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A "Need for Chaos" and Motivations to Share Hostile Political Rumors

Why are some people motivated to share hostile political rumors, such as conspiracy theories and other derogative news stories? In this talk, I utilize evolutionary insights on the psychology of status-seeking to argue that extremely disruptive psychological motivations are at the root. Specifically, I developed the prediction that individuals who feel socially and politically marginalized are motivated to circulate hostile rumors because they wish to "burn down" the entire established political order in the hope that they can gain status in the process. Together with colleagues, I conducted 8 studies in Denmark and the United States ($N = 9558$) to show that some individuals are predisposed to have a "Need for Chaos" when facing social isolation and discontent, and that this need is the strongest predictor of explicit motivations to share hostile political rumors, even when these rumors are not believed by the sharer. Panel and experimental data show that chaotic motivations reflect stable traits that are primed by the environment and, consistent with the rising inequality across advanced democracies, we find that these motivations are strikingly widespread. To stem the tide of hostile political rumors on social media, the present findings suggest that real-world policy solutions are needed that address the growing social and political frustrations of democratic populations.

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