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BROOKINGS CAFETERIA PODCAST

CYBERBULLYING AND BYSTANDER INTERVENTION

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DEWS: Welcome to the Brookings Cafeteria, the podcast about ideas and the experts who have them. I'm Fred Dews.

In social media spaces, 70 percent of people report that they have done something abusive to someone else online, and a majority report being cyberbullied themselves. Nearly 90 percent of teenagers report witnessing online bullying. In a new report published by Brookings, a team of researchers examine the cyberbullying phenomenon, especially its racial aspect, and the strategies onlookers use to intervene. In fact, the research, titled "Bystander intervention on social media: Examining cyberbullying and reactions to systemic racism," finds that over 80 percent of youth report seeing others stand up to cyberbullying. In this episode, I interview two of the authors of the report: Rashawn Ray, senior fellow in Governance Studies at Brookings and a professor of sociology and executive director of the Lab for Applied Social Science Research at the University of Maryland; and Melissa Brown, assistant professor in the Department of Communication at Santa Clara University.

Also on this episode, Governance Studies Senior Fellow Molly Reynolds explains why Democratic leaders in Congress are using reconciliation to try to pass President Biden's legislative priorities, and why that process can be so difficult to use to achieve policy goals.

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First up, here's Molly Reynolds with what's happening in Congress.

REYNOLDS: I'm Molly Reynolds, a senior fellow in Governance Studies at the Brookings Institution. Even after several months of negotiations at varying levels

of detail, Democrats in the House and Senate, thanks to a number of challenges, are still at work on major legislation to enact components of President Biden's agenda.

What's presented difficulties? First, both the House and Senate are operating with the narrowest of majorities. The Senate is tied 50-50 with the tie-breaking vote from Vice President Harris available. In the House, the Democrats' eight-seat majority means they can only lose three votes if all members of both parties are present and voting.

These slim majorities have given groups and members in the House and individual members in the Senate significant influence over the shape and timing of the negotiations. But while much of the media coverage is focused on the policy preferences and negotiating positions of various House members and senators, Democrats' difficulty in completing work on the legislation can also be traced to the process known as reconciliation that they are using to move the bill. The principal advantage of the reconciliation process is significant. Reconciliation bills can't be filibustered in the Senate, but that benefit comes with costs. Perhaps the best known of these is the Senate's Byrd Rule, which restricts the policy content and budget consequences of reconciliation legislation. It is the Byrd Rule that, along with the unwillingness of party members to actually vote for certain initiatives, gets blamed for Congress's inability to enact a number of specific policy changes, including increasing the federal minimum wage during the debate over the American Rescue Plan earlier this year, and various immigration proposals as part of the current reconciliation bill.

These limitations placed on bill subject matter doesn't only constrain what they can do. The rules also restrict leaders' flexibility in negotiating an agreement by reducing the number of things on the table.

Another structural reality of the reconciliation process that can create difficulties for negotiators is its two-step nature. Under the rules prescribed by the Congressional Budget Act, Congress must first agree on an overall budget blueprint setting the aggregate size of a

reconciliation bill and outlining the budgetary changes that the congressional committees specifically listed in that blueprint are supposed to contribute to the overall reconciliation bill. Congressional leaders typically determine these instructions to committees—that is, the size of the individual components of the bill over which each committee is responsible—with their idea about what policy priorities each committee is going to advance. But all sorts of complications can arise as committees work to meet their directives, and the requirement that the overall budgetary contours of the bill must be agreed on first limits negotiators' options as they try to get to yes.

Historically, an advantage of this two-step dynamic was that reconciliation was often, but not exclusively, used to pass legislation that was deficit reducing. By deciding first how much each committee involved in the process would be responsible for cutting, congressional leaders had leverage to make committees do something they didn't want to do: reduce spending in their jurisdictions. Under this model, reconciliation would help spread the pain around to different constituencies in Congress.

Most congressional committees involved in writing this year's bill, however, have been directed to draft legislation that increases, rather than reduces, the deficit. That is, to engage in new spending. The instructions tell committees what the maximum they can spend is, creating the kind of tradeoffs over whether to engage in new spending for more programs for a shorter time period, or to allocate new money for fewer programs over a longer time horizon that are currently confronting Democrats.

