Ep. 123 Breaking the Social Media Prism

Dean Kelley [00:00:03] Polarization is one of the most vexing issues in society today, many of us lean left, many of us lean right and online, at least is a wide, wide gap in between. Do you have a friend or family member with whom you basically had to stop talking about politics or perhaps even more serious, where you've stopped talking at all because politics have driven you apart? How do we go about fixing this, both on a personal level but also on a national level? How do we reach across this gap and come to understand each other better? Will it help if we get exposed to more opposing views and come to understand it that way, the reasoning that others have? Or will it be better if maybe we can't be anonymous online? How do people's views change in environments that have more diverse views or where one's independence or identity is not forefront? What does identity have to do with it? So lots of experts argue that the fix might be easy, at least in the social media space, if we can break somehow out of our social media bubbles. That's the problem, they say. But my guest today has found that when people are exposed to views that oppose their own, say a Democrat is exposed to daily social media posts that come from a Republican perspective, they may not react just as you might expect. Chris Bail is professor of sociology and public policy here at Duke University. He directs a polarization lab. In this lab, he conducts research with data from real people's social media accounts and tools from computational social science. He's built bots that exposed people to news that they don't agree with and then he's measured and seen how people react. His most recent book is just out from Princeton University Press, and it's called Breaking the Social Media Prism. I'm Judith Kelley, Dean of the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University. And my guest today is Chris Bail. Welcome, Chris.

Chris Bail [00:02:13] Thanks so much for having me, Judith.

Dean Kelley [00:02:15] It's so great to have you with us, Chris. The first thing I want to ask you to do is to recount the story of Dave Kelly that you opened your book with because his online persona was quite different from his real life persona. So why don't you start with him and can you tell his story?

Chris Bail [00:02:35] That's right. So so, Dave Kelly, you know, I think most of us know a Dave Kelly. Dave Kelly is a moderate kind of Republican man who, you know, he has he has no love for Trump. But he you know, he kind of leans to the right on kind of a variety of economic issues and, you know, takes somewhat liberal positions on things like climate change. And and yet, you know, if you were to meet him online, you wouldn't know any of this. You would mostly see someone who is very upset about racial bias in the media and someone who is, you know, fairly kind of cantankerous and an angry person online. And there's a gap between social media and real life. We discovered in the course of our research is one of the most powerful sources of polarization today. And that's why we discovered when we take people like Dave Kelly out of out of his echo chamber, we see some paradoxical results.

Dean Kelley [00:03:38] So describe the first experiment you did with the bots and how did that work?

Chris Bail [00:03:44] Sure. In 2017, we recruited about 1,220 Republicans and Democrats who regularly use Twitter to follow or not follow a bot that we created that exposed them to members of the other side for about a month. And before they did this, we gave them a survey to ask them about their political views and their attitudes towards the other party. And then at the end of the month, we resurveyed them to try to figure out what happens

when you take someone outside their echo chamber for a month. And, of course, what we were hoping would happen, and I think what common wisdom suggests might happen is that this experience would make people more moderate. It would make them kind of see that there's two sides to every story. It would make them kind of humanize or empathize with the other side a little bit more. And instead, we found that most people didn't do that. In fact, most people not only didn't become more moderate, but many people became actually more extreme in their views, especially Republicans. So this finding holds across issues as diverse as immigration, government regulation of the economy, climate change, attitudes about LGBT rights. So it includes a range of both highly polarizing issues similar to abortion, but also issues where there's a kind of somewhat less polarization.

Dean Kelley [00:05:08] So you found instead that people. Became more. Entrenched in their own views, is that right? And is it the same for everybody?

Chris Bail [00:05:20] Yeah, for most people, no matter what kind of analysis we threw at this data. So, you know, we looked at young people, old people, strong partizans or people who are less enthusiastic about their political party, people with high education, people with low education, Democrats or Republicans. Across all of these different subgroups we saw the same thing that exposing people to a wide range of journalists, elected officials, and advocacy organizations, and media outlets from the other side tended to make them more polarized, not less. You know, that ran counter to a lot of our expectations. Certainly, you know, for decades, social scientists like me have been arguing that, you know, we really only need to break down the barriers that separate people across social differences. And if they can only spend more time together, then they'll kind of, you know, better appreciate again that there's two sides to every story or that there's a human on the other side of a conversation.

