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Why we need to address polarisation if we want to tackle the climate crisis

european
youth forum

Contents

Introduction

Climate change, biodiversity loss and other environmental issues pose existential and urgent threats to our people and planet. To deal with these issues, we need to create awareness about the scope of the tasks ahead and discuss them in the public sphere.

Yet, the increasingly polarised societies we live in prevent us from doing so. Nowadays, meaningful dialogue on many subjects - be it the climate crisis, COVID-19 or immigration - has become impossible. Our views on the issue at hand move in such divergent directions that we separate into seemingly different realities. As a result, we're no longer receptive to arguments and facts 'from the other side'. Collective sensemaking, people coming together to make sense of an issue by using their varied perspectives and cognitive abilities, becomes unattainable.[1]

Do you also feel that public discourse on pressing issues has become increasingly polarised over the last years, leaving very little room for nuanced dialogue and discussion? Do you worry about the future of our people and planet? Then this article is for you!

As our societies are drifting apart more and more, solving complex challenges in order to transition towards a more sustainable world is becoming continuously more difficult. To break this vicious cycle, we seek to move away from only talking about external issues and to start looking into how our state of mind impacts the state of our world. We'll answer questions we believe should be at the core of the discussion. What is polarisation? Why should we worry about it? How did polarisation come about and what is driving it? What can we all do to depolarise and reduce the growing contempt in our societies?

We're not intending to offer a blueprint on how to overcome polarisation. Instead, we provide food for thought on ways to improve dialogue, create rich conversations and build trust within our polarised societies. We set a starting point for discussions on how to cooperate across humanity. Interested? Read on and subscribe to our dedicated mailing list.

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1   Narberhaus, M. & Beiner, A. (2021). Thinking about climate change and polarisation together. How to start a conversation_. Retrieved from https://76ce844a-63bb-4f0f-b487-395e96703c36.usrfiles.com/ugd/76ce84_0956b5abd54f4e16a6eb5d5bd70112f1.pdf.

What is polarisation?

What do we mean when talking about polarisation in this article? We mean deep social division between two or more (ideologically) different groups, potentially leading to hate. In other words, the non-existence of a healthy and nuanced (political) debate.

Even though polarisation is happening across the world, it's not always obvious and can differ in degree. When looking at the United States, you'd most likely agree that there is a deep division between two different ideological groups: Democrats and Republicans, liberals and conservatives. In recent years, they've come to live separate lives, which in some cases has led to hate and violent conflict. There's no more middle. A place where nuanced perspectives are alive, opposing ideologies combined and a more complete picture of reality formed. While the social and political division in the United States might be one of the first and starkest examples to come to mind, Europe has also been no stranger to polarisation. Among others, Brexit and the conflict in Northern Ireland have led to division, conflict and hate. Hence, we find a situation that resembles in many ways the US situation. Crises over the past years made hidden and underlying ideologies more visible and significantly contributed to increasingly fragmented societies.

One of the most recent crises that has left Europe more polarised is the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has split Europe along geographic, socio-economic, political and demographic lines. Overall, Southern and Eastern Europe feel more badly affected than Northern and Western Europe. While COVID-19 affected some people by causing sickness, others mainly experienced economic consequences as a result of lockdowns. Again others didn't feel affected at all. Another major dividing factor was faith in governments. Some believed in the good intentions behind lockdowns. Others were certain that governments intended to cover up failures or increase control over people. The pandemic also contributed to a major generational divide. Young people were more likely to blame governments for the ongoing adverse impact of restrictions than old people.[2] Yet, the divide didn't stop at geographic, socio-economic, political and demographic borders. It also ran through families, friends and colleagues. Even worse, it caused hate and violence, often in the form of violent protests in major European cities.

The lived experience of the pandemic can partially explain these divisions. But that's not all. COVID-19 also brought underlying ideologies that have long been part of our societies to the surface. Overall, the pandemic left Europe more (obviously) divided. Groups holding diverging ideologies are increasingly unable to listen and engage in meaningful dialogue.