Finally, broader changes in the congressional legislating environment mean that under unified party control, reconciliation is increasingly seen as the party's one opportunity, or "one neat trick" of sorts, for accomplishing major party-defining goals, at least as long as the filibuster remains in place for most other legislation. This political reality places an extraordinary amount of pressure on one single run of the legislative process.

Reconciliation bills like the one currently under consideration come to be seen as too big to fail. But fail they can, like when Republicans tried unsuccessfully to use the process to repeal the Affordable Care Act in 2017. Because Democrats' current effort does not have one single goal associated with it, like repealing Obamacare, it is easier to imagine various proposals getting swept in and out until agreement is reached. As we've seen with the debate over paid leave, however, exactly which elements survive the legislative process has enormous consequences for Americans across the country.

What will the bill ultimately look like? Which Americans will it help? Answering those questions is currently what's happening in Congress.

DEWS: Listen to more from Molly Reynolds and Sarah Binder on what's happening in Congress on the Brookings SoundCloud channel. And now, here's my interview with Rashawn Ray and Melissa Brown on cyberbullying and bystander intervention strategies.

Dr. Rashawn Ray, Dr. Melissa Brown, welcome to you both to the Brookings Cafeteria.

BROWN: Thank you.

RAY: Thank you so much for having us.

DEWS: I mentioned, the title of the report in the introduction, and I'll also add that the bystander intervention report is coauthored with Ed Summers, Samantha Elizondo, and Connor Powelson. When I interview scholars about reports like this, I like to ask them about the origin story. Where did this idea come from? So, can one of you talk about the origin of this research, including your collaboration all across the country?

RAY: Sure, yeah, I mean, it is definitely a large collaboration. I mean, having Melissa as part of this project was one of my must haves to say yes to it. And so I mean, this project really evolved from some other work, doing work on cyberbullying with youth and starting to realize the prominence of social media in that process. And so, we ended up building this

collaboration with some generous funding from CDC and APHA, the American Public Health Association. And what we really wanted to do was to take a deep methodological dive to figure out what was happening around cyberbullying, particularly in responses to systemic racism.

A lot of work on cyberbullying focuses on gender, focuses on sexism, focuses on homophobia. All of those things are extremely, extremely important. But missing was this focus on racism and racist discourse. And we can think about not only the rise of anti-Black sentiment, but also the rise in prejudice and discrimination against Asian Americans dealing with COVID. And so what we wanted to do was to build this large collaboration.

Dr. Brown has an extensive track record and skill set in working with social media data, with big data, as we call it in the academic space. Dr. Ed Summers, who is on research faculty at the Maryland Institute for Technology and Humanities at the University of Maryland—all three of us have worked previously on a related project looking at social media, dealing with responses to Black Lives Matter in Ferguson on Twitter. So it makes sense for us to come together again. We then, of course, brought in Samantha and Connor, who are my research assistants, one at Brookings, one in Maryland, who have done work in this area as well.

DEWS: And to kind of put a point on what you were saying, Rashawn, about racism, I'm just going to quote from the report: "Social media polarization has helped reopen the Pandora's box that allows white supremacy and racism to wreak havoc on people's lives." So, can one of you give us a sense just overall of what the research is all about?

BROWN: Yes, I'd say the research is about the ways that social media has kind of become our contemporary public sphere, it's the space where people work out issues related to their identity, as well as to ideologies related to being a member of society and being a human. And a lot of that is wrapped up in our ideas about race, gender, and sexuality.

So, this research is taking into account the ways that social media has become a space for people dialog with each other across identities, and how this leads to kind of power dynamics, particularly around bullying as a form of maladaptive communication. And we were interested in being able to identify patterns not only within one social media space, but across social media spaces. So, we decided to compare both Twitter and Reddit, taking into account different ways the different social media platforms allow people to engage with each other and how that affects how they communicate. And the ways that this communication that in turn not only leads to bullying about race or racial identity, but also the ways that people use the very same social media tools that are being deployed in cyberbullying to respond to cyberbullying and intervene in cyberbullying and become bystanders that take active action against racist discourse on the internet.

