

THEME 01

A time of moral outrage

MORALIZATION

SOCIO-CULTURAL

SOCIAL MEDIA

In recent years, debates on all sorts of moral issues have surfaced in the Western hemisphere. While most of these themes (e.g. racism, gender equality, environmental protection) are more than worthy of debate, the fierceness of the debates also fuels ongoing societal polarization and leaves little room for nuance and reflection, let alone, consensus. Many put the blame on the internet, and social media in particular, but other, more structural, factors are at least as important.

Our observations

- Topics of recent moral debates included racism (e.g. Black Lives Matter and Black Pete in the Netherlands), sexual harassment (e.g. #MeToo), gender issues (e.g. the emancipation of transgenders and toxic masculinity), but also topics concerning animal rights (e.g. veganism), (un)healthy [diets](#), [body](#) shaming, [mom](#) shaming, new year's fireworks and air pollution (e.g. the Volkswagen scandal, the use of wood burning [stoves](#)).
- In 2016, we wrote about "[naming and shaming](#)" campaigns on social media against supposed wrong-doers. In some cases, these concern clearly criminal behavior (e.g. robbers), but they sometimes merely relate to something somebody (once) posted (e.g. a misplaced joke).
- In the U.S., political [polarization](#) has grown significantly over the last decades. Both sides have drifted farther apart in terms of political values and also in terms of what they view as the nation's most [pressing problems](#) (e.g. whether climate change is really an important issue). Moreover, they increasingly regard each other as a threat to the nation and, in everyday life, they experience discussions with people on the "other side" as increasingly stressful.
- Politics has a hard time dealing with these kinds of moral debates. Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte clearly avoids picking sides in debates (e.g. on Black Pete) and many of these topics are widely regarded as personal matters not to be meddled with by the state. At the same time, moral outrage over something like #MeToo can also be mobilized for political purposes, as was the case with Brett Kavanaugh's confirmation for the Supreme Court amid allegations of misbehavior.
- Whether it was born from sincere and intrinsic motivation or merely driven by commercial interests, several multinational companies have taken a stance in recent moral debates. With Black Panther, [Disney](#) engaged in the debate on racial tensions and so did [Nike](#) with its endorsement of Colin Kaepernick. Attempts to "do good" by such companies can also result in backlash: [Pepsi](#)'s Kendall Jenner commercial was widely criticized and so was [Gillette](#)'s recent statement against toxic masculinity. Interestingly, the latter was booed by both feminists who saw an obvious attempt to cash in on the latest moral debate and (white) men who felt wrongfully accused and stereotyped.



Connecting the dots

Each of the moral issues over which people are voicing their outrage is worthy of debate and subsequent action. However, the sheer number of issues and the fierceness of the debates suggest there is more at stake than the individual issues alone. One could argue that society is in a process of developing a deeper, better, sense of morality, but the very fact that we are talking more about morality does not necessarily make us more moral beings. Indeed, there are multiple reasons for this moralization, and polarization, of public debate. Among the obvious reasons are rising welfare, the decline of religious values, technological disruption and the rise of social media provide the opportunity, the tools and the need to raise these issues in public.

Over the years, people in the West, on average, have seen a rise of discretionary income and have not had to worry too much about their basic needs for shelter, food and safety anymore. As a result, in terms of the Maslow pyramid, people have been able to spend more attention on their psychological needs and self-fulfillment and are now claiming a bigger role for themselves in society (e.g. through emancipation of women, transgenders and people of color). This, necessarily, comes with moral struggles between those who demand more attention, better salaries and justice and those who (fear that they) will have to give up some of their privileged position.

Secularization means that we are no longer handed a set of fixed values and norms by which to abide. That is, the church used to tell people what to think and how to behave and there was less need for individuals to define and debate their own norms. At the same time, the recent [Nashville](#) declaration (in the U.S., followed by the Netherlands) is a sign that increasingly marginalized Christians also feel the need to emphasize and defend their moral values, hence join the (inter)national debates.

Clearly, (digital) technology and social media play a role in the ways these debates take place, who takes part and who gets heard. On the one hand, this means that hitherto unheard voices are amplified and can truly make a difference (e.g. all of the individual victims of sexual harassment). At the same time, these tools also make it easier to spy on each other and, for instance in the case of body shaming,

voice our disapproval of someone's lifestyle.

While these factors certainly play a role, the expansion of our lifeworld (both in space and time) is more fundamentally changing the nature of morality. Globalization, the fact that people, goods and information travel across the globe ever faster and against lower costs, also means that the consequences of our actions stretch well beyond our immediate observations. That is, in the past, whatever we did had direct consequences for our immediate surroundings (e.g. our family members, neighbors, villages and nearby plants and animals). While this is still the case, our actions today also affect those living across the globe and for generations to come. Those effects we cannot observe for ourselves, however, and we have to rely on others (e.g. scientists or news reports) to get a sense of these consequences and adjust our behavior accordingly. This is true for a long term and global problem such as climate change, but also for our consumption of goods produced across the globe and what we do and say online (e.g. sharing videos). At the same time, the expansion of our lifeworld also means that we are increasingly confronted with values held by others (i.e. other cultures) and these force us to reconsider our own values (and privileges). Both factors, the indirect observation of the consequences of our actions and the confrontation with different world views, make it harder for us to calibrate our moral compass and it is thus no surprise that this process comes with heated debate. Moreover, as a consequence of this abstraction of morality, morality is becoming something of the mind, and less of the heart, and this can easily lead to moral segregation between self-proclaimed moral elites and those who either don't perceive the same problems or who prioritize other problems. To illustrate, the debate over the costs of climate mitigation relates to both a difference in the perception of the problem (i.e. whether or not mankind is responsible for global warming) and a difference in priorities (i.e. fixing a long term global problem vs immediate local and personal needs). In other words, while moral conflicts are nothing new per se, it will be increasingly difficult to reconcile people's diverging values and norms as they, often literally, have a different view of the world.

Implications

- New moral issues may emerge in the coming years and they are likely to be debated as fiercely as today's issues. Any interest group that seeks to introduce their concerns to the general public will have to "scream" as loudly as others in order to be heard in the first place.
- We will increasingly gain insight into (long term) effects of certain kinds of behavior and this will further deepen the divide between those who see that bigger picture and those who don't. Digital technology will continue to expose "wrongdoers" and may be used increasingly to try and nudge our behavior.
- Whether or not the current societal, and hence political, polarization is a phase or a "new normal" remains an open question. The drivers we have identified above are structural, but the general public could also grow tired of these debates and, from a political perspective, support politicians who are much more centric and willing to reach consensus.