Why is polarisation a problem? It…

Polarisation keeps us from reaching our fullest potential. It hinders us from solving problems on an individual, group and societal level. Thus, we'll look into the impact of polarisation on our individual capacity to develop, the division of societies and formation of hate, and our ability to solve complex issues.

… hampers our personal development

To develop and learn, we need to ensure our ideologies get challenged through exposure to different ones. An ideology is a set of ideas, opinions and beliefs an individual or a group holds. It influences the way we think and act. In one way or the other, we're all part of an ideological group (in-group) that holds certain convictions about reality. Due to the lack of dialogue, our in-group is isolated from other groups (out-groups) with diverging ideologies. Hence, polarisation hampers our exposure to different ideologies as we remain in the same group. It limits our capacity to think out of the box, move beyond our usual patterns of thought and behaviour. It stalls out our personal development.

… drives social division and hate

The lack of dialogue and exposure to diverging ideologies leads to a deep ideological divide between our in-group and the out-group. Over time and if not recognised and acted upon, this social division can turn into hate. How? When we become over-identified with a very negative or

2   Krastev, I. & Leonard, M. (2021). Europe's invisible divides: How covid-19 is polarising European politics. Retrieved from https://ecfr.eu/publication/europes-invisible-divides-how-covid-19-is-polarising-european-politics/.

judgemental stance against the out-group, we limit our own capacity to perceive larger possibilities in the world. Continuously seeing the world through our *us vs. them* glasses and thinking of the other as evil prevents us from building relationships.[3] Hence, increasing out-group stereotyping and discrimination lead to out-group hate and distrust.

… hampers solving complex issues by impeding collective sensemaking

Finally, let's look at the effect of polarisation on a societal level. To understand reality and tackle complex issues, we need to engage in collective sensemaking[4]. We need to get into a dialogue with people holding varied perspectives and cognitive skills. Why? First, the out-group's ideology, however controversial it might be, could turn out to be true. Second, even if our in-group's ideology is largely correct, we could hold it more securely as a result of it being challenged. Third, to reach a more accurate picture of reality, we may have to combine opposing ideologies each containing a part of the truth.[5] In other words, conflicting ideologies may each contain a part of reality. Combining them may thus lead to a more complete picture of reality. Polarisation hinders this process and makes collective sensemaking impossible. Consequently, we're unable to solve the complex issues of our times, such as the climate crisis.

Polarisation and the climate crisis

With the climate crisis worsening over the past decades, climate activism has been taking on an increasingly confrontational approach through more direct action and civil disobedience. Most of you probably know the Youth Climate Movement started by Greta Thunberg's school strike in 2019, and you may have read about Extinction Rebellion. These initiatives helped in putting the climate crisis high on the political agenda. Yet, they also led to increased polarisation in our societies as a consequence of increased prominence in the media. To get all of society on board for the cause, we need a large number of people from diverse backgrounds. At present, the climate movement in Europe tends to attract mostly well-educated, liberal people from middle class backgrounds in Western European cities. Large groups of people are missing in the conversation, such as more conservative people, farmers or people from rural areas and coal regions in Central and Eastern Europe. Hence the movement's membership is quite homogeneous.[6] Let's explore some of the commonly held views.

First, oversimplification: the belief that we already have all the science and tools to tackle the climate crisis. All we need to do is wake up and act. Is that so? And, what are the concrete solutions? Also, while relying on science has its merits, the movement doesn't provide a clear analysis of the climate crisis' root causes. Former and current governments are blamed for inaction, citizens called hypocrites. But, is this all? What are the underlying factors that make people act the way they do? What role does our system play?

Second, the consolidation of other (liberal) ideas. Only recently, the movement uninvited singer Ronja Maltzahn who was supposed to perform at a climate protest. For what reason? Because she wears dreadlocks. They justified their decision by stating that they're "relying on an anti-colonial and anti-racist narrative". According to them, white people should not wear dreadlocks "because they're assimilating a part of another culture without experiencing the systematic oppression behind it."[7]

3   Noor, P. (2020). They hate each other's political views – so why have they become friends? Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2020/sep/30/politics-polarization-friends-america.