DEWS: Yeah, so, one of my takeaways from the research is that, as you said, Melissa, you focus on Twitter, you focus on Reddit, and there's different ways that people express themselves who bully on those different platforms, but also lends itself to different bystander intervention strategies, which is what I want to get to in a minute, because that's obviously the title of the paper. But first, I want to talk a little bit more about the bullying phenomenon itself in terms of the percentage of people who use social media. What's the extent of people who say they have bullied or have been bullied themselves?

RAY: Well, it's quite high. I mean, about 70 percent of people reported doing something abusive to someone online. I mean, that is a very, very high percentage. And interestingly, similarly to bullying trends more broadly, people who bully report being bullied previously. So, oftentimes, people are lashing out, aiming to respond to incidents that have happened to them. And even more troubling, nearly 90 percent of teenagers report witnessing bullying online.

So, we know from just studies when it comes to social media that younger people, particularly youth, are more likely to be exposed to cyberbullying. They're the ones who are more likely to be using these particular type of social media platforms. And as we'll talk about, I mean, the anonymity of some of these social media platforms partly contributes to the growing rise in cyberbullying.

But here's the silver lining that we really wanted to highlight in our report: is that over 80 percent of youth report seeing someone stand up during cyberbullying incidents. And we wanted to know what does "stand up" mean. What does it mean to be a bystander online, which is quite different from the physical space where a person might literally put their physical bodies within a space to prevent someone from being bullied? They might literally stand up in a physical sense. We wanted to know what does it mean to stand up in a social media context?

DEWS: Just broadly thinking about standing up and bullying, I mean, I, and I think a lot of people associate bullying with that kind of physical in-person, I'm going to push you around, I'm going to call you a name, I'm going to make you feel bad about yourself. And the likelihood that somebody would stand up in that environment probably is less because they'd be afraid of getting hurt themselves. So, do you think just kind of as a general proposition that while social media might allow for a wider space of bullying, it might also allow for a wider space of standing up, of being a bystander who does an intervention in the bullying space.

BROWN: Yeah, I would agree that the dynamics of social media are such that people are using what scholars call the "affordances" of technology platforms to engage in certain types of actions, and they have the capacity to do certain things depending on the features of a particular platform. So, for example, on Twitter, you can reply directly to somebody. And so it really depends on what their aim is; if they aim to contribute to bullying, if they aim to

reduce bullying, Twitter's reply features allow people to comment in a certain way. And on Twitter you can also quote tweet, which allows a discourse to go from that person's profile to your personal profile. And maybe you know that you have users that follow you that are more pro-social in their responses to cyberbullying and can aid in reacting to a particular event.

Whereas on Reddit, there's features of the platform, particularly the anonymity that's required of every single user because no one user is allowed to have a profile picture on Reddit. That allows people to engage in bullying, again, because anonymity breeds negativity. People use the feature of anonymity to engage in nefarious behaviors. But at the same time, that anonymity allows people to kind of have a more distanced reaction to what they're observing on a particular platform. And once again, they can use their account to respond directly to a particular action and use the features of Reddit, particularly linking directly to another website that has information or resources to respond to.

So, a lot of what we see has to do with the ways that people use the features of a platform to engage in the ways that those very same features can either engender negative reactions and negative discourse or positive reactions and positive discourse.

DEWS: I want to follow up on something that Rashawn said a minute ago, and that's about the age, with 90 percent of younger people report that they have participated in these activities, been bullied or have bullied. But is that endemic to youth on these platforms or are there older people, middle aged people? What is kind of the age involvement of cyberbullying?

RAY: Well, let me … I think that we definitely know that younger people are more exposed just by general trends. We know that they are more likely to use these social media platforms, including platforms that we are still trying to figure out, like Tik Tok or Snapchat in some ways.

For us, as Melissa was saying, thinking about Twitter and Reddit, these are platforms that have some different components that allow us to examine the processes that might evolve here. At the same time, we know that people across the age gradient, if they are on these social media platforms, they are exposed to cyberbullying. I think in the Twitter space, it becomes one of those examples where you don't necessarily always know who you're interacting with. You don't know the age of the person. Now, at times, a person's profile can definitely supposedly suggest who the person is, even if they might have someone else tweeting for them. But overall, you at least know the account. And as Melissa was saying, that becomes different from Reddit in some regards.

