# Twitter Thread by hannah anderson



**hannah anderson**
@sometimesalight

## Popping back on briefly to share some insights on media consumption, spread of conspiracy theories, & epistemelogical divides.

.@n_d_anderson & I have spent the last few days having important conversations w/ family members who fall in the evangelical right matrix.

We didn't talk presenting issues & aimed our Qs instead for the underlying divides. @DavidAFrench identified this in a recent article as the difference btwn the danger of believing activating lies & enabling lies.

A couple things became apparent very quickly:

1) We had to be the ones to insist on conversation. People are afraid of conversation right now b/c they think it will turn into a fight & they don't want that w/ people they love. Meanwhile, the epistemological divides widen.

2) We had to clarify the underlying disconnects--and they aren't simply at a policy or issue level. Unfortunately, people have been trained to see positions or votes as representative of certain things that don't necessarily represent. But this leads to biggest takeaway...

3) The biggest assumption we unearthed was consistently about media consumption & influence. Folks assumed we reached our conclusions b/c we were unduly influenced by liberal news sources. But wait, there's more... & this is really important...

It became clear to me that the difference btwn us was not the source of our news but HOW we were using the internet & social media.

Did we use the internet to gain access prepackaged information or did we use the internet to gain access to direct sources? Did we "watch" social media or did we "read" social media?

Here's how it happened:

I ask this Q: "What do you think I think & why do you think I think that?"

Answer: "You're doing your best, but you're influenced by liberal news media that doesn't report the facts fairly."

In their mind, there are 2 choices: prepacked info that skews right & prepackaged info that skews left.

They didn't have category for ability to bypass reporters & news outlets all together. They didn't understand I can factcheck by simply going to source's socials.

(And let it need to be stated explicitly, conspiracy theories are the essence of prepackaged information. They are connecting the dots btwn disparate bits of info & delivering it to consumer. The power of the conspiracy theory is not the data; it's the connections they draw.)

Despite the claims, the digital age has actually weakened the possibility of journalistic bias. It has created GREATER accountability for those reporting the news to us b/c if we want, we can access public figures more directly.

OTOH, the digital age has created unique pitfalls for those accustomed to "watching" the news (vs. engaging w/ it). The digital age puts more weight on individual to "interpret" & sort thru news.

And for a lot of folks, that's simply too much. There is simply too much information. They are legitimately overwhelmed & don't have the skills, time, or capacity to make sense of it. SO they outsource it. They outsource the process of critical thinking.

But the news sources they choose are doing more than providing facts. They are providing cohesion; they are providing a narrative.

That's why they think I'm unduly influenced by liberal bias. B/c they have outsourced process of drawing conclusions, they believe I have as well.

I'm not saying this excuses lack of curiousity, fact-checking, or intellectual honesty. I'm saying it was helpful to understand how we can both have access to similar sources & come to different conclusions. We're using digital age differently & to different purposes.

I know a lot of you are trying to understand the massive gaps in info right now. To do this, you're going to have to get to the roots. You're going to have to unearth deeply held assumptions. You're going to have to ask direct, probing questions.

For me, these 3 Qs have been productive:

1) What do you think I think?
2) Why do you think I think that?
3) How do you square that w/ everything else you know about me?

And (I can't reiterate this enough), you are going to have to be the one to gently insist on these conversations. Yes, folks should be intellectually curious & care about you. Yes, they should have mental flexibility to entertain alternative viewpoints instead of condemning.

But this whole crisis has been brought about by the FAILURE to do these things. This whole crisis has been brought about by dividing & conquering & condeming those who diverge in their thinking. That's not suddenly going to change.

Political radicalization, by definition, will not seek out these conversations & will instead, enable & reward the kind of vitriole & aggressive rhetoric that has brought us to this point.

And to be clear, I am not talking about "understanding" people or having empathy for their positions. I am not suggesting that we bridge divides by minimizing the differences btwn us. On the contrary, we must pursue conversations that unearth & bring real differences to light.