

Title: Xander Snyder & Erik Fogg of the Reconsider Podcast, Bias and Tribalism
Episode: 45

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Transcript

[From Heterodox Academy, this is *Half Hour of Heterodoxy*, conversations with scholars and authors, ideas from diverse viewpoints and perspectives. Here's your host, Chris Martin.]

Chris Martin: Thanks for tuning in. My guests today on this co-episode are Erik Fogg and Xander Snyder. They're hosts of the *ReConsider Podcast*. Some of you may already subscribe to that. They're a podcast that covers politics, history and social sciences more broadly. Their slogan is, "We don't do the thinking for you." I met them at the podcasting conference Sound Education in Boston in October or November of last year and it was great to meet a bunch of podcasters there. I spent a lot of time chatting with both Xander and Erik and we found we had common interests. So we decided to do this co-episode.

Xander Snyder: So Chris Martin from Cold Play, welcome.

Chris Martin: Thank you very much. I will not be doing any singing in this episode. Maybe next time.

Xander Snyder: Maybe. Maybe we will have to get you on again then.

Chris Martin: Yeah. I can talk all about my marriage to Gwyneth Paltrow at some point.

Xander Snyder: Sounds exciting. Let's just ditch the politics and thinking about the world and just talk about Gwyneth Paltrow for the whole episode.

Chris Martin: Yeah.

Erik Fogg: Whole foods.

Chris Martin: Well, *Half Hour of Heterodoxy*, if you're a ReConsider listener and don't know much about *Half Hour of Heterodoxy*, it's that offshoot of Heterodox Academy. It's produced by Heterodox Academy. I and Jon Haidt and several other academics founded Heterodox Academy in 2015 to coincide with the publication of some papers that suggested that political research or research on politically-loaded topics and the social sciences was being affected adversely by the fact that there was a lot of ideological homogeneity within the disciplines, especially social psychology. That was the big paper published by Jon and a few other psychologists.

I published a solo-authored paper on *The American Sociologist* about the same topic. Nick Rosenkranz published a paper in law. So since then, Heterodox Academy has been trying to make the academy a more welcoming place to people of different ideologies, people of different religions and it has actually evolved into an organization that's trying to help students be better at

listening to one another and being open to reconsidering some of their most cherished views in the light of new evidence and being less polarized.

Xander Snyder: And since this is a joint episode for listeners of *Half Hour of Heterodoxy* that are not familiar with ReConsider, we look at different topics of the day and try to place them in a broader context basically. So our slogan is, “We don’t do the thinking for you,” and the idea there is maybe if you’re familiar with a certain issue and you’ve heard narratives A and B and you like B more, B is definitely your narrative. We just want to tell you that narratives C, D and E also exist and that those are options and why people have those positions or have those opinions and that’s kind of it.

Then we step back and do our very best not to advocate for any particular policies and that’s where we get our slogan.

Erik Fogg: Yeah. Our passion is actually getting – taking people and shaking them by the collar a bit and getting them to sort of wake up from a bit of a fugue-like state they’ve had about a particular issue and our background is not so sophisticated as Chris and certainly not Mr. Haidt who if you listen to ReConsider, we love to cite him a lot. He’s one of our great influencers or Dr. Haidt, excuse me.

But we – our background is we both have studied economics and political science fairly extensively. Xander studied economics at school. I studied political science and then I got personally interested in economics, went and studied that. Xander got personally interested in political science and international relations, went and studied that. We both studied some philosophy.

My career has involved being part of a – well, actually, I started ReConsider Media, published a book called “Wedged” and also very much influenced by Haidt. *Wedged* is about the tendency for Americans to choose political tribes and sacrifice their own thinking to that tribe and decide the issues – just like decide collectively that issues are much more divisive than they really are and then – and much more divisive than each of us really feel about them.

Wedged talks about why that happened and how that happened and sort of proves that it’s happening and a little bit of what you can do about it. Xander’s background ...

Xander Snyder: Yeah. My background was in economics. So I studied that first, went out, worked in finance for a number of years. Started a company in the energy efficiency space and now I have shifted full on into the international relations realm. I work for a company called Geopolitical Futures and we look at big picture stories about the international system, where we are in history, where things are going and why.

I joined Erik at ReConsider to work on both some written and podcast efforts back in 2015 and our passion is talking about yeah, why people might be focused on one narrative or another and how tribal affiliations influence those narratives and we – that’s what we talk about.

Erik Fogg: So when we had met Chris, he had a really challenging couple of questions for us and I want to turn it over to him to sort of set us up for this talk today.

Chris Martin: So my questions were – I don't recall the exact wording. But my questions roughly were if you're trying to not do the thinking for someone, how are you sure you're not really doing the thinking for someone? In other words, you are basing your decision to just cover some topics on the basis of some values and you certainly value say truth over falsehood.