Dean Kelley [00:06:17] So did you feel like you were you were getting at the level of of analysis that you needed, or did you tweak the experiments in any way to understand what was going on more deeply?

Chris Bail [00:06:32] On the one hand, we're living through a golden age of social science. I think it's fair to say we have more data than we've ever had before as social scientists. In a matter of seconds, we can we can collect tens of millions of of data points from places like Twitter. On the other hand, this has created a kind of hubris, I think it's fair to say, among people in the field of computational social science, which I've worked really hard to help grow, and that is that if we just had a little bit more horsepower in our machine learning algorithms or if we just collected a little bit more data, that we could derive fundamental insights about human behavior. And certainly there's a lot of opportunity there. We have advances in computer science and exciting new fields like natural language processing and computational linguistics that will let us pull out themes from massive bodies of texts and track them. But we used all of these available tools and including sophisticated forms of social network analysis and and all sorts of other exciting new tools in the kind of data science toolkit. And we really couldn't explain the pattern with what we were seeing online alone. And that's why, yes, we did decide to do a follow up study where instead of giving people a brief survey that they completed online, we actually spoke with them for an hour or two before and after they followed the bots to try to really figure out what was going on behind the scenes and what we weren't seeing from thirty thousand feet with our data science tools.

Dean Kelley [00:08:04] Sure, sure. So surely that revealed a little bit more nuance. Now, people are also sort of face to face, accountable to another person for the views they were, you know, expressing. What did you find?

Chris Bail [00:08:17] Absolutely so, so what we discovered is there's a remarkable disconnect. You know, it's so easy, especially during covid and during the pandemic, when we're all so isolated from each other to kind of treat social media as real life, as a as a replacement for the kind of human connections that we're used to having. But, of course, it's not that it's not at all that in the realm of politics, we know that about six percent of all people account for about 75 percent of all tweets about politics. And that small group of people has disproportionately extreme views. And so what happens is when we when we when we kind of cave in to the temptation to treat social media as reality, we're really seeing, you know, what I call the social media prism. We're seeing a distortion of the landscape. We're not seeing and connecting with people as individuals and understanding how the way they behave online fits into a much bigger story about their lives.

Dean Kelley [00:09:17] So what so what did you learn from the conversations you had with people?

Chris Bail [00:09:21] Well, a few of them stick out to me. The one that's probably most memorable for me is an interview we did with a guy named Ray. Now, Ray is another kind of moderate conservative when you meet him. He'll say, you know, he's not the most conservative person, but he does lean to the right. He was by far one of the most polite people we met in the course of our research, deferential, you know, saying he never had anything bad to say about anybody else and saying, saying he avoided talking about politics because it was so divisive. But with our data, we were able to also track this guy Ray, online. And what we discovered was shocking. Ray was pretty much the most extreme Internet troll I've ever seen. And I've been studying these these folks for more than a decade. I mean, some of the most reprehensible stuff we certainly can't discuss on this podcast. And, you know, he would even go out of his way to in our interview with him to kind of criticize people like Internet trolls saying, you know, oh, well, they're probably just people who live with their parents and stay up all night trolling people online. Well, when we went back with our survey data and, you know, merged some data about local real estate, we discovered that Ray is, in fact, a middle aged single man who lives with his mom. He was talking about himself. So he really has a kind of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde kind of transformation when he goes online.

Dean Kelley [00:10:51] Does that suggest that somehow the online life is in an alternate reality and we maybe ought to be a lot less worried about it from that perspective?

