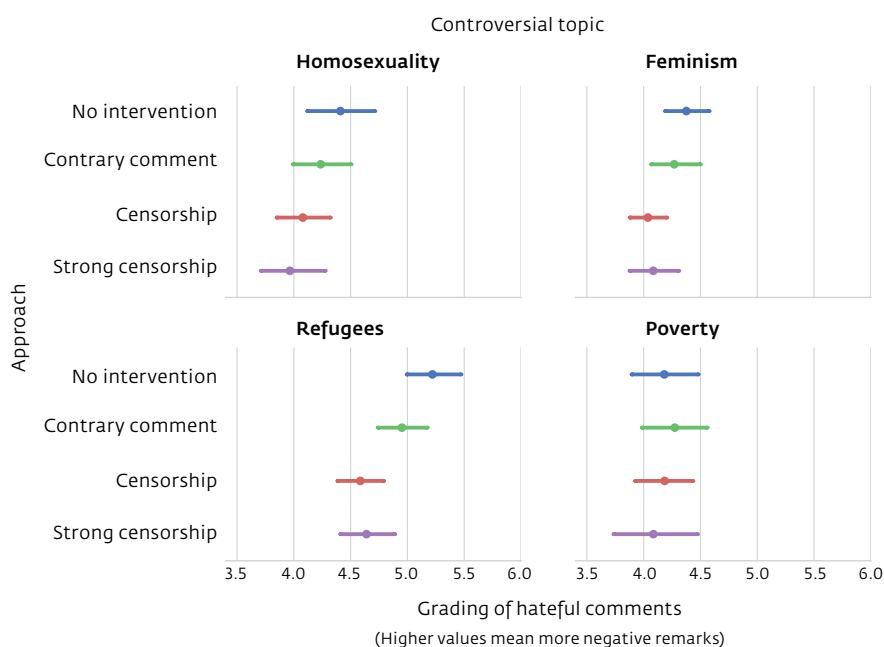
Intervention helps: Unfiltered communication (blue) in internet debates often leads to hate and agitation rising further. Even contrary comments (green) can heat up the controversy. Deleting extreme comments (red), in contrast, helps bring the discussion to a more objective level. However, fundamental censorship (violet) can have the opposite effect.

"Ugh!!!," "Unacceptable!!!!!," "Embarrassing!!!!!!"

"Just seeing her!"

"We'll soon be bringing politicians like you to trial!"

"As dumb as a stump!"

"Poor Germany!"

"Traitor!"

Equipped with a sense of humor: Green Party politician Renate Künast regularly receives abuse and threats on the internet. As a result, she posted ironic instructions for hateful comments on her Facebook profile, quoting abuse she commonly receives. Künast does, however, also defend herself through legal action.

as the way in which they're controlled. In an internet forum set up specifically for that purpose, he presented the participants in his series of studies with a wide range of comments on photos of gay couples or long lines of migrants. These comments were presented to a first group unfiltered, and then the replies to the comments were also included in the comments presented to a second group – as is common in chatrooms. He prompted participants to "Add your voice to the debate! Let us know what you think about this!" In a third list, statements that were especially hostile were deleted by members of the research team, and a fourth list included only decidedly positive comments on the controversial themes of the photographs. The researcher's goal was to find out how strongly a person's opinion is influenced by the climate of his or her social environment.

The results apparently surprised the researcher himself a little: deletion helps. Contrary comments seldom diminish the controversy, nor do they decrease the frequency of extremely hateful comments. In addition, fundamental censorship that allows only harmless words into further debates appears to have engendered angry reactance in some participants. However, removing –

as a matter of precaution – comments that were openly racist, abusive or sexist helped keep the flow and content in the forum to more objective lines of discussion. Fabian Winter shrugs his shoulders and quotes an old internet community adage: "Don't feed the trolls. There are people out there who simply enjoy escalation. You shouldn't give them a free opening."

Renate Künast filed charges every time she found a hateful comment to be too personal and threatening. It didn't help much – most proceedings were dropped. It's like tilting at windmills. Fabian Winter realizes that the bypass methods of using complicated encryption processes or a server located in some remote tundra makes it extremely difficult to trace fake news and

criminal agitation. With the act passed this summer on improving law enforcement in social networks (NetzDG for short), the German Minister of Justice seeks to have the responsibility for such issues be placed on network operators themselves. Facebook has already stepped up the self-control of its content. However, critics up to and including the United Nations fear for freedom of expression and information, and warn against totalitarian censorship.

Winter's data suggests that, in the collective good of the internet, it's necessary to implement regulations and curb momentum before it can build up. The corresponding forms and authorities must still be negotiated and established. The discussion moves on to the next round. ◄

TO THE POINT

- Sociologists are examining how rules of social interaction can be maintained when social contacts increasingly take place in the virtual world.

- In personal face-to-face encounters, such as those on a railway platform, whether a violation of rules is admonished depends on one's assessment of the offending party.

- The more anonymous the environment, the more severely people who are normally polite and reserved will violate fundamental rules of propriety.

- It's very easy for hate and agitation to build up on the internet. A debate can often be made more objective only by deleting extreme comments.