4   Collective sensemaking includes multiple steps, such as seeking out many types and sources of data and facts; becoming aware of our own biases and blind spots; developing plausible understandings; testing them with others; and ultimately refining our understanding or abandoning views in favour of new ones better explaining reality. Ancona, D. (2012). Framing and Acting in the Unknown. *S. Snook, N. Nohria, & R. Khurana, the handbook for teaching leadership,* 3-19.

5   Mill, J. S. (2013). On the Liberty of Thought and Discussion [1859]. In *Primer of Intellectual Freedom* (pp. 110-141). Harvard University Press.

6   Narberhaus, M. & Beiner, A. (2021). Thinking about climate change and polarisation together. How to start a conversation_. Retrieved from https://76ce844a-63bb-4f0f-b487-395e96703c36.usrfiles.com/ugd/76ce84_0956b5abd54f4e16a6eb5d5bd70112f1.pdf.

7   Daniel, J. (2022). Cancellation because of dreadlocks: apology from "Fridays for Future". Retrieved from https://allnewspress.com/cancellation-because-of-dreadlocks-apology-from-fridays-for-future-ndr-de-news-lower-saxony/.

Third, the movement presumes its own moral and intellectual correctness. It uses this assumption as a justification for communication that induces fear, guilt and shame. In Germany, the word "Flugscham" is one of the most prominent examples. It doesn't refer to the fear of flying, but shame of flying and the pollution it causes.[8] A similar dynamic is visible in the debate about our diets. It seems the movement has become a safe space for vegans and vegetarians. But what about everybody else?

As a result, the movement drives many people away from the cause. People who may even be sympathetic to tackling the climate crisis. The deadlock in dialogue is detrimental, as it's urgently needed to address the climate crisis - a complex issue due to the complexity of the climate system itself, and the complex nature of the factors contributing to it.

Thus, it seems the climate crisis itself has become one more issue suffering the effects of polarisation. So, it's necessary to address polarisation if we want to tackle the climate crisis.

Why is polarisation happening?

Why do ideological bubbles exist and why do we remain in them?

We need people. Our need to belong is instinctual, we were born with it. Research suggests our need to belong may be of evolutionary origin. Back when we still lived as hunters and gatherers, we found strength in groups. When we were attacked by a wild animal, a group of us had an increased level of survival than one of us alone. Thus, those among us who were able to build strong relationships had a better chance of survival.

Until today, we follow this instinct. Our need to belong manifests itself in seeking inclusion over exclusion, membership over isolation, and acceptance over rejection across individuals and societies. We have an inherent *need to belong:* "a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and impactful interpersonal relationships"[9]. That is, even though we're capable of living separate and apart from others, we join with others to fulfil our need to belong. Most of us satisfy our need to belong by joining groups. We respond negatively when our need to belong is not fulfilled.[10] When researchers used a functional magnetic resonance imaging scanner to track neural responses to exclusion, they found that people who were left out of a group activity displayed heightened cortical activity in two specific areas of the brain associated with the experience of physical pain sensations.[11] It hurts, quite literally, to be left out of a group.

Which groups do we join? And how does a group become an ideological bubble? In a complex world like ours, different narratives about reality develop. Based on these, ideologically opposed groups form.[12] And although we appreciate any kind of companionship, we prefer those who provide us with reassurance and security, those who share our perspectives and corroborate our prejudices. Subconsciously, we continuously justify our deeper moral intuitions and motives by reinforcing our pre-existing beliefs and opinions. It's comforting, validating and makes us feel individually smarter.[13] Hence, we're more likely to join ideological groups whose beliefs and opinions are in line with our own.

If members of a group with shared ideological understandings close themselves off to other opposing views, we see the formation of an ideological bubble. In this kind of social network we're unable to have a serious, civil conversation with people with whom we disagree. Put simply, we've become part of an ideological bubble if the only people whom we talk to seriously about ideology are those we already agree with.[14]

8   Caldwell, C. (2019). The Problem With Greta Thunberg's Climate Activism. Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/02/opinion/climate-change-greta-thunberg.html.