So, I mean, look, we see it across the board. I think the biggest thing oftentimes is who we see it affecting the most. So, it's not necessarily that cyberbullying might vary by age. I think if people are on these platforms, they're exposed in similar ways. But also the way that individuals react to that and we see youth internalizing cyberbullying in a different way than people who are older do.

BROWN: And I'd also like to add that the platforms themselves have different demographics of who likes to engage with those platforms. So, for example, places like Facebook and Instagram skew a little older, a little more people of color than a space like Reddit, which has much younger people. So more people under 30, as well as a little bit whiter, a little bit more college educated than other platforms as well. So, taking into the factors of who likes to use certain applications also contributes to the conversational dynamics that you might see on that platform and the dynamics that would play out in cyberbullying incidents.

DEWS: I want to dive into the heart of your research here in a moment, but I want to ask kind of one more question about what are the consequences of cyber bullying? You talk about this a little bit in the paper.

RAY: Well, look, I think that the consequences are quite pervasive. Suicide being one of the biggest ones—or cyberbullicide, as oftentimes scholars quote it as—where the experiences that people have in the online space carry over to real life.

I think we particularly see that in more closed social networks, so we can think about schools. Take a high schooler who all of a sudden has a picture taken of them inappropriately and it's blasted out on social media. And so now all of a sudden, when people see that post and then they see this student in person in school, it has a carryover effect. And so we know that suicide rates are significantly high. They spiked during the pandemic. But then, of course, other components related to suicide, whether that be depression and anxiety.

So, we see huge forms of mental health outcomes that play out in the social media space. And I think that is something when we talk about dealing with with cyberbullying that we really, really have to address. And I think it's particularly important for parents, practitioners, and lawmakers to think about this issue because part of what happens is the older we get—and Melissa just talked about the different platforms and how they skew by age—not only is it that the components of those platforms are different—for example on Facebook, which of course is supposed to be social network-based with friends, and it definitely doesn't absolve Facebook, as we know, from cyberbullying happening in those spaces—but it's quite different at times from what younger people might be facing, particularly because they've grown up in this era where their parents might actually be ill equipped to discuss the consequences of cyberbullying with them.

And technology speeds up so fast. I mean, we're just talking about these social media platforms, but there are other type of social networking platforms from Discord and others that expose children to cyberbullying. And so I think it's a big awareness campaign that needs to go on to bring parents up to speed about what is happening. I mean, I almost feel like it needs to be a regular basis, getting them up to speed as quickly as the technology

changes. But I mean, the mental health consequences of cyberbullying are quite, quite pervasive.

DEWS: I just want to repeat for listeners that term that you used because it's super powerful, cyberbullicide—it's very, very disturbing that we have to have a word like that. Let's move on to more of the substance of the report itself. Melissa, as you mentioned earlier, there's lots of different ways that people get cyberbullied based on their sexuality, based on their gender, and based on race, and this report focuses primarily on racist discourse in social media. What forms does that discourse take in the study? You detail four primary types.

BROWN: So, through our qualitative text analysis, we found four ways that racist discourse played out on both Twitter and Reddit. The most reoccurring patterns varied by platform. So, for example, on Reddit, the most popular way that people engage in racist discourse was racial stereotyping. So, this involved using some type of racist tropes in society about racially or ethnically marginalized people and sharing narratives that kind of reinforce that. So, for example, maybe on Reddit somebody would link to a study that implied something about economic inequality in the Black community. And then in the text of the Reddit post, they would blame the economic equality on Black people being lazy, which is a well-long, well known, longstanding trope. And about 20 percent of people on Twitter engaged in a similar pattern of racist discourse.

There is also accusations of reverse racism, and this idea was that basically people would look at people who are historically racially marginalized and actually claim that they were the perpetrators of some type of racist act or discourse. And these happen relatively similarly on both Reddit, on Twitter in terms of 40 percent of users on Reddit and compared to 47 percent of users on Twitter engage in that type of racist discourse.

There is also racial scapegoating, and this was this practice of basically seeing an incident or event particularly around anti-Asian violence and attributing that event to another

ethnic group. Or they would also do something where, for example, if that ethnic group was involved in some type of activism related to, say, police brutality or something like that, people would actually blame the ethics group's activism for the reason why they were experiencing some type of inequality. And that happened more so on Twitter. So, about 73 percent of what we saw on Twitter around racist discourse involved scapegoating, compared to 37 percent of Reddit posts that we analyzed.