Chris Bail [00:11:02] Well, I think it's very different. I still think we should be worried about it. And the reason why is that I think social media is kind of fundamentally reshaping the way that we create our identities. I think what we've got wrong about social media is we like to think of it as a place where we go to get into information or kind of maybe distract ourselves for a few minutes with some funny Internet memes or whatever. But in an era of increasing social isolation like we're experiencing and by the way, this is, of course, been been going on since before covid, recent analysis showed that most Republicans and Democrats live in areas where they will rarely, if ever, come into contact with each other. We're going to rely upon social media to to understand each other, especially young people as we go forward. And so the challenges, I think if we naively expect that social media is going to be the ideal forum for for democracy that many, many people once thought it might be, we're going to be sorely disappointed. In my view, social media is not a

place where we go to get information or entertain ourselves. Yes, we do that sometimes, but it has a deeper purpose that is actually draws us into something that is all too human, and that is to create different versions of ourselves, present different identities, observe how other people react to them, and then cultivate those identities that make us feel good about ourselves, that give us social status. And if we think about social media as a form of status seeking, it really helps us, I think, understand not only the rise of extremism, people like Ray, but also the reason why there aren't more moderate people online and why we can all come to mistakenly conclude that the other side is much more extreme than it really is.

Dean Kelley [00:12:45] But couldn't we also argue, though, that social media has contributed to democracy a lot in the sense of giving voice to communities that might not otherwise get any attention at all, I'm thinking particular about some of the metoo movements of different kinds or, you know, where people have come out and spoken out against injustices that have been done against them and gain traction in a way that, you know, if they had stood on a street corner with a sign, people would have just beeped and driven on by.

Chris Bail [00:13:19] Yeah, absolutely. And I think the the problem with our public debate right now is that we seem to still be having the conversation should we still have social media or not or should we delete our accounts and should we know, is there some alternative? But, you know, as anyone who has kids or spends time around, you know, young people, knows social media is here to stay and it's really something that we can't evaluate right now as a net positive or a net negative. And really, we'd need to go way back to the early history of the Internet and the broader political context of, you know, cable news and divisive political strategies among certain political parties to to fully understand where polarization comes from. So I think I think it's perhaps unproductive to ask the question if social media is a net good or not bad, the more productive question, I think, is how can we make social media a more a more cohesive place, a place where we understand each other better instead of as is so obviously happening right now, you know, dividing ourselves apart.

Dean Kelley [00:14:25] So so you say, Chris, that sort of stepping outside the echo chamber actually sharpened the contrast between us and them, depending on which camp you were in, Democrats, Republicans, et cetera. And so if that's the case, how much of this is tied up in identity to begin with? And and how would it be different if we weren't always attached to our identity? And I know you looked into this, you know, because you offered people the opportunity to be anonymous.

Chris Bail [00:14:59] That's right.

Dean Kelley [00:15:00] So tell us a little bit about what got you to that stage of wanting to do that research and what happened.

Chris Bail [00:15:08] Sure, you know, well, one of the people we interviewed who sticks out in my mind is a an older woman from upstate New York named Patty. And when we first met her, she was a very unenthusiastic Democrat. She had kind of reluctantly voted for Obama and reluctantly voted for Hillary Clinton. But mostly she didn't like politics. She didn't like Fox News. She thought it was biased. But she also, you know, thought CNN was biased. And, you know, when we invited her to begin to follow a bot that would expose her to Republicans for a month, I thought, you know, maybe this is the type of person who a Trump style populism would appeal to. You know, she had moderately negative attitudes

towards immigrants. She had concerns that American culture was being ripped apart. And, you know, so I was kind of lying, lying in wait, thinking, well, this is going to we're going to, you know, nudge this this woman, Patty, to the right. And instead, the opposite happened. So she went from an unenthusiastic partizan to someone who could essentially rehearse talking points on the Democratic side. She suddenly had someone elaborated views about government regulation of the economy. She had moderated her views about immigration.

Dean Kelley [00:16:28] She had moderated or she has actually not moderated. She had altered, you mean, that she had become more.

Chris Bail [00:16:33] Right, sorry. That's right. Yeah. She had become she had become a little more liberal. Yeah. I moderated on immigration. So. So, yeah. So what happened and what we think happened, especially in talking to her a second time, in watching, by the way, each day how she interacted with other people online. You know, we would have loved to tell a story where, you know, Patty gets exposed to, say, David Brooks, the centrist columnist for The New York Times, or Steve Bullock, the centrist Republican governor of Montana, and says, you know, these people on the right have have some ideas and I'm willing to, you know, to consider them. Instead, you know, people like Patty and most people in general focus on the extremes. So, you know, you could put up 10 posts by David Brooks, but they would focus on the one post that is a scathing attack of liberals. And, you know, because we think that social media has become this tool we use to cultivate our identities, it means when we go out online, and especially when we're exposed to to the other side, we're also exposing ourselves to the full scale of partizan warfare. So people like Patty, by stepping outside of her, you know, her echo chamber are actually being exposed to threats against their political identity for the first time and this, we learned, makes even an unenthusiastic partizan like Patty begin to learn how to defend herself, begin to, in her case, even go on the offensive against Republicans, which was really shocking to see.