So how do you occasionally step back and say, "Are we really not doing the thinking for people?"

Erik Fogg: Fox News at least had – I don't know if they still do – a slogan, "We report. You decide," right? Which is pretty similar. You know, we just give you the facts and you get to decide what to think. Fox News' reputation is not particularly one of being an unbiased source of facts. Regardless of how you feel about Fox News, just generally the majority of Americans do not think that it is unbiased, right? They have a reporting bias.

Chris Martin: Yeah. I think we can confidently say it is biased.

Erik Fogg: Right. Oh, yeah. We can actually study that. Yeah. So we can also show that by reasonable metrics, it is quite biased and so the reason – and so I actually occasionally have had moments of angst and consternation over our own motto because of that, because it harkens back to disingenuous bias, right?

Is it so much better if you have a bias to know it and to be forward about it and declare like look, this is what I believe is true. This is what I think is important and then try to make a case for it. That way, everyone knows what they're getting themselves into and you aren't being intentionally deceptive at that point, right?

Whereas if you tell people, "Hey, we don't have biases. We are objective in some way. We are beyond bias. We don't tell you what to think," and if you're good enough and clever enough and your tongue is silver enough, you might just convince people that's true even when you are telling them what to think.

So it's very dangerous ground that we play on and of course I've read enough of Haidt and a bunch of other people to know that no human is without bias, right? Of course I have biases. I have – and it's not even just biases because bias implies like a mental – it's not a flaw but like it is something that influences reason, right? It's something beyond pure reason. You have a tendency to believe that something is true or want something to be true even if you don't – or even if like the facts in front of you will not lead you that way. That's kind of what bias means.

There are all kinds of biases. We list them in our show. But of course not only do I have biases, but I have things that I believe are true and that – you know, I will see other bits of evidence and I will still continue to think that the thing I think is true or I will change my mind and then I will think that's true as well. Not without a set of, as Chris said, values or a set of what I – of things I think are true.

So when I was thinking about this, the question of, “Do we really not do any thinking for anyone?” suddenly it starts to sound like well, maybe that’s literally impossible, right? Maybe it’s – maybe that – to make that claim ever in any circumstance is disingenuous. I’ve got some thoughts on what our motto what our commitment means to us. But I want to shut up and let Xander talk for a minute.

Xander Snyder: I mean I agree with a lot of what Erik said. I think if – Chris, I haven’t read – clearly I haven’t studied cognitive biases in as much depth as you have. But I read Kahneman and I know that if you approach the subject of cognitive biases from a fairly critical perspective, then it’s actually impossible for no one to be biased. Everyone has biases. It’s like you said. Just by selecting a certain topic, you are introducing a bias into the conversation, period.

So I think from certain angle, everyone is biased. It is impossible to not be biased. It is impossible to be truly objective and recognizing that, I think sort of the best next thing that you can do is strive for objectivity as much as possible and some of the ways we do that on the show is we do quite a lot of work before each show doing the research and challenging one another in terms of sort of what we – what we want to talk about and how we present issues.

We do our best on the show to be open and frank if we do have a bias that’s completely unavoidable on a certain topic. We did a show – this was a while ago at this point about some privacy issues with Apple and the FBI and the iPhone that FBI wanted unlocked and I spent two years as a – like a privacy advocate for a group that was working against mass surveillance. After the *[0:11:01] [Indiscernible]* leaks there’s no way I can be unbiased about that topic. So I had to mention that upfront.

So I think that’s part of it. In terms of striving for that next best thing, I think what you can do is just try to represent what people think, what narratives are out there, why those narratives are convincing for different sorts of people and how the data that you have at your disposal for discussing those issues could be leading you to misrepresent one thing or another and introduce some degree of probability or uncertainty around the topics that you’re discussing whenever possible.

Erik Fogg: The one thing I want to say on this that I think is true is that of course everyone who listens to us is going to be infected with some sort of bias and we have our own window of stuff that we think is reasonable and we have a window of stuff outside of which we think is unreasonable and we sort of don’t even – we don’t even broker. One thing we don’t do that people – if I introduce the concept who accused me of before they’ve heard the show is, “Oh, you present what the left thinks and what the right thinks and you say, see, both have equally good points,” right? Everyone has got equally good points and that’s certainly not what we do.

I think the commitment that we really make that is the essence of our motto and the essence of our show is while we’re introducing certainly curation bias to a large extent, based on what we cover, what we’re committed to is a dialectic. It’s like what’s out pedagogy ultimately. It’s a dialectic. So we are introducing dialogue that is meant to shake people out of thoughts – their patterns of thought that they have. I’ve told people that we are breakers, not builders.