And finally, there are racism echo chambers. And echo chambers is a longstanding, I guess, concept related to social media. And it's basically this idea that when people consume media, they choose to consume media that confirms their biases already. And then when they create a social network around that media consumption, they tend to like to engage with people who reaffirm their own biases. So, in the context of racism, this looks like a post from, say, a conservative, ultra-far right outlet going on Twitter and sharing one of their media sources and every single user who responds or reacts, falling in line completely with the racist discourse that's being shared there. And that was once again a little bit more prevalent on Twitter. About 27 percent of the racist discourse that we analyze involved racism echo chambers as compared to 11 percent of the racism echo chambers happening on our Reddit posts that we analyzed.

DEWS: So four kinds of racist discourse, stereotyping, accusations of reverse racism, scapegoating, and racial echo chambers. Why do you disaggregate them that way?

BROWN: The disaggregation comes from the way that we like to approach our data analysis. So, a lot of times when people do big data sets, they rely completely on quantitative text analysis, and that involves using machine learning technology to kind of crawl through the data, identify patterns, maybe using some type of statistical methods, high level statistical methods, to try to look at some types of correlations between various variables related to the data.

But we like to do a little bit of qualitative approach as well. Typically, what we like to call "digital ethnography." And the reason why that's important is because we like to take into account the ways that people are actually engaging on the platform, and really thinking about the way the user interface plays a role and how these discourses play out, as well as the instantaneous nature of social media. Right. So, when you make a big data set, you're often looking at spreadsheets or some type of data set that isn't actually related to the user interface itself. But when you do digital ethnography, you kind of go in as if you are observing people on the sidelines as they use these platforms, and it really takes into account how people actually experience the platform as users.

So, part of why we disaggregated them is because we became aware of how different these types of racist discourses plays out. And I think that's important for people to be aware of as they try to think of bystander intervention strategies. There's a relationship between the type of racist discourse that's out there and whether or not a bystander intervention strategy is taken into account and whether or not it's effective.

So, being aware that there's not just one type of way that people engage in racist discourse gives us a sense of, well, now that we know what type of racist discourse is going on, how might we effectively combat that specific type and do our strategies of intervention work well across the different types of racist discourse.

DEWS: Perfect segue, then to bystander intervention strategies, which you just mentioned, Melissa, it's the title of the research. So, can you talk about what is bystander intervention? What are bystander intervention strategies?

BROWN: Yes. So, the way that we think about bystander intervention kind of took into account our conversations with our APHA and CDC partners in that in the realm of public health bystander intervention is considered a pro-social phenomenon. However, we

also take into account sociological aspects of bystander intervention in that bystander intervention kind of relies on the power dynamics at play here.

So, basically, the classical example of bystander intervention is someone's walking down the street, you hear a woman screaming, and historically a lot of people don't react or respond if they just hear somebody screaming because they can't identify what that means.

However, in a scenario where someone's walking down the street and they hear someone screaming and they think, let me call 911, let me ask if this person needs help. They go from being just a passive observer or a witness to a bystander in that they take action in response to a particular action that they deem requiring intervention.

And so, in the context of racist discourse online, we also found that there were four ways that people tended to intervene, and once again, this was something that varied between platforms. By and large, people like to engage in education or evidence. And this is one of the ways that the features of social media platforms plays a huge role in how people can engage in bystander intervention. Basically, people would typically respond to some type of racist discourse, identify the logical fallacy in the racist discourse and say, Hey, that stereotype that you just shared is inaccurate. Here's some evidence from the CDC or from Brookings or from other well-established research organizations and entities that kind of disproves your argument.

Another thing that people like to do was they like to engage in callouts, and in this type of intervention took a very, varying approach. So, sometimes people would just say, Hey, what you said was racist and leave it at that. Sometimes people would be more clear about what they felt like that racism meant about that person, is like, Hey, you said something racist that makes you ignorant or something to that effect. So, plainly naming that they found someone to be engaging in racism. And this is more prevalent on Twitter and Reddit. So, about 73 percent of the bystander interventions that we saw involve some type of callout as

compared to Reddit, there was about 40 percent of the posts involved bystander interventions that look like calling people out.