Dean Kelley [00:18:05] So then so then you think of this notion of becoming anonymous instead?

Chris Bail [00:18:11] That's right, yeah.

Dean Kelley [00:18:12] So talk about that.

Chris Bail [00:18:13] Sure. So, you know, having concluded that identity was one of the things that's interrupting productive conversations on politics and that took a while. We we we did many studies. I could tell you many more stories about many people. But at the root of it is this idea that our identities are filtering the information we consume online. We're not just dispassionate creatures who are calmly considering alternative viewpoints. We're really looking for ways to to feel better about ourselves. And we focus on the identities of those who are attacking us and those who are supporting us more than we focus on the content of the ideas. So the big thing that that we did in the lab is like, how could you refocus the conversation towards ideas and away from identities? And we don't want to do this for every topic. Many you know, there are core questions about American identity that that I think many people are not willing to give any ground on. And I think we obviously need to respect that, especially when there's been so much divisive rhetoric around identities, especially race in the United States. But we decided to do an experiment where we paid Republicans and Democrats to engage in an anonymous chat on a new social media platform that we created for scientific research. And we just asked them to talk about either immigration or gun control for one hour. And the startling result of this large

experiment was that this had very large gains in depolarization. So we saw a lot of moderation when people were discussing discussing these controversial issues on kind of a different playing field where they couldn't really see the jerseys of the people that they were playing against. They were mostly anonymous to each other. We gave them gender neutral names. And so though anonymity certainly in some cases can breed incivility and people may perceive there are fewer consequences to acting in an uncivil manner, we think it can also give people the opportunity to focus on the content of ideas in political debate rather than the identities of the people who are, you know, espousing them.

Dean Kelley [00:20:24] Mm hmm. Yeah, because as you as you mentioned, it's certainly the case that that there's also been research showing that people just are more willing to be vile, you know, when they are anonymous.

Chris Bail [00:20:34] That's right. Yeah, that's right.

Dean Kelley [00:20:36] So did you, did these, did these less polarized views stick?

Chris Bail [00:20:44] Well, we measured them twice. We measured them immediately after the conversation and about a week and a half later. And interestingly, we ran this experiment during what could be described as the most polarizing moment in in US history, which was the first impeachment of former President Donald Trump. We were actually in the field during that week.

Dean Kelley [00:21:03] Right.

Chris Bail [00:21:04] And despite being in the field during that week, we saw really large increases in positive attitudes towards the other party in particular. Immediately after people chatted. A week later, these dropped off but they were still there, despite probably many of the people in our study seeing a lot of negative news coverage of the other party.

Dean Kelley [00:21:26] Mm hmm. Mm hmm. So before you found that the effects you were seeing were pretty much the same across the board, regardless of education, political affiliation, etc., how was that in this case and this experiment? Was it also the same for everyone?

Chris Bail [00:21:46] Yeah, for the most part, we're still analyzing this data. We've got a new paper that should be out in about a month. One interesting thing we're starting to see in the data, though, that really intrigues us is that it seems to be that Republicans depolarized more than Democrats when we put them in these anonymous conversations. So if you remember from the first study I described, we found that exposing people to the other side was making them more polarized. But this was particularly true of Republicans. Republicans became much more conservative after we expose them to Democratic opinion leaders. So we were really excited to see that this anonymous conversation seemed to decrease polarization among Republicans, even more than Democrats. And, you know, we thought a lot about why this might happen. And one of the clues that we think is out there is that if you think about something like Twitter, we're engaging in these conversations in a public space, there are huge consequences to going against your party in a public manner. In fact, many of the trolls and extremists that we studied in the course of our research would intentionally go after people who expressed moderate views, sometimes with even more vitriol than those on the other side. Think of someone like a Mitt Romney or a Justin Amash, the the independent formerly Republican member of Congress. These people are often some of the favorite targets of these extremists, and it

really has, we think, a muting effect on moderation, so we're not seeing moderates, particularly Republican moderates, express their views because they're so afraid of being censured by by more extreme people.