So we run around with hammers and we hit things a lot and it can be uncomfortable because then we just leave you. We just say, OK, this thing that you felt was rock solid, we've like kind of broken through the clay façade on it and it's a little bit empty inside. Now what? And there's not much we can do at that point other – you know, to let them go, to let them come to a conclusion other than point to some – you know, point them to different ways that some different people have thought about it without telling them what we think is the best thing.

So the biggest thing, the most important thing that I think is behind that is we don't draw conclusions about what is true, what is right in any of these realms. We, with probably a heavy dose of curation bias, go and beat things up a little bit and then walk away and that pattern – I think once people – what our hope is with that pattern of experiencing that with us and going on that journey with us – because it's often a journey for us as well as we explore these topics.

By people going through that journey with us, they're going to be able to do more and more of it on their own at which point any leaning on us they've been doing, any sense of crutch, the start to let that go and run for themselves and kind of leave us behind. There's a point that ReConsider should be left behind in your journey of finding truth.

Chris Martin: That's an interesting perspective to take for a podcast. I think a lot of podcasters want people to just keep listening. So it's a very altruistic perspective I would say. So what I hear you saying is that in a way, you're like anthropologists. You're trying to go into this, try to go into a tribe and just describe what is going on and try to understand the internal mental states of people there without evaluating what's going on that particular tribe from your perspective.

So in a way, you're anthropological which is valuable I think. I think anthropology sometimes is less valued because it at least for a long time did not focus on Western society. So it just got bracketed and political scientists and historians and sociologists talked to one another and anthropologists were off in a corner doing their own thing.

Fortunately we now do have anthropologists who study things like the anthropology of Wall Street and what I hear you saying is you also try to be journalists in the tradition of let's say a magazine like the Economist where you do a lot of investigation but you don't advertise yourself as having a political slant per se and you just want to get the facts out there. But not just the facts. Put the facts into a narrative like a good historian would.

So maybe you're part anthropologist and part historians. Is that maybe a fair description?

Xander Snyder: I would say yes. I would say – I don't know if we're journalists to the sense – in the sense that a lot of the times journalists are actually going out there and getting the scope, getting the story and we're not. We're reading the scoop. We're reading the stories that journalists are collecting and we're trying to put them in perspective as best as possible.

I will take 15-second unbridged with your comment on the Economist. I don't think they do a particularly good job of presenting information unbiased at all. I think they do an incredible

amount of policy advocacy in their work. They say if Mr. X wants to accomplish Y, it would be best that they do Z.

A lot of their stuff, especially in the last couple of years, has taken – I don't really want to categorize it. But I would say that it is – fits firmly within a school of thought that is not trying to just present information.

Chris Martin: Yeah, I would agree. I would actually agree with that. I feel like relatively speaking, they try to adopt that tone. Relative to journalists like say the National Review or the Nation.

Xander Snyder: Sure. The tone is there. I will agree with that, definitely.

Erik Fogg: One question I had for you Chris is – sorry, I guess I should answer your question and not just dodge it. I might – well I might dodge it a little bit. I need to think about what's the best analogy for us. My analogy was a little more – how do we say? A little more messianic. So I'm going to feel really bad saying this. But I like to think of us as going at things a little bit like Plato where – you know, what we do is we read Plato's dialogues. You know, what's happening in Socrates is constantly saying like, oh, so the logical conclusion of what you just said is blah. So you think blah and people are like, "Sweet Jesus. No, I don't think blah. That's insane. That's absurd," and he goes, "Oh. So if you don't think that, then what about this and what about this and what about this?"

What happens is one of two things always happens to the people that Socrates talks to. They either walk away like dazed and confused and they're probably going to go like become a monk for a while, to try sort out everything because everything they thought was true has been upended or they like retreat into their shell and that's where those dialogues tend to end. We're probably not as – not probably, excuse me. We're certainly not as talented at this as is Plato and so –

Xander Snyder: Quick clarification.

Erik Fogg: We are not the greatest thinker that has ever existed in the history of the West. But ...

Chris Martin: Well, Socrates was kind of a troll. I think that's the consensus now. He was a very smart troll but he was trolling people.

Erik Fogg: Yes. But it was his – but it was a pedagogical tool, right?

Xander Snyder: A pedagogical troll.

Erik Fogg: Yeah. He was a very intentionally pedagogical troll. I think what's – why I think this is so interesting is actually what we're doing is we're – part of our bias that we take is we tend to go take hammers against orthodox positions and probably the – I would assume that most people in the US accept that there are generally two orthodoxies about different issues.