People also like to engage in insults, in mocking, way more on Twitter than Reddit. So, about 60 percent of the posts that we saw on Twitter had some type of insults or mocking. And this involved name calling and, in a sense, giving the bully a taste of their own medicine. And I think that one of the reasons why it was very popular on Twitter than Reddit came from the features of the websites, so once again.

And one of the last bystander interventions, which is moderation. And so content moderation was way more popular on Reddit than Twitter. So, content moderation looked like somebody who's responsible for the content—usually the initial poster—or on the case of Reddit, forum moderators basically saying there are rules for this dialog, and some of those rules look like they're not allowed to say racist things. So, if you say something racist, we will ban from the space. We will delete your posts. And we will not allow you to engage in that here. Those features don't really exist on Twitter, so, a lot of times when you saw somebody engaging in content moderation, it was usually the original poster saying, I'm not comfortable with you expressing that on my thread. So, if you do that again, I will report your tweet, or I will ask my followers to call you out and kind of inspire other people to engage in a different form of intervention. There is no such thing as being a forum moderator on Twitter, so they're not able to use those same types of approaches to curate the conversation on Twitter that way.

DEWS: So, again, to kind of summarize the four ways people tend to intervene, and they vary by platform: education or evidence, callouts, engaging in insults or mocking, and content moderation. Just so listeners know, this is written up in a lot more detail in the report itself, which you can find on the Brookings website, brookings.edu. So, are there certain conditions, certain types of bullying, certain levels of bullying vitriol that make it more likely

that bystanders will intervene? I mean, what are the conditions under which bystanders are likely to intervene with any of these strategies?

BROWN: I believe the conditions take into account what the features of the website are, once again. So, one of the things that we felt was clear on Reddit, for example, was the fact that it's a forum inspires content moderation in that people design rules. They have a rules page when you go to their forum. And another aspect of this idea of forums are what they call subreddits, it's this idea of you name plainly what your subreddit is about. So, it'll have a little description and topical description. And I think that's one way that people kind of curate the conversation on Reddit in a way that they can't really curate it on Twitter.

And in general, I think that people like to take different approaches depending on what they're seeing. So, for example, when we noticed that when people were engaging in racism echo chambers, that inspired insults and mocking on Twitter because people felt like here's a group of people who have chosen to create an ignorant space, and I'm going to come here and call them out for their ignorance. Maybe those users don't feel as though education and evidence would be as suitable or fruitful in that type of dynamic, whereas when there was racial stereotyping or racial scapegoating, typically that involved a conversation that began with, say, CNN posting an article and then a variety of users engaging in a conversation. And then because there's a variety of users with different ideologies, different perspectives on race and racism, there's different ways that people tend to like to approach that types of conversation.

So, I think taking into account who initiates the conversation is a really important factor about thinking about what happens, both with the racist discourse and the bystander intervention in that the person who creates the conversation or initiates the conversation sets the tone. So, at times both on Reddit and Twitter, when the initial poster was the one who's actually engaging in racist discourse, people relatively immediately responded with some

type of education or evidence that asks them to rethink their perspective. Whereas if somebody was a politician or a news source kind of making a general sentiment that was related to race but didn't necessarily have either racist or anti-racist perspectives, that brought out both racist and anti-racist users who were having actually their own separate conversations inspired by the initial post. And that's when you see a variety of users engage in different types of strategies.

So, I think the main thing is thinking about who begins the conversation. How they choose to talk about race when they begin that conversation kind of filters out the way that people then end up responding. And then taking into account that different platforms have different features, and those features in and of themselves kind of take a shape or contour the ways that people choose to engage both in the racist discourse and then the bystander intervention.

DEWS: I want to pick up on a term you used a few minutes ago, Melissa, and that is pro-social—there are pro-social interventions that sounds like a good thing. But there are also anti-social interventions that you describe in the report. And depending on which platform, Reddit or Twitter the discussion is hosting, can one of you elaborate on those two terms: pro-social and antisocial?