Dean Kelley [00:23:24] Yeah, yeah. Our colleague Timur Kuran has done some work on this in which I think he calls it preference concealment or something like that...

Chris Bail [00:23:35] Right, yeah, exactly.

Dean Kelley [00:23:36] ...you'd just rather, you'd just rather hide your hide your views from from those around you to avoid their criticism, potentially.

Chris Bail [00:23:46] Exactly.

Dean Kelley [00:23:46] Yeah. So, you know, our listeners might be thinking, you know, what a mess. I mean, you've got people who are sitting at home and, you know, criticizing the social media world for being a bunch of people who are sitting at home trolling all night long. And that's exactly what they're doing. So they're misrepresenting themselves. They're misrepresenting their own views, even from their own real persona. But then in addition to this, you have also a lot of accounts that may not even represent any real human beings to begin with. And we've we've heard about this certainly in connection with Russian interference in our elections and such. Can you just comment really briefly on that?

Chris Bail [00:24:37] Yeah, sure. So, you know, the idea that bots have been spreading misinformation or kind of trying to divide Americans is is a very compelling idea when we see the scale of Russia's Russia's operation. So, you know, these are these are tens of thousands of tweets and thousands of accounts. So it's easy to assume that that type of campaign would be effective, particularly when we've seen such sudden growth of partizanship and polarization among the American public. But our polarization lab had a kind of an interesting opportunity recently to with the help of data from Twitter and the U.S. intelligence service to identify people in our studies who had interacted with accounts associated with the Russia linked Internet research agency. And of course, you know, we all thought that these people would be expressing more polarized views or at least more negative attitudes towards the other party because these trolls so effectively impersonate American partizans we think.

Dean Kelley [00:25:39] Sure.

Chris Bail [00:25:40] But instead, what we found is there was no effect of interacting with these trolls on people's views about social policies, their views about the other party and a few other behavioral outcomes of, say, interest in politics and talking about politics online. So this is hardly the end all be all study. But we've yet to seen a study that convincingly, in my view, shows that these foreign misinformation campaigns or bot led campaigns are actually successfully dividing the American public.

Dean Kelley [00:26:12] Is that because they're mostly targeting those folks who are already, you know, converted to their views?

Chris Bail [00:26:20] Exactly. So, you know, we know from, you know, theories in political science that are two or three years old that most political campaigns actually have minimal effects, which is to say that they really only tend to be read and kind of consumed by

people who already are highly active in politics and have you have disproportionately extreme views and these people tend not to change their minds. And so the net effect of most of these microtargeting campaigns, even outside the realm of politics, by the way, we're learning on social media, has been negligible.

Dean Kelley [00:26:54] This is fascinating, Chris, so, you know. In your book, you you talk about a prism, then, rather than seeing social media as a mirror. So tell us how these findings you've talked about now about people becoming less polarized in an anonymous environment, people, you know, when they are hearing the viewpoint of others not necessarily becoming less polarized, but more polarized, how does that fit into your prism analogy? And where are you trying to go with that?