Like you bring up an issue. You say, “What do people think about this?” They’re going to say oh, it’s this or it’s that. So we’re like running around banging on that and there’s some risk that we’re necessarily advocating for the heterodox positions, which in the US are legion but tiny and the – as I was thinking about the show, Chris, one of the things I wanted to think about that I think you actually hinted at early on was that when we’re talking about heterodoxy in US politics, I think the first thought a lot of people are going to have is external heterodoxy where they go, “I’m a conservative,” or “I’m a liberal.”

We are right and then there are these like weird people that think weird things who are the other side,” right? They’re either red or they’re blue. They must be heterodox. As I revealed, I think these are the orthodoxies and that there are these literal heterodoxies like greenism and libertarianism and communism and white nationalism and all this stuff.

I think you come at the notion of heterodoxy from a much more positive angle and you see this as powerful and I think you see internal heterodoxies as useful and I want to understand that better.

Chris Martin: I think that’s such an interesting point. My brain is sort of going in two directions at this point and I think one interesting question whenever you approach these topics is, “Are you talking about psychological facts or are you talking about the concrete stuff that’s happening on the ground right now?”

I mean when it comes to psychological facts, I think you could take a time machine, go back to any point in time and find people who are roughly liberal and roughly conservative. I know those terms became – well, the terms left and right became much more common after 1789 in the French revolution. But you can go back further and see people who are – you know, in retrospect, we might call them relatively liberal or not. Like Socrates for example I think would be considered sort of liberal or even radical by challenging a lot of conventions and ultimately being sentenced to death for them, although you could have a Socratic debate about even that.

So when you take these psychological dispositions, we know there’s a personality trait called openness to experience and another trait called conscientiousness and in general, people who are kind of high in openness to experience and kind of lower in conscientiousness tend to be liberal and vice versa.

So I think it’s important to understand that people are going to bring these psychological lenses to situations even if they don’t necessarily form tribes. So we look at maybe the period from about 1940 to 1980 as this Cold War consensus area where democrats and liberals had much more in common.

But even then, you could see that liberals and conservatives in each party – and the parties were more heterogeneous at the time – were bringing different lenses to things.

I think where things get risky is then you have to look at a particular point in time. Like right now for example if you look at the incarnation of the Democratic Party and the incarnation of the Republican Party, which is not representative of where they were 100 years ago and not where

they will be 100 years from now, I think you can fall into this trap of both-siderism and wanting to say well, there are these psychological lenses of conservatism and liberalism that people bring and they bias everyone. So therefore half of what the Republican Party is saying is probably true and half of the points that the Democratic Party are saying are probably true.

Then that's where things get risky because we actually know that's not true right now. Does that make sense?

Xander Snyder: Yeah, and I think the – Erik, what is the term we're – false equivalency? Like just ...

Erik Fogg: Yes!

Chris Martin: Yeah.

Xander Snyder: Yeah, that's the word we're looking for. I don't think either of us think that that's accurate. I think you can have – I mean forget that democrats and republicans exist. We don't live in that world. We live in a world where like *snoggles and bif darts* [0:23:05] [*Phonetic*] are the two parties. I don't know. Those are the first things –

Erik Fogg: Yes to *bif darts, snoggles* [*Phonetic*] 20-20.

Xander Snyder: See? See? Tribes that emerge almost immediately. It is entirely possible that *bif darts* lie about 95 percent of things and that they just don't represent things accurately and maybe it's because it's like all of the media is controlled – all the *bif dart* [*Phonetic*] media is controlled by like – I don't know, a party of eight that controls all of the content that goes out, like Soviet style. I don't know. But this is an extreme hyperbolic example to make the point that no, of course. Just because there are two parties does not mean that they shared truth equally. That doesn't make sense.

Chris Martin: I think the data though right now show that even if you look at the voter basis, if you look at Matt Grossmann's research in political science for example, there is an asymmetry in the sense that if you ask people should your party be more open to compromise or should it completely resist compromise, democrat voters tend to be more open to compromise. Republican voters tend to not be. It's not like an 80 percentage point difference. But it's a pretty substantial difference. If I recall, it's about 15 percentage points or so.

So right now, if you think of democratic voters as your one tribe, they really are more open to compromise and to just take another issue, the issue of fake news as well. If you look at Andy Guess and Brendan Nyhan's research, there's the thing he uses mostly in older, white republican phenomenon of a set of voters forwarding fake news to one another and that circles. So again, it's not that democrats are forwarding fake news to each other and republicans are forwarding fake news to each other. There really is more – at least as of 2016 to the present, I would say there is more fake news on the republican side. I think we know that with a certain degree of – you know that with a fair degree of certainty.

Erik Fogg: The thing I want to quibble about the first one is – gosh, I’m not going to be able to cite whose study it is. But I just like go grab my own damn book is my – one of the impressions that I have – and I have probably read some research on it at some point.

