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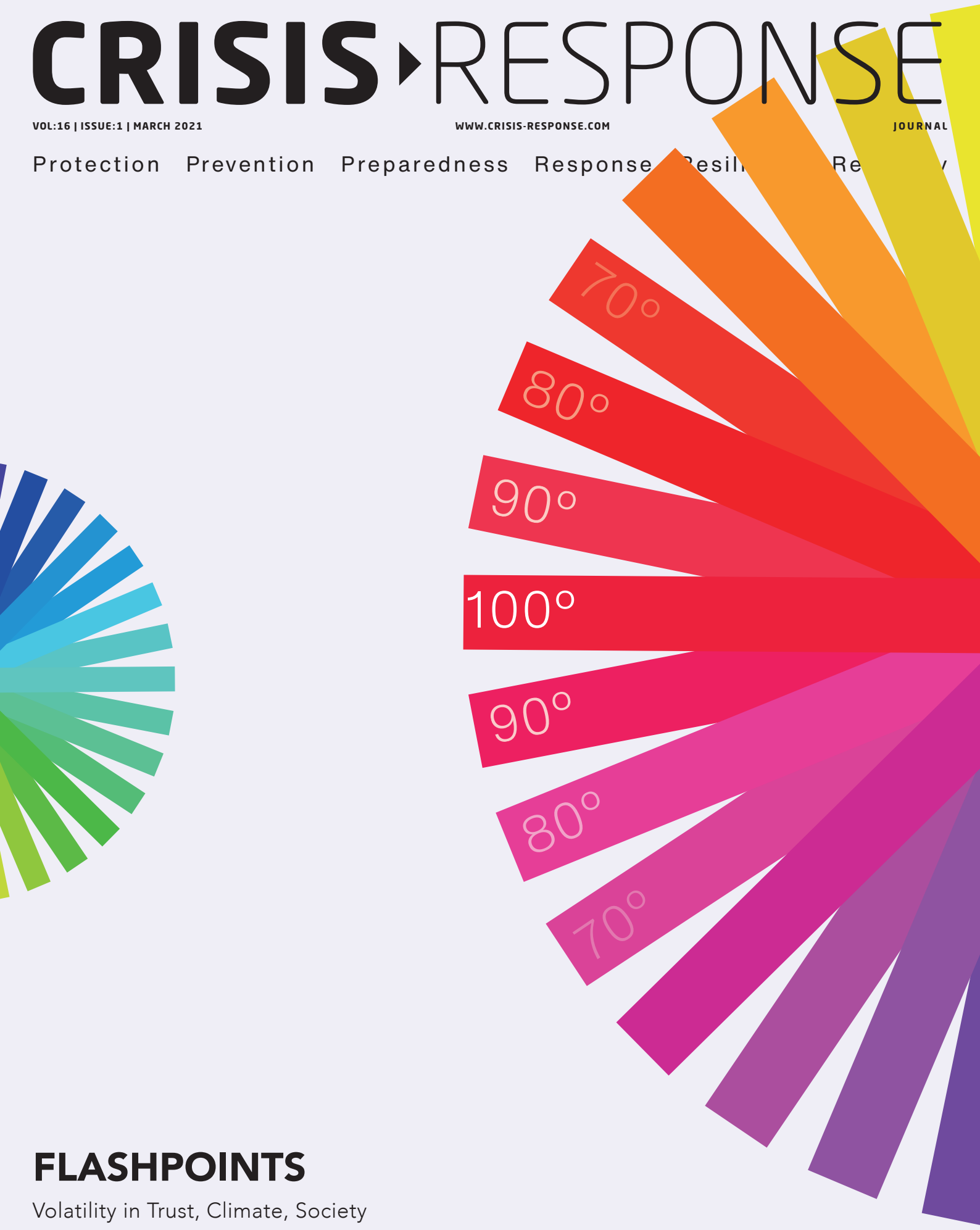

FLASHPOINTS

Volatility in Trust, Climate, Society

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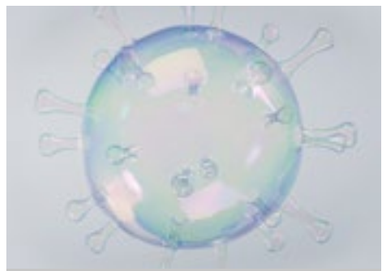

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Cover story: Rising temperatures
Cover image: Gracie Broom

comment

This edition's cover is a representation of the increasing volatility and temperature of opinions, discourse and beliefs. An 'addiction to outrage' is heating up (p76) and red hot rhetoric is dwarfing calmer, pragmatic and measured reasoning, like a rampant infection burning through communities and the world.

Our feature on society and polarisation unpicks this phenomenon, because to treat the symptoms, we must first understand the causes, recognising how a complex online ecosystem inflames predispositions to the point where they boil over into real world consequences.

But the cover is also a more literal depiction of climbing temperatures and a far less stable world environment. *CRJ* has covered climate issues for many years, homing in on how they affect frontline responders, societies and individuals. More than climate and rising temperatures – the tipping points to calamity are manifold and include biodiversity and ecosystems. Humanity's complex interaction with nature means we treat the world's resources as if they are an infinite commodity, squandering and polluting without considering the repercussions (p54 and p58).

The Covid-19 pandemic is far from over, but the small glimmers of hope have become more concrete. As Mami Mizutori of the UNDRR says on p