9   Baumeister, R. F., & Leary, M. R. (2017). The need to belong: Desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation. *Interpersonal development,* 57-89, p. 497.

10   Davis, J. A., & Smith, T. W. (2007). General Social Surveys, 1972-2006 [machine-readable data file]. *Principal Investigator, James A. Davis.*

11   Eisenberger, N. I., Lieberman, M. D., & Williams, K. D. (2003). Does rejection hurt? An fMRI study of social exclusion. *Science, 302*(5643), 290-292.

12   Bliuc, A. M., Bouguettaya, A., & Felise, K. D. (2021). Online Intergroup Polarization Across Political Fault Lines: An Integrative Review. *Frontiers in Psychology,* 4744.

13   Syed, M. (2019). *Rebel ideas: The power of diverse thinking.* Hachette UK.

14   Ikeda, S. (2013). Labels and Ideological Bubbles. Retrieved from https://fee.org/articles/labels-and-ideological-bubbles/.

Have you ever asked yourself how many friends you have that don't agree with you on topics that are important to you? Or have you ever thought about why you hang out with some schoolmates, peers and colleagues more than others? Could it be because you share certain ideologies? Have you ever thought about how these ideologies impact the way you see the world? Well, let's talk about it.

Imagine that I'm driving all the way home from work through slow, SUV-intensive, rush-hour traffic. If I'm part of a more socially conscious ideological bubble, I'll likely be disgusted by all the huge, lane-blocking, polluting SUVs, Hummers and pick-up trucks, burning their wasteful fuel and making life on earth for future generations unbearable, if not impossible. So, I'll possibly think of how our children will despise us for wasting all the future's fuel, further screwing up the climate and get mad about how spoiled and stupid they all are.[15]

Some of you might be able to relate. Why? Because this way of thinking tends to be easy and automatic. It's as if this way of thinking is hardwired in our brains. Yet, the truth is, there are many ways to think about this situation. Isn't it possible that some of these people in SUVs have been in a horrible car accident in the past, so the only way they feel safe enough to drive is to get a huge, heavy SUV? Or they're only driving an SUV because they want to travel comfortably while being 2 metres tall and don't want to take the plane? You're right, it might not be very likely, but possible. It depends on what you want to consider. If you're automatically sure that you know what reality is, then you probably won't think about any other possibilities. But if you learn how to pay attention to your own ideologies and how they make you see the world, you'll understand you don't know the truth and that there are other options.[16] Again, you're right, it's damn hard. Here's why.

We've already established one reason above, our need to belong. Thinking differently would mean questioning our ideologies and potentially leaving or being left out of the group. This would impact our well-being in a negative way. Quite literally, it would hurt. But there's more to it than merely fulfilling our need to belong. More profoundly, our need to belong blinds us to the ideologies we've adopted and hence, the ideological groups we're part of. Our ideologies have become part of us, our identity. Without becoming aware of the ideologies that determine the way we think and act, we won't be able to change and develop. Unless we understand the only thing that's true is that **WE** get to decide how we're trying to see the world, we won't be able to leave our ideological bubble.

Why is our communication broken?

Have you watched a debate lately where someone actively listened and even changed their mind? A debate where participants tried to understand each other and broaden their horizon rather than get their point across? Unfortunately, this kind of debate has become very rare. Nowadays, judging, rather than listening to those not already on board with a certain ideology characterise most of our debates. The resulting deadlock in dialogue leads to further division between ideologically opposed groups.

To understand how we can re-engage in dialogue, we need to investigate why our communication is broken. While we acknowledge that many factors may contribute to the way we communicate with each other, or not, we put an emphasis on our need to belong. As humans, we need to belong. We need to fulfil our emotional need to affiliate with and be accepted by a group. What's acceptance? It means the absence of (moral) judgement, punishment or humiliation.[17] Sounds great, but it's not always that easy. In a world where groups and individuals often assume their moral correctness, we're living in constant fear of rejection when voicing an opinion or acting in a way that doesn't comply.