I owe it to you in the show notes my friends. I owe it to you in the show notes is that someone can say, “Ooh!” when they asked – when asked like how open are you to compromise, someone can say, “I am very open to compromise.” Why would they say that they’re open to compromise? Because it’s part of their self-identity, their sense of identity. But they are someone who is open to compromise, right?

And it is one thing to say it and another thing to do it and I have – what I would quibble would be depending on anyone’s – now it doesn’t mean it’s not true. But I quibble at this, depending on anyone’s self-reporting of their preferences in a poll or even in public or something like that because they’re saying it because it’s a sense of who they think they are and then the question is going to come down to like, “Hey, are they actually going to do it when the rubber hits the road?” because we go, “Oh, we’re open to compromise except with those maniacs in the other party.” That what they want us to compromise on is unacceptable. We’re no longer asking about compromise. Everything they want is against their core values.

So I often – not to – again, not to try to change the perspective or to go like, oh, everyone is just as bad as everyone. But to say when – just I think it’s a – I think it’s an important point for when we are doing this research and looking at these polls and we ask people like what they think and what they believe in. We have to know that that is tentative until we see them with skin in the game. Gosh, I forget his name. The guy who wrote the book *Skin in the Game*, he wrote *Black Swan*.

Chris Martin: Nassim Taleb?

Erik Fogg: Thank you, Taleb. I love *Skin in the Game*. I’m totally bought into it. I think that his point that you can’t really know what someone believes or you can’t really rely on someone reporting something until they have put skin in the game to test it is very valid. I don’t know if what I just said resonated with you at all.

Chris Martin: No, I think there’s evidence that making people accountable for their forecasts actually makes them more conscientious and less biased. So accountability does matter. I think the data though – I mean I completely agree that if part of your identity is saying I’m a tolerant person, yes, you will answer on surveys I’m a tolerant person.

So if that were the only data we had, I think it wouldn’t be so reliable. But then if you look at things like republicans being called RINOs, republican in name only, essentially any republican who’s open to a little bit of compromise gets called a RINO and gets purged from the party and you don’t see that happening. There’s no democrat – there’s no DINO, democrat in name only for example phenomenon. There are some people who – you know, there are internal arguments but there’s no equivalent phenomenon.

Erik Fogg: Right, right.

Xander Snyder: I guess at this point though, I kind of want to ask you about how some of that other data is collected. But I mean if – it seems like we’re quickly devolving into a conversation about how we categorize different groups of people, which is a valid argument to have, right? But if we don’t even know what a republican is before we say that republicans tend to be less willing to compromise, then what exactly is the conversation that we’re having?

Erik Fogg: So Xander, what’s the – I think I would say most people listening to this including me would say, “Oh, I know what a republican is. It’s someone who says they’re a republican.” What’s the alternate way of looking at this?

Xander Snyder: Well, I’m referring to the RINO thing, Chris. So you republican name only and these studies that you’re referring to are those – are RINOs included into the data or – because you mentioned that they get purged from the party, that they aren’t included somehow and whatever the tag is on the survey or the study that’s done to see whether or not they’re willing to compromise.

Chris Martin: OK. I see what you’re saying. So the term RINO, it’s only used for republican politicians. So they’re generally not used in surveys. What I mean is at the electoral level, republican candidates will refer to other republican candidates as RINOs. It’s not based on survey data at all or media figures who are republicans or conservative like on Fox News might refer to someone who’s republican in name only.

I mean you see this phenomenon of within the republican party of valorizing extremism, starting with Newt Gingrich and so people who – I mean you get people who follow the strategy and then get eaten by the strategy itself. Like Eric Cantor for example portrayed himself as a radical who was going to shake things up and then someone portrayed himself as more radical than Eric Cantor and Cantor lost as primary or his seat. I can’t remember if he lost in the primary or the general.

So you see that phenomenon of I’m going to be even more extreme and less compromising than you. Dating to Newt Gingrich’s strategy of just trying to say we’re not going to be accommodating and our message should be we’re going to throw the establishment out because the whole establishment is corrupt and we need new radicals to come in and you see that cycling into some of those radicals just being eaten by that strategy.

Erik Fogg: So your entire project, the heterodoxy project.

Chris Martin: Uh-huh.

Erik Fogg: Or academy, excuse me, Heterodoxy Academy.

Chris Martin: That’s Heterodox Academy.

Erik Fogg: Heterodox Academy, thank you.

Chris Martin: Yeah.

Erik Fogg: One of the things you hinted at early at – that I’m really excited about is that the [0:31:33] [Indiscernible] that have gotten together here, they see a path forward as including encouraging more heterogeneous though within a party or at least that – within the parties, within a party or something like that.