RAY: Well, yeah, Fred, I mean, I think Melissa nailed it. As you noted, there's much variation in the deployment of these intervention strategies. On Twitter, where people can be more anonymous and also may not see all of the social network branches like we were able to do. One thing that that we put together that Ed led is a social networking tool of sorts that allows people to click Reddit or Twitter, and then they can actually click on a specific topic, whether that's racism, the racial wealth gap, or just a term like "Black people" in general. And it will take them to the tweets or the Reddit post that focus on this particular topic. People are able to see the social networking tree, all of the ways that a person sends out a

tweet or posts something on Reddit and a whole bunch of people respond to it. I mean, in some of these social networking branches there are hundreds of people responding.

And one of the big things we noted is that on Twitter, where people can be more anonymous and may not have all those branches, they were less likely to use these pro-social strategies, such as education and evidence, saying, Well, you know, this is actually what the research says, or here's a recent study or my experience said this. So, they're, they're aiming to provide evidence and then they educate and try to tell people why that statement might have been hurtful to certain people in a specific community or even to themselves.

And then secondly, on Reddit, where the social network is more closed and interactional, and also where people are having repeated interactions—as Melissa noted, on Reddit you can also rate comments up or down so people see that information—they start to see what people are gravitating to. And accordingly, people were more likely to engage in pro-social bystander intervention strategies, whereas on Twitter, people were more likely to engage in these anti-social strategies. They were more likely to call out what people were saying, which, as Melissa noted, doesn't always necessarily mean that it's negative, but often times simply calling someone out for something. Research documents that people may be less likely to view that as something then that they need to change. And then, of course, people are more likely to engage in insults or mocking.

So, for us, we saw a kind of pro-social strategies versus anti-social strategies. And these pro-social strategies, our research suggests the importance of repeated interactions to create accountability mechanisms rather than the continuous ability to be anonymous. Anonymity seems to drive contagion and actually reduces the employment of content moderation as a bystander intervention strategy. Again, content moderation coming in saying, Hey, that's not necessarily what we do. And as Melissa noted on Reddit, where they oftentimes have rules for these subreddits, we see these changes.

Now, other social media platforms, some of the main ones, are starting to make some of these changes as well. I mean, we know on Facebook they've always had kind of these Facebook groups. But on Twitter, they're starting to create something similar to that. And I would expect that on some of these other platforms, they will do that as well because we know that, as we talked about before, cyberbullicide is such a big deal that there has to be a way to rein it in. And our research suggests that anonymity and rules and someone being responsible for content can help to actually reduce cyberbullying, and also enhance pro-social intervention strategies.

DEWS: So, I think that that takes us into the question of does this work, do bystander intervention strategies work to combat cyberbullying, to reduce the prevalence of cyberbullicide? And I'm going to quote again from the report and ask you, ask one of you to unpack the statements. Because I think this is where we get to that solutions piece of the puzzle. And I'm going to quote here: "It seems likely that deliberate bystander stances against racism and established social norms that will both constrain the racist behavior immediately address and even effect long term social attitudes in the group."

BROWN: Yeah, so I think this goes to this idea of pro-social strategies in particular and thinking about the ways that, going back to what I said earlier, we have to think about social media as this contemporary public sphere and the ways that social media plays a role in allowing people to have discourses about their identities and ideologies and the ways that it brings disparate, sometimes usually disconnected people to kind of unify in the discourse.

So, if we think about, for example, the demographics of who use Twitter, Reddit, and all these spaces, a lot of those demographics kind of fly in the face of who lives in, say, certain neighborhoods, or who attend certain schools, or who goes to certain workplaces, and the ways that our offline spaces are so segregated and disconnected. The internet facilitates connections in a way that when you're on social media, you can have conversations with

people that you really wouldn't regularly think about. And so because of the ways that you can have sustained, consistent, continuous dialog on social media, you're actually allowed to engage and kind of rework through things and through a long period of time.

I kind of liken it to, say, going to college and being in a class for a year or so, right. After you've been exposed to the same sorts of ideas for a year, it kind of shifts your thinking a little bit. It can happen much faster on social media. If you've been talking in the same subreddit space for two or three months and you're really taking into account the fact that, like, Hey, these people do not like my ideas, maybe I should really hear what they have to say and really read the articles that they're sending me and really question the way that I have been taught. We can see where people really actually will respond positively to information that disconfirms their earlier perspective. So, the tools of certain social media features play a role.

