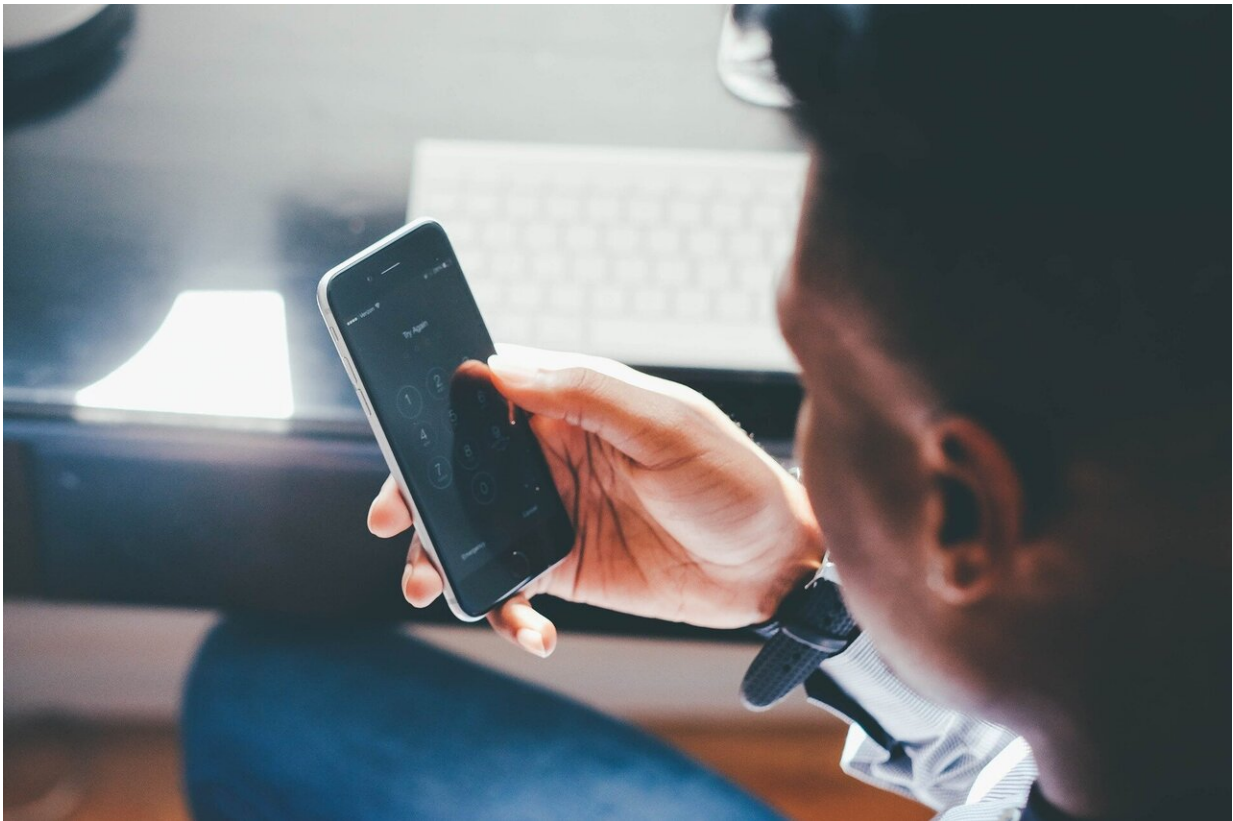


Toxic ideas online are spreading and growing through the use of irony, analysis shows

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Irony has become a medium for the spread of toxic ideas online, a new analysis shows.

The use of irony is growing in both contemporary politics and radical online communities because it helps people to make sense of and navigate major political and economic changes, researchers have said.

Ideas, jokes, memes, images are emerging as an animating force for new social movements and are now inextricably intertwined with the rise of the alt-right.

The study says examining irony can help understand how recent influential political coalitions, such as the Brexit campaign, are held together even though those involved are from different backgrounds or ideologies. It says irony can help explain how political movements are now mobilized—it has the power to mobilize people and get them to commit to ideas that are emergent, unclear, ambivalent, fraught, or contradictory.

Irony generates an intensity and energy which can play a major role in animating people's beliefs—transforming them from propositions to convictions, investing them with a sense of possibility, and compelling people to act.

The study was carried out by Farhan Samanani, from University College London and the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity; Susannah Crockford from the University of Exeter; Daniel M. Knight, from the University of St. Andrews; Craig Stensrud from the University of British Columbia; Girish Daswani from the University of Toronto; Marc Tuters, from the University of Amsterdam and visual artist Io Chaviara, from the Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences of Athens.

The research team examined the use of irony across varied groups, including Black American abolitionist literature; contemporary BlackLivesMatter activism in Ghana; the so-called alt-right; the

eneration of the Greek socialist party PASOK; and the gun-loving, millenarian Boogaloo Bois.

Dr. Crockford said, "Irony enables people to critique the crippling political and economic restructuring of their worlds, to navigate an uncertain present, and to reorient toward the future.

"Contemporary economic governance, entrenched inequality, growing social complexity, and the breakdown of established political certainties make it harder to imagine plausible near futures and trace political cause and effect.

"Many campaigners, activists, and [political leaders](#) are finding it increasingly difficult to grasp how they might act effectively, and to imagine forms of social transformation that do not demand total upheaval.

"Irony can allow people to take aim at political ills and stand for something, in the face of existential vertigo—even if it is not precisely clear what this something is. In this sense, irony also offers a means for gathering political collectives and orienting them in a common direction.

"Irony also contains the potential for gathering incipient collectives, oriented not toward clear-cut convictions but toward sub-certainties that offer speculative routes forward, in a world in tumult."

Dr. Samanani added, "By playing with incongruity between text and subtext, or between points of view, irony provides new ways of making meaning and make sense of a fraught, contradictory world. Irony can provoke strong feelings, ranging from laughter, to disorientation, to the camaraderie that comes from being in on the joke, particularly among political movements that have significantly taken shape online.

"To participate in such communities does not require one to 'believe' in any specific [ideology](#). The effervescent pleasure in participation comes from the experience of being part of a living language community, which is always evolving through the innovation of new vernaculars.

"Understanding the political workings of [irony](#) helps us better understand those political movements that seem to be defined by more clear-cut ideologies. Beliefs that may be expressed through reasoned argument or in terms of clear-cut values may nonetheless be anchored and animated in more ironic terms."

The work is published in the journal *Public Culture*.

More information: Farhan Samanani et al, Animating Irony, *Public Culture* (2023). [DOI: 10.1215/08992363-10575859](https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-10575859)

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