That was the hint I got from what you had mentioned earlier and I’m excited to see you or I’m excited for you to elaborate on kind of what that mission looks like because I – well, for a lot of reasons.

Chris Martin: I would say our mission is – well, we started out being more research-focused and now I would say we’re more teaching-focused. So the research focus side was – I’m not talking about party elites or politicians. Just talking at the academic level. If you have a lot of people from one ideology, you’re not really going to be aware of facts that falsify the research you’re talking about and certain things are just going to become taboo.

So even if you have research to support certain arguments, it’s just going to be taboo to even bring up that evidence. So that’s going to be – I mean the whole project of research ends up getting corrupted or not being very effective or as effective as it could be because you’re not using all the data that were out there. You’re not touching certain issues because it could be taboo and you lose the respect of your discipline.

Now we’re more teaching-focused. So now we’re more focused on – within the academy, how do you get undergraduates to be open to the fact that they might learn from people who defer from them in terms of their ideology?

I mean I think because college attracts a certain – well, most colleges attract – people have a certain degree of intellectual curiosity. I think most students actually come into college wanting to learn these things. But then there are forces within college, some political forces and in colleges it’s typically left wing forces that suggest that really there’s this war going on. There’s a political war going on and you have to be on one side of that or to defeat the other side. You often see terms like “allies” being thrown around.

Erik Fogg: Right.

Chris Martin: Which is a term you would use in the war and there might be times in post-college life when that – I mean I don’t want to make general statements about post-college life. But when you’re in college, I think it’s important to figure out how to get people, regardless of who they are, to be intellectually curious and figure out sort of the way you figure out how to have these dialectical arguments with people rather than making your whole college experience about purifying your college population and expose anyone who doesn’t have certain beliefs.

Erik Fogg: Well, I remember President Obama made a speech at – I don’t know which college or – gosh, the guy has given so many speeches. But it was certainly like related to I think some of this phenomenon that you described of purification and like using shouting or like using – sort

of making someone socially uncomfortable or socially ostracized publicly, public shaming. Other tactics like that to silence them, to silence unacceptable though and I think at this – if I remember correctly, this case is from the left.

So he gave a speech where he said look, you should be able to – essentially, you should be able to win with your argument. Like you have a better position. He's obviously a democrat so he's supporting a lot of these people and saying you have a better position. You out-argue them, right? Like show why you're right and I don't know, I found that a little bit heartwarming, that the idea is to talk about it rather than shame – you know, shame unacceptable thought into oblivion.

Based on what you guys have learned, what can ReConsider's listeners learn from that in order to one, help them be – help themselves be more intellectually curious and less purifying and two, help them help friends who are particularly dug in to be open to the same.

Chris Martin: Are most ReConsider listeners college age or are they mostly older than that?

Xander Snyder: All over.

Erik Fogg: Yeah, it's – hey, ReConsider listeners, we never told you, but you are shockingly diverse. Congratulations and thank you.

Xander Snyder: We love all of you.

Chris Martin: To put in very broad strokes, I would say keep tabs on what's happening in the worlds of moral psychology and political psychology, but also keep tabs on what's happening in the world of political science and history. So I would say moral psychology and political psychology are important because as you pointed out, there's some tribalism out there and some of that research shows to what extent – if you divide the world simplistically into just two tribes, liberals and conservatives, to what extent there's some symmetry in those biases.

Jarret Crawford's research is one good place to start for example and then political science and history research too. I think that's valuable for many reasons, but one is to figure out – well, to understand propaganda better because I think one of the things you don't get from psychology is understanding propaganda, so also understanding that there's some perspectives that are basically people being paid to spout lies but do it in a way that sounds very sincere. So you have to keep both of those things in mind at the same time.

Xander Snyder: OK. Now I have two questions for you. If I need to repeat one, let me know. The first talking about how people could go about becoming more informed about history, becoming more informed about these issues of propaganda. I know lots and lots of very intelligent people whose profession is not in this industry who nevertheless are concerned and care about the world and even for people like me who it is my profession all day long to read about world events from different perspectives to understand what's actually happening, to try to distill the facts from the way that it's being told. It can be extraordinarily difficult and I spend 10 to 12 hours a day doing it.

So my first question is how can your non-professional who wants to be as well-informed as possible, recognizing all the challenges that you just pointed out in terms of trying to distill all of these different perspectives from all the different sources that are out there go about doing that and – well, how about I just leave that and I will come back to the next question after?

Chris Martin: I mean I think that's a really, really challenging question. One of the resources that we've created that's now its own thing is Project Open Mind or the Open Mind platform and that was created for professors to use in classrooms but now it's customized, so you can use it in a religious institution, in industrial or business setting.