Let's consider the SUV situation again. Imagine the group I'm part of strongly believes that driving an SUV in light of the climate crisis is immoral and unjustifiable. But, what if I believe that some people might have a good reason to do so? Will I be confident in voicing my opinion? Possibly not, because

15   Wallace, D. F. (2009). *This is water: Some thoughts, delivered on a significant occasion, about living a compassionate life*. Hachette UK.

16   Ibid.

17   Cherry, K. (2021). What Is the Sense of Belonging?. Retrieved from https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-the-need-to-belong-2795393.

my fear of moral judgement and exclusion from the group is stronger. This leads me to agree (or at least not vocally disagree) even though in reality, I may not. So, acceptance, or the absence of moral judgement, punishment or humiliation, are likely to provide us with the psychological safety we need to speak up and act. The fear of moral judgement and rejection puts us into a situation where we're unable to speak our mind and act the way we'd like to. We try to look good and avoid looking bad to fulfil our need to belong. In other words, we respond in ways that we feel are more appropriate or socially acceptable to others.

If we can't say what we think and act the way we'd like to, then who are we? We're the version of ourselves we present to the world. Carl Gustav Jung, Swiss psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, calls this public version of ourselves "persona". The word "persona" comes from a Latin word that means "mask". Our persona represents all the different masks we wear among various groups and situations. It protects us from isolation by ensuring we remain part of the group. This is exactly the scenario I find myself in, in the discussion about driving SUVs and the climate crisis. Instead of sharing my thoughts, I keep quiet, signalling agreement. I adapt to the moral requirements of the group defined by its ideologies. In other words, my persona is obedient to the expectations of others.[18]

What else does this imply for the way we communicate with each other, or not? Let's continue with the SUV example. I decide not to speak up or to bring a different perspective to the table. Instead, I remain silent - but my group's persistent belief that only their view is correct makes me angry. Yet, anger is not accepted as a reaction by myself or society and showing it would make me feel guilt and shame. Hence, I swallow my anger. The problem is, just because I refuse to associate with this part of me doesn't mean it doesn't exist. To the contrary, due to not admitting it, I start projecting it on others - it becomes my shadow. According to Jung, our shadow unites all those things we subconsciously seek to hide from others. It contains all the things that are unacceptable not only to society, but also to our own personal morals and values. When we perceive a moral deficiency in others we can be sure there is a similar inferiority within ourselves.[19]

If we remain unaware of our shadow, it can interfere with our relationships by creating a defensive barrier once the shadow's identity gets triggered. Imagine my shadow, in this case anger, becomes triggered through a comment or action. Instead of being able to discuss SUVs and the climate crisis, I become defensive. Why? Because I'm too embarrassed to admit my weakness. Also, hiding this embarrassing part of my personality keeps me in a state where I can't relax, be vulnerable, and connect with others. On top of it, I have no idea what is getting me stuck in my thinking pattern. My desperate need to hide my weakness and defend myself changes my way of communicating. I start using manipulative and judgemental language that induces fear, guilt, blame and punishment. Creating a space of psychological safety, relating with others and having meaningful dialogue based on honesty and empathy becomes impossible.

And that's not all. Our inability to admit our weaknesses leads to something else: our inability to admit that we don't know. We can't risk losing our mask in public, admitting we're not "as good" as we presented ourselves to be, as we'd risk rejection. Once more, let's turn to our SUV example. We established that it's easy to think that SUV drivers don't care about the climate crisis. But, is that really so? Well, we can't know for sure because we don't have complete information. You might remember our statement in the previous section: in fact, there are many ways to think about this. But to do so, we'd have to admit that we don't know the truth, that we can't be certain about reality. So, besides contributing to our inability to connect, not being able to admit our weaknesses causes another issue: if we believe we already know it all, we simply have no reason to listen.

Why do social, technological and institutional developments make things worse?

Not long ago, we were stuck at home, unable to see friends, family and colleagues. COVID-19 had taken

18 Stead, H. J. (2019). 4 Carl Jung Theories Explained: Persona, Shadow, Anima/Animus, The Self. Retrieved from https://medium.com/personal-growth/4-carl-jung-theories-explained-persona-shadow-anima-animus-the-self-4ab6df8f7971.