Chris Bail [00:27:34] Well, let me illustrate the prism with another story, if I may. Another story that sticks out to me is the story of a woman that I call in the book Sarah Rendon and Sara is another kind of moderate conservative, and she's a young mother. She's got a pretty good life in in a suburb of of, you know, East Coast US. And, you know, when we first met her, the first story she told us because, you know, we started out by asking people, you know, some general questions about how you use social media. She said, well, you know, about six months ago, I was I was up late. I was scrolling through Twitter and I saw a post from the NRA, the National Rifle Association, saying, you know, something about, you know, it's it's Americans rights to own guns. And she she responded to this with a little note that said, you know, my my husband is a responsible gun owner. He sometimes goes to a gun range to practice. And, you know, I'm glad we have the NRA or something like that. Pretty, pretty balanced views in the current gun debate in the US, but the first thing she saw on her feed after writing this was someone saying, hey, I saw you have kids. I hope they find your gun and shoot you. I mean, just reprehensible stuff, right? And she had other stories that that were equally harrowing. And so for anyone with young kids, this is this is a kind of a terrifying thing to have, you know, a stranger attack you and mention your kids online. And so people like Sarah who have, you know, moderate views on a lot of issues. So she was so complex. You know, again, if you saw her online, you just think, oh, well, she likes guns. Turns out, you know, she's from New York City. She's half Puerto Rican. She's from a family where her father was a police officer. She went to an Ivy League college in the Northeast. She reads The New Yorker. She reads The New York Times. She has amazingly nuanced views on race and policing that you will never see on social media, not only because she's, you know, experienced this really harrowing harassment from other people, but also because a lot of people like her just feel like there's too much risk to express your political views online. Whereas extremists like that guy Ray, I was talking about the guy who lives with his mom and, you know, he's finding a kind of social status from social media. People like Sarah, this moderate that I'm describing, you know, really, they don't need social media. They for them, social media is a liability. It gets their relatives upset at Thanksgiving or it gets you get your children threatened. You know, why would you spend any time on there? And so the effect, this social media prism at the same time that it amplifies the status seeking extremists, it's also muting moderates like Sarah, who I really think we need to move forward on these divisive issues like race and policing or gun control.

Dean Kelley [00:30:38] So are we just paying too much attention? Is there a way to, you know, should we all delete our social media accounts? What what should we do, in your view, to defeat sort of this tribalism?

Chris Bail [00:30:51] This is the big question. And with this book, I really wanted to provide some answers to this question. You know, there's so few solutions to polarization

right now. We see evidence every day that it's getting worse. You know, that people are willing to resort to violence in unprecedented numbers. You know, it's really concerning stuff. And all of the solutions on the table have been proposed by, you know, not by social scientists who have studied these things for years, but often by, you know, tech leaders or policy makers who have, you know, highly speculative and untested ideas like that, you know, stepping outside our echo chambers is a good move or that foreign misinformation campaigns explain it all away or that algorithms are radicalizing us. There's actually very little evidence for for all three of these views in the in the research. And so I wanted to say, OK, well, let's take a research based view and evidence based approach to this. And what could we do? Should we delete our accounts? I think the answer is no. Now, look, I have uncomfortable interactions on social media all the time. I have awkward family gatherings because of social media. So I get it. I get that for a lot of people, it doesn't seem like there's a lot of positive or at least that the negatives outweigh the positives. The problem is that if people like us all leave social media, the people who are left there are the people like Ray, the guy who lives with his mother and is spending every night spreading this this vitriol. So we can do, I think, three things. The first thing we can do is to become more self aware. We can we can become more reflective social media users. We can learn to, in effect, see the social media prism, see how it's boosting extremists and muting moderates. Now, in a book like mine that can begin to kind of sound a little bit self-help-y, like, oh, we all just need to become, you know, more self-aware, great. You know, Kumbaya. But we want it to go a step further and say we actually want to give people tools, technology, apps, quizzes, bots that you can use that can actually help you enact these insights from our research. So, for example, we have a tool that allows you to identify extremists. It uses machine learning models to identify common phrases that extreme extremists use on social media. It allows you to put in characteristics of the social media user you're interacting with to try to see if they're an extremist.

Dean Kelley [00:33:14] So what's a common phrase?

Chris Bail [00:33:16] Oh, well, you know, some of it wouldn't surprise you. Liberals are snowflakes and, you know, and this type of stuff. But, you know, a lot of it centers and centers around the most extreme parts of the of the political continuum. You can view these terms, by the way, on our on our website polarization lab dot com. So so the first thing we can do is become more self-aware. We can do that also by by turning our, out, turning inwards. So another one of the tools that we have on on our website allows any user to put in their Twitter handle and see what their posts look like to other people. So you can see where the content of your posts falls on a spectrum that ranges from very liberal to very conservative. And what we hope this will do is allow people to see if the person that they are projecting online is the person who they want to be offline. And this is not only to dissuade extremists to kind of tone it down, but also for the moderates who may very rarely talk about politics to encourage them and to incentivize them to talk more.

Dean Kelley [00:34:24] So does that app sort of do a quick content analysis, essentially, of your social media website and then...