So just to get people to understand the importance of being open-minded, if let's say you're managing a company or even if you're curious about just understanding how you might be more biased than you think. That's a good route. But your specific question is more about once you get past that point, how do you make sure you're getting a certain degree of heterodoxy in your views?

I don't know if there's a simple answer to that. I would say if you're, let's say, somehow only getting your news from Fox News or only getting your news from one single channel, you're probably doing a poor job of it.

I think one thing that is good about the world now is that there are various podcasts. Some of them are left wing leaning, some are right. There's a really good one because – well, partly because *The Weekly Standard* is no longer in business. A lot of people who wrote for them are now doing their podcasts called The Bulwark. So it's – you subscribe to a podcast like that and then maybe subscribe to Chris Hayes' podcast, if you're in America that is purely about American political issues. That might be one good way to do it.

Ultimately there's no substitute for doing the research and I don't know how we're going to have a world where people have 12 hours in a day to do as much research as you're doing. I mean what would you suggest?

Xander Snyder: Oh, boy. Yeah. Turn it back around on me, will you?

Chris Martin: It cuts both ways.

Xander Snyder: I think you're right. I think – well, so at ReConsider, we publish two sets of documents that we kind of keep referring to. One is called "ReConsider Principles" and another is called the "ReConsider Discussion Strategies". The idea is laying out some of the common problems that you will encounter when trying to learn more about any particular topic and that involves both in interacting with other people and interacting with your own thoughts and frankly at some point, I would love to get you to read about it because you're actually an expert in this field and we're kind of – we collected a lot of this information from practical experience and our own experiences.

But for example, being skeptical of – even of sources that you particularly trust. So internal skepticism, being skeptical of the things that you tend to depend on because you will be less critical of them would be one thing and that perhaps may drive you to seek out more than just NPR or just Fox and I'm not equating these – this is not a false equivalency thing.

It's just sources of information that I know a lot of people tend to depend almost exclusively on them as sources for information. So if you really like NPR and you just come to expect them as a source that you trust inherently and perhaps finding a way to be more skeptical of them on a more regular basis so that you're asking questions about the information that they're presenting to you that may drive you to seek out 15 minutes of your one hour a day of consuming information and new source that represents that topic in a different way. So that might be one way of doing it.

Trying to find a way when you're having a conversation with someone else that is presenting information to you of seeing them as a person that's after a common goal that is a good goal, that is trying to improve the welfare of our country and understanding that even though they may be presenting a policy prescription or a podcast or TV show is presenting a prescription that really sits wrong with you, trying nevertheless to see if at all possible, if that person is coming from a place at least they think it's good. So they get to see them as a good person.

I think that that lowers the defenses a lot and when you lower your own defenses, you're more likely to be less reactive and to be actually able and willing to hear new ideas.

So those are some ideas. But I certainly think that trying to diversify your sources of information like you said Chris is a good idea and there's no reason not to be able to do it today with the wealth of podcasts and YouTube channels that are out there. We work a lot with a guy named Enrique Fonseca from VisualPolitik. He has two great channels, in Spanish and English, that 12 to 15-minute bite sizes of stories twice a week that you can get.

There's a million of channels like this now focused on geopolitics and different battles in history and there's no shortage of information. It's just hard to know where to start sometimes. So it's sort of like a dual purpose or a dual raison d'être. ReConsider is trying to be able to begin to offer – be a source of sort of jumping off where you can find some additional sources of information like that.

So we're like a repository and we're trying to do that. I don't know if we've been as effective as we could be, Erik. But we both do other things. So anyways, that's my answer.

Erik Fogg: The thing I would add to it is I think that you've got to some extent be able to use those same principles, use some smarts that you've gathered, some skepticism you've gathered and mix with some open-mindedness you've gathered over time to outsource a little bit of this learning. I think that – you know, congress people, it's their – supposedly their fulltime job to spend – they have to spend the rest of the time campaigning. But it's supposed to be their fulltime job to try to understand these issues and be able to make well-informed decisions on them.

I think the idea that if you tell someone like ah, yes, to like achieve a – a reasonable level of understanding something, you have to do all the research yourself, especially from like in a first – you know, first sources, primary sources. It's just like it's just bonkers. I mean it's just not going to happen and even I – what I do is I rely on a network of humans that I trust with whom I've established sufficient relationships, such that I'm able to get sort of the real take from them and pick stuff apart in conversations and challenge things, be rechallenged myself, that many of whom are either quasi-experts in or at least very interested in topics that I'm not.

So a good example is like I used to do a ton of research on healthcare and I've lost a lot of connection to it. But there's a couple of friends of mine who are really deep in it and I learn a lot of stuff from them that gets distilled down because I have sort of delegated and outsourced this process a little bit.