19 Ibid.

control of Europe and the world, determining our everyday lives. And it exacerbated a problem that has long been prevalent in our societies. The loss of community cohesion, absence of social empathy, and lack of emotional connection. But we actually want the opposite! We desire connection. It's who we are as humans. We're social creatures longing for a greater sense of belonging and connectedness with others.[20]

To fulfil this need, we seek personal interaction and connection. Not all the time, but regularly. Polyvagal theory explains what's needed for us to feel safe, calm and connected. It also tells us what happens if we don't feel safe, and why.

Can you remember a situation where you felt unsafe or in danger but were not sure why? You may not realise it, but you're reading thousands of social cues in your environment all the time. In our interaction with others, we notice facial expressions, tones of voice and body movements. We learn about ourselves and about others, who we can trust, and who feels dangerous to us.[21]

Think about my discussion about the SUV. Imagine that while discussing, the person smiles, looks at me with kind eyes and speaks in a calm voice. All these actions provide me with cues of safety. They enable me to build trust and make me feel psychologically safe. In this state of safety, I'm able to engage, be curious and available to new ideas. I won't get angry because I feel my conversation partner believes only their views are true. I'm ready to open up, be part of an honest dialogue and step out of my ideological bubble. Who knows, maybe I even share my idea about the accident the person in the SUV might have had. But, what happens if my conversational partner grinds their teeth, looks away and rolls their eyes? Instead of feeling safe and ready to engage, I feel threatened and move into a state of defence. In this state, I'm unable to socially engage, listen and connect.

Of course, this isn't a one-way street. Just as I read another person's cues, so do they read mine. If I wish someone else to connect and engage with me, I need to make sure they feel safe too. Bottom line? To create a state of psychological safety for both (or all) parties and enable dialogue, we all need to provide each other with enough cues of safety.

How does this play a role in an era of technological development? A time in which we turn to digital solutions as a remedy for our loneliness? On social media, we're unable to see someone else's facial expressions, body language and hear their voice. We can only read their words. So, how can we be sure we're safe when there are no cues that are essential to create the necessary safety to connect and engage? We can't. The only cue we have are words and as we all know, they often tell us little about how the other person feels.

Let's turn to the SUV story one last time. Imagine I'm sharing my idea that the person driving an SUV might have had an accident on social media. The person receiving the message, especially when not sharing my ideology, may perceive it as a criticism or judgement. Instead of feeling safe, they may move into a state of defence and rejection. This doesn't contribute to feeling connected and having an open dialogue. To the contrary, it may result in even stronger ideological bubbles.[22]

What makes matters worse is the polluted information ecology we live in, making it more and more difficult to make sense of what's going on around us. We're exposed to ever more disinformation, propaganda, emotional manipulation and lies. It is increasingly difficult to distinguish facts from opinions, beliefs, lies and disinformation.[23] Everyone with a functioning internet connection can share content online - fact or not.

In addition, algorithms on social media determine what is curated to you. They identify content that generates more reactions, elevates it and priori-

20 Koty, W. (2021). Are you experiencing a crisis of meaning? (Part 1). Retrieved from https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/you-experiencing-crisis-meaning-part-1-william-koty/.

21 Clarke, J. (2019). Polyvagal Theory and How It Relates to Social Cues. Retrieved from https://www.verywellmind.com/polyvagal-theory-4588049.

22 Porges, S. (2019). Dr Stephen Porges: The Neuroscience of Polarisation (pt 2 of 4). Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vmkG5l7CaGw.

23 Schmachtenberger, D. (2019). The War on Sensemaking, Daniel Schmachtenberger. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7LqaotiGWjQ&t=9s.

tises the creation of similar content. This can be both, content we strongly agree or disagree with, strengthening in-group favouritism or out-group animosity. As a result, we're exposed to content we're likely to agree with and content accelerating the rejection of diverging perspectives. Hence, algorithms strengthen the ideologies of our in-group and incurse the out-group, further accelerating social division and polarisation.[24]

In fact, ideological bubbles don't only exist on social media, they're also part of our analogue life. Are you part of a youth or environmental organisation? Do you think your organisation does enough to engage in dialogue with people they don't agree with? Is your organisation able and willing to accept different ideologies?