Chris Bail [00:34:30] That's right.

Dean Kelley [00:34:31] ...this is how you're portraying yourself.

Chris Bail [00:34:33] Exactly, yeah. And the third thing, the third thing that we can do is to really begin to boost moderation. So one thing I will say, and I will never say that social media companies are blameless for the current situation. But, you know, the way that

news feed algorithms work that determine the order of posts that we see in our feeds, they tend to reward content that is, that, that gets a lot of engagement, right. Gets a lot of likes. But the problem is, you know, a lot of the stuff that's getting likes is just playing to one side of the aisle. Someone taking down Trump will get a lot of likes from, you know, from Democrats and someone taking down Nancy Pelosi will get a lot of likes from Republicans. And this is really only fueling the fire. So the thought experiment that we did is, well, can we identify people who are actually resonating across party lines using this unprecedented data set that we have that links people online and offline and allows us to look at at great scale who is getting traction across partizan divides? And so we created this thing called the Bipartisanship Leader Board, which you can also see on our website.

Dean Kelley [00:35:42] The bipartisanship what?

Chris Bail [00:35:44] Leader board. Right. Yeah. So it's kind of like, you know, of all the politicians and journalists and news organizations and even celebrities we track, you know, which ones produce posts that tend to get liked by people on both sides, tend to get likes from Republicans and Democrats. And what we hope this will do is try to incentivize people towards moderation, to boost sense of status around bipartisanship at a time when really there's no rewards towards going to the middle for anyone on either side. So we think that boosting moderation is part of the key. And then, of course, the bots, the same type of bots that we used to run the experiment we talked about earlier. These bots can also retweet the moderate content. And so we have two bots. They're called Polly, its our acute polarization lab name for our bots. So you can follow Polly and Polly will retweet messages from the other side that our research indicates have resonated with with people on your side.

Dean Kelley [00:36:46] So a lot of great tools right there. I'm curious, though, Chris, who is currently leading the bipartisan leadership...

Chris Bail [00:36:55] Well, it depends on the category. So, for example, in politics, you wouldn't be surprised to see people like the centrist governor of Ohio, Mike DeWine. He's currently in a leading position. You know, Mitt Romney, some other members of Congress who you'll be familiar with as kind of, you know, champions of bipartisanship. But it's kind of interesting also, I think, to look at like the celebrities. So, you know, Jimmy Fallon is currently topping our our celebrity leaderboard. But even in journalism, you know, you might be surprised. Yes, there are people, you know, working in centrist outlets who get a lot of attention. But one of the surprises to me was the the host of the New York Times podcast, The Daily, Michael Barbaro. He is he's in our top three for journalists. So there are people out there that are really getting traction on both sides. And I think, you know, whatever we can do to boost them and give them a sense of status to to to incentivize them to continue what they're doing is paramount right now.

Dean Kelley [00:38:00] Well, Chris, there's so much insight in this book, and I love the tools that you also are thinking about how to allow people to implement some changes in their lives, do an analysis of their own content to see how others view them, to become more self-aware and to think about valuing bipartisanship as a as a real, you know, a credit to be to be earned for being able to speak intelligently to both sides. So I think those those sound really promising. And surely we'll be hearing more about this for a long time to come. I urge everybody to go and pick up a copy, a copy of Chris's book. And Chris, where would be the best place for them to do that?

Chris Bail [00:38:59] Well, you know, I would love for people to pick it up from an indie bookseller. They've been hit very hard by the pandemic. And though it is available on Amazon or through the publisher, Princeton University Press, I would love for people to show some love to those independent bookstores that haven't been able to host events or get people through the doors.

Dean Kelley [00:39:19] And if you like some of the stories that Chris was telling today, you thought they were insightful. This book is filled with stories. It's so well-written and surprising, so thank you very much for joining me today, Chris.

Chris Bail [00:39:31] Oh, it was really my pleasure. Thank you Judith, and and and thanks, everyone, for listening.

Dean Kelley [00:39:34] Chris Bail is a professor of sociology and public policy here at Duke University, where he directs the polarization lab. His book is called Breaking the Social Media Prism, and I can't recommend it enough. Thank you for joining me. I'm Judith Kelley.