I get to pick stuff apart. I get to do some select research to challenge things or expand on things, that it means that I have a better chance of keeping up without having to spend 12 hours a day on it. The trick here is that you have to have the right mental toolset to be able to listen to someone and just know it. Like OK, where is this person coming from? What are they – what's their curation bias here? What's their – what are many of their biases here that are going to get them to present things in a certain way to me, even if they're like doing their best to be accurate with me?

You know, because I think the biggest threat is not people trying to be accurate but being a little bit off. I think the biggest threat is when you have the war fighters who are – who like want something to be true and don't really care if it's not in a lot of ways. Those are the ones – you sort of want to stay away from them as sources of information and find people who have like a true sense of curiosity.

If you can find people who are truly curious, truly interested in finding truth, willing to change their minds, those are going to be good people with whom you can form a little network of truth-seeking.

Chris Martin: I think that's a good strategy. I mean I think the challenge we all face is – one is just time and energy and if you're – someone like you has this background of being part of networks of highly-informed people. That's a different situation from a lot of people in America. So that's a challenge. I forgot to say one thing but I guess one tip I would just have is don't get your news from television. Television networks in general are entertainment-focused. You can see that change. I just interviewed Kevin Kruse about his book *Fault Lines* by him and Julian Zelizer and one change you see in America is television news becoming much more entertainment-focused from the '70s to the present. So I mean I don't like dissing people but I would just say avoid TV as your primary source of news as well.

Yeah. I mean I would love to continue this further. But I think we might need to wrap up. Maybe we could do a co-episode in another few months about a different topic.

Xander Snyder: Sure, sounds fun to me.

Erik Fogg: That sounds like a brilliant idea. What's great about this is I think I've left with a lot more – you know, we've closed the loop on absolutely nothing.

Chris Martin: Exactly.

Erik Fogg: We have just like cracked a bunch of eggs open and ...

Chris Martin: So you've succeeded at your Socratic attempt to just raise questions.

Erik Fogg: Yeah, exactly and well, thank you. What stuff I would like to follow up on includes – let's talk about the change in news media, how that happened, why that happened. That's something I've written about and would love to talk to you about. I would love to talk about sort of the challenge of truth-finding and I think we owe a little bit more on our challenges and methodology as well here at ReConsider, what's so hard about it because it's something we don't tend to – we don't talk meta much on our show, right? We don't talk about the show on the show. But I think it is valuable for people. In particular, I think the most valuable thing we can do for our listeners that we don't do enough is challenge them to be skeptical of us.

Xander Snyder: Sure. I can get behind that. I think, well, if we're laying out follow-up questions that I would like to discuss, I do want to come back to the notion – this was the second question I didn't end up asking of how to reach people who may be intellectually curious in a way that doesn't get screened for college applications or who perhaps don't have the opportunity to access college and how to engage with people who are curious or creative in ways that are maybe not seen as standard within like the college profile sort of way because clearly, all of these people are also involved in national politics and regional politics.

So next show Chris.

Chris Martin: Sounds good. I'm glad you picked a topic. That takes work off me.

Erik Fogg: Yeah, exactly. Awesome. Well, from our perspective, it has been – I mean we're having each other on each other's shows here. But this has been a ton of fun. It's great when we get to interview experts because they're like, "Ah, yes. Like based on all my research, like here's what I know is true." But this routine thing, it's a special pleasure to be able to get in it and crack some things open with someone else who thinks about thinking because it's the – god, it's hard, isn't it?

So I've really enjoyed it. I really look forward to the next one. Chris, thank you.

Chris Martin: Thanks. Take care.

[Music]

Chris Martin: You can visit ReConsiderMedia.com to learn more about the ReConsider Podcast. I've also added some links in the show notes for the political science and psychology

research that I mentioned during the episode. That includes research by Matt Grossmann and David Hopkins. I unfortunately neglected to mention David in the episode.

Our next episode will feature Deb Mashek, the Director of Heterodox Academy and Musa Al-Gharbi, our Communications Director. They will be reflecting on some of the challenges that Heterodox Academy faced in 2018 and also some of the successes. They will also be talking about what's in store for 2019. The episode after that, we will feature historian Julian Zelizer. We're going to be talking about how to teach students about polarization in America. Zelizer is the co-author with Kevin Kruse of *Fault Lines: A History of the US Since 1974*. Lastly in late February, we will have an episode with Katie Baxter and Noah Silverman of Interfaith Youth Corps, an organization that fosters interfaith cooperation on campuses and in society.

If you have any comments about today's episode, you can contact me at podcast@heterodoxacademy.org or tag me on Twitter, @chrismartin76. If you're an academic, you can also learn more about joining Heterodox Academy in HeterodoxAcademy.org. Thanks for listening.

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