In today's world, organisations often contribute to polarisation rather than mitigating it. How? By only speaking to like-minded people and rejecting opposing views. Dialogue and discussion between organisations holding different ideologies is rare. Can you imagine a fruitful debate between organisations fighting the climate crisis and those representing the oil industry? And yes, it may seem absurd, but maybe it's exactly these kinds of debates we need to solve our complex issues. Even within organisations, people aren't always able to share an opinion that differs from the organisation's point of view. Why? Because they fear being judged, rejected or miscredited as a person. This doesn't only lead to a lack of dialogue and collective sense-making between, but also within organisations. So if not even the organisations we're part of are a safe space, then what is? And how can we create it?

How can we overcome polarisation?

Besides all the bad news, there's some good news. Whether we remain stuck in a polarised society, unable to connect and solve issues as complex as the climate crisis, depends on us. It's time to understand that the state of our mind matters for the state of our world. We need to learn how we can heal ourselves and our societies. We need to learn to see ourselves as part of something bigger than a world defined by *us vs. them.* How?

On a personal level, we need to learn that there are many ways to see the world, and that we don't have a complete picture of reality. We need to become aware of the biases and ideologies that determine the way we see the world. One way to do so is to pay attention to our thoughts and examine our beliefs to identify the assumptions we currently hold. For example, do you believe that people will always speak up when they disagree? Do you think that driving an SUV is a sign of not caring about the climate? We also need to admit that there are things we don't know. Not knowing isn't a weakness, but a chance to be curious and develop. When we're curious, we're more likely to listen to new ideas and open up to changes in position based on new information.

'Authentic relating', a practice that creates enriching, enlivening and nourishing relationships is one way to connect and engage in meaningful dialogue. It has the power to settle reactive nervous systems, and allows us to be seen, heard, and accepted for who we are. Non-violent communication offers a complimentary strategy to connect, communicate and listen. Known as the language of compassion, it's composed of two parts: honestly expressing ourselves to others, and empathically hearing others. It's based on the principle that all our actions are needs we seek to meet, and understanding these can create a basis for connection and cooperation.[25] Of course, active listening is an integral part of each conversation. It's the process of listening attentively while someone else speaks, paraphrasing and reflecting back what is said without judgement and advice. When you practice active listening, you make the other person feel heard and valued.[26]

Last but not least, we need to start working on this in our organisations. As part of an organisation, we have the opportunity to bring about change from within. We need to rethink how our organisations

24   Dixon, T. & Juan-Torres, M. (2018). Is the Internet Eroding Europe's Middle Ground? Public Opinion, Polarisation and New Technologies. Retrieved from https://espas.secure.europarl.europa.eu/orbis/sites/default/files/generated/document/en/Foresight%20Reflection%20Polarisation%20paper_V04.pdf.

25   Kashtan, I. & Kashtan, M. (n.d.). Basics of Nonviolent Communication. Retrieved from https://baynvc.org/basics-of-nonviolent-communication/.

26   Cuncic, A. (2022). What Is Active Listening? Retrieved from https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-active-listening-3024343.

engage with those holding different positions - internally and externally. We need to cultivate a culture of openness and respect, even during times of disagreement. A culture where disagreement and group learning is promoted and opposing views welcomed. We need to give sufficient time to nuanced discussions on topics people disagree on to collectively make sense of the challenges we face.[27]

Thus, to tackle the climate crisis, we need to address polarisation. And just as the climate crisis, polarisation is a complex issue. To understand and tackle it requires your help. A one-sided view won't help us solve it. We're in this together, and we need to solve this together. We need your thoughts and ideas on how we can overcome polarisation. Interested in joining us, becoming part of the conversation and participating in our workshop series on depolarisation? Fill in this form to subscribe to our dedicated mailing list.

27   The Consilience Project (2022). The Endgames of Bad Faith Communication. Retrieved from https://consilienceproject.org/endgames-of-bad-communication/.

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