THEME 02

Uncovering our hidden preferences

SOCIOCULTURAL   SOCIAL CHANGE   DIGITAL SPACES

The general view is that social change occurs when people create new preferences. However, social change also occurs through the surfacing of preexisting hidden preferences. Populist politics, #metoo and emerging tech can be understood from this perspective. Norm entrepreneurs, media publicity and digital spaces are fundamental to identifying hidden preferences that may trigger widespread social change in the future.

Our observations

- In a preliminary draft paper, Cass Sunstein argues that social change (i.e. changing behavior, values, preferences) comes from two directions. First, social norms change as people produce new preferences that did not exist before. For example, being sustainable (as we have noted before) is a newly constructed value that people now actively strive for. Second, social norms can also erode over time, allowing people to reveal what they truly believe and to act as they wish. For example, populist politics have eroded norms concerning the expression of nationalism, illuminating preexisting values of previously underrepresented communities. As such, besides newly emerging preferences, there are also preexisting hidden preferences. These preferences stay hidden because, due to social norms, people do not feel free to say or do as they wish.

- The #metoo movement changed social norms for women expressing themselves about sexual harassment, revealing preexisting anxiety that previous norms successfully repressed. Sunstein argues that women always disliked being harassed, but after several high-profile public cases of women speaking out, the barrier to expressing themselves eroded, leading to an explosive social movement that gained widespread attention.

- Populist politics play into hidden preferences. The term "political correctness" refers to silencing the expression of preferences that defy (left-leaning) social norms. Demagogues, by definition, seek support by appealing to popular preferences concealed by social norms. Many populist leaders can be understood from this perspective: they weaken the social norms that previously led people to hide their preferences (e.g. nationalism, anti-immigration, law and order). While the election of Donald Trump shook the world, it was deeply rooted in the hidden preferences of non-urban "hillbilly" communities in the U.S. In Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro could soon be elected president after he surprisingly emerged in response to Brazilians being fed up with crime and violence. In Europe, nationalist politicians (e.g. Wilders, Le Pen, AfD) have brought to the surface hidden preferences concerning nationalism, community and immigration.

- The Arab Spring signified the eruption of the hidden preferences of Arab youth in the Islamic world. While the uprising seemingly came out of nowhere, the recipe for social change had actually been brewing underneath the surface for a long time: the distrust of authoritarian regimes and declining living standards.

- The world of consumer technology is rife with social norms and perhaps even hidden preferences. Changing social norms is interlinked with the use of digital devices (e.g. esthetics, use in public, mode of interaction). Consider the initial doubts about Apple's Airpods (i.e. they look ridiculous, are prone to being dropped) compared to their current popularity. Technology that targets consumers differently could even uncover hidden preferences (i.e. targeting a different touchpoint of the human body instead of visual/text-based communication, e.g. augmented reality, motion gesture).

Connecting the dots

Social change is generally understood as people creating new types of preferences. In this general view, social norms emerge because people come to have preferences that they did not have before. Examples are different attitudes towards smoking, discrimination and food. However, social change also emerges through the surfacing of previously hidden preferences. When social norms that lead people to hide their preferences are weakened, social change seems to come from nowhere. Such change can be sudden, rapid and widespread (e.g. #metoo, populism, the Arab Spring). Since people hide these preferences, it may seem hard to identify what type of social change will emerge. However, several phenomena could actually enable us to anticipate how hidden preferences emerge.

The role of "norm entrepreneurs", as Sunstein calls them, is fundamental to revealing hidden preferences. They are those who oppose existing norms and try to change them. Examples are populist leaders like Trump and Bolsonaro, outspoken public figures around the #metoo movement, and brands like Apple. They lead by drawing attention to the stupidity, unnaturalness or ugliness of current norms (e.g. political correctness, sexual harassment, outdated tech). Consequently, they reframe the entire debate by depicting those who break the norm as courageous and authentic, and those who comply as lacking independence or even as pathetic. As such, broadly speaking, norm entrepreneurs allow hidden preferences to surface. Hence, the leaders of social movements that gain any kind of popularity reveal what type of social change may emerge tomorrow.

The spark that ignites such change involves the existence of "cascades". Sunstein argues that large groups of people often end up believing something simply because other people believe it too. Research shows that these "cascade effects" occur depending on, for example, the order in which people announce what they think and people's thresholds for abandoning their own beliefs in deference to views of others. Moreover, norm entrepreneurs offer people this information about what others think, which people care about deeply. As such, the attention paid to "emerging" social movements in media is highly relevant: efforts to change norms are far more likely to succeed when they are highly publicized. When, through increasing publicity, norms are seen to be weakening or shifting, people become more willing to give voice to their beliefs (especially when these beliefs are hostile to others). All in all, when norm entrepreneurs and their social movements are highly publicized, their likelihood of changing norms increases dramatically.

Interestingly, the rise of digital spaces requires an entirely different way of thinking about norms, preferences and social change. People naturally hide their preferences when social norms make them feel embarrassed, anxious or guilty about their values (which makes polling relatively unreliable). People are especially hesitant to express themselves when, as Sunstein argues, their reputation is at stake. However, since online activity is nearly always anonymous, the internet provides a space with much weaker, if any, social norms. As digital spaces become places where people express their hidden preferences, studying social movements online could be a fundamental method to anticipate social change. For example, the alt-right movement started to gain popularity on websites like 4chan and Reddit from around 2013, while being partly responsible for massive social change a few years later with the election of Donald Trump. Indeed, digital spaces allow hidden preferences to become much more readily identifiable than in the past. All in all, hidden preferences, through norm entrepreneurs, publicity, and digital spaces, while triggering seemingly unpredictable change, are actually dormant but identifiable phenomena.

Implications

- Youth dynamics across countries are great indicators of social change. After all, norms of previous generations are naturally in place to prevent the hidden preferences of the youth from emerging (from politics to ethics and consumption).

- Sophisticated studies of social movements online could become increasingly important in anticipating any type of social change (e.g. alt-right movement, Kekistan culture). This is also why countries such as China and Russia want to retain control over their digital infrastructure.

- When norms change, Sunstein (a legal scholar) notes that legal reform is fundamental to entrenching and fortifying those norms, which can result in large-scale change in an astoundingly short time (e.g. legal reform around electric mobility and sustainable food).