And we also have to think about who kind of drives these conversations as well, particularly media figures and political figures, and them taking accountability for the ways that their stances on race and race related topics kind of inspire certain types of responses from people.

But in general, because of the ways that social media operates as a public sphere and a public sphere that brings together people in a way that has not been possible prior to networked communication technology, we can really hope and be inspired by the ways that people are creating their own bystander intervention strategies without being aware of the patterns of racist discourse that they're even attending to, and just having a sense that, well, when I see stereotyping, I know that, I saw a report from Brookings that disconfirmed that. And so let me share that. Let me educate and let me use my social media platform to be an educator, an antiracist educator at that.

So, I think people are actually taking on these roles without even thinking about the implications of what they're doing. And at the same time, people are consuming the information that disconfirms their perspective, not necessarily realizing how quickly that information can kind of change the way they see and leave the world.

DEWS: Let me just pick up one final question on that, what you said, Melissa, you expressed hope that this report and this kind of research would be used to further, to strengthen the anti-racist discourse. Maybe for both of you, do you … how do you see this kind of research facilitating, furthering, strengthening the anti-racist discourse?

RAY: Yeah, I think that's a great question, I mean, I think first you'll have educators who will start using some of the language that we've highlighted in this report, particularly around pro-social and antisocial in thinking about those specific strategies. We know that people intervene. The question has always been what exactly do people do when they intervene and is it effective? And we provided some insights there.

I think secondly, there are things that lawmakers can do, particularly at the federal level, to think about the role of technology, to think about ways to get ahead of the technology, and to think about resources that provide trainings for not only people who are experiencing these platforms, but also the individuals who are creating the platforms. And I think that's one of the biggest things, is that the technology is moving so fast in the private sector that in the public sector, particularly in terms of policy, is not catching up to it.

And then I think finally, not just thinking about educators, but also researchers, we've aimed to lay out a methodological toolkit for scholars wanting to do this type of work. There's a repeated pattern of our team doing this. People can pick up the methodological skills. They should definitely follow Melissa Brown and look at all of the great ways that she does this work because this is the cutting-edge work that is going to start everything.

And then I think finally, it's helping parents to really understand what their kids are going through. There are a lot of parents who, if they are on social media, they do it rather intimately. They don't necessarily have time to focus on this, but their kids are. And by reading our report, by playing around, looking at the types of social networking kind of tools that we've allotted, what it allows for them to do is to actually see how pervasive cyberbullying is and actually really look at the ramifications and the effects. I mean, some of the things that people say to other people is highly detrimental. And I think at times you can have older people, including myself, who will look at younger people, like maybe even my kids' ages and say, Oh, it's not as bad as what we went through in person. Well, research doesn't suggest that at all. When we look at the mental health of youth, it suggests that it is quite pervasive. And we could imagine that during a time like COVID, where even more people have been online, that it's even worse.

So, I think that there is a lot in this report that can be shared. And I think just the vast amount of data and the implications of our work can be quite useful for a lot of different, a lot of different parties.

DEWS: Rashawn, I know people can follow you on Twitter @SociologistRay. Melissa, where can people follow you?

BROWN: They can follow me @ProfMCBrown, P-R-O-F-M-C-B-R-O-W-N.

DEWS: Excellent. Well, Dr. Melissa Brown, Dr. Rashawn Ray, I want to thank you both for sharing with us your time and expertise discussing this really fascinating and important research. Thank you.

BROWN: Thank you for having us.

RAY: Thank you.

DEWS: You can find their report coauthored with Edward Summers, Samantha Elizondo, and Connor Powelson titled "Bystander Intervention on Social Media: Examining cyberbullying and reactions to systemic racism," on our website, brookings.edu.

A team of amazing colleagues makes the Brookings Cafeteria possible. My thanks go out to audio engineer Gaston Reboredo; our audio intern this semester, Nicolette Kelly; Bill Finan, director of the Brookings Institution Press, who does the book interviews; my communications colleagues Marie Wilkin, Adrianna Pita, and Chris McKenna for their collaboration. And finally, to Ian McAllister, Soren Messner-Zidell and Andrea Risotto for their guidance and support.

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Until next time, I'm Fred Dews.