Is it too late to stop extremism taking over politics?
By Julia Ebner, *The Guardian*, July 31, 2023

Welcome to the 2020s, the beginning of what history books might one day describe as the digital middle ages. […]Significant portions of the population in liberal democracies consider it possible that global elites drink the blood of children in order to stay young. […]Up to a third of Britons believe that powerful figures in Hollywood, government and the media are secretly engaged in child trafficking. Is
5 humanity on the return journey from enlightenment to the dark ages?

As segments of the public have headed towards extremes, so has our politics. In the US, dozens of congressional candidates, including the successfully elected Lauren Boebert, have been supportive of QAnon. […]The recent rise to power of far-right parties such as Fratelli d'Italia and the populist Sweden Democrats bolster this trend.

10 I am often asked why the UK doesn't have a successful far-right populist party. My answer is: because it doesn't need to. Parts of the Conservative party now cater to audiences that would have voted for the BNP or Ukip in the past. A few years ago, the far-right Britain First claimed that 5,000 of its members had joined the Tory party. Not unlike the Republicans in the US, the Tories have increasingly departed from moderate conservative thinking and lean more and more towards radicalism.

15 […]Language is a key indicator of radicalisation. The words of Conservative politicians speak for themselves: home secretary Suella Braverman referred to migrants arriving in the UK as an "invasion on our southern coast"[…]. Using far-right dog whistles such as "invasion" invites listeners to open a Pandora's box of conspiracy myths. Research shows that believing in one makes you more susceptible to others.

20 […]Are we now at a point where it is it too late to stop democracies being taken over by far-right ideologies and conspiracy thinking? If so, do we simply have to accept the "new normal"?

There are various ways we can try to prevent and reverse the spread of extremist narratives. For some people who have turned to extremism over the past few years, too little has changed: anger over political inaction on economic inequality is now further fuelled by the exacerbating cost of living crisis. For
25 others, too much has changed: they see themselves as rebels against a takeover by "woke" or "globalist" policies.

What they have in common is a sense that the political class no longer takes their wellbeing seriously, and moves to improve social conditions and reduce inequality would go some way towards reducing such grievances. But beyond that, their fears and frustrations have clearly been instrumentalised by
30 extremists, as well as by opportunistic politicians and profit-oriented social media firms. This means that it is essential to expose extremist manipulation tactics, call out politicians when they normalise conspiracy thinking and regulate algorithm design by the big technology companies that still amplify harmful content.

If the private sector is part of the problem, it can also be part of the solution. Surveys by the Edelman
35 Trust Barometer found that people in liberal democracies have largely lost trust in governments, media and even NGOs but, surprisingly, still trust their employers and workplaces. Companies can play an important role in the fight for democratic values.[...]

National school curricula should include a new subject at the intersection of psychology and internet studies to help digital natives understand the forces that their parents have struggled to grasp: the
40 psychological processes that drive digital group dynamics, online engagement and the rise of conspiracy thinking. Ultimately, the next generation will vote conspiracy theorists in or out of power. Only they can reverse our journey towards the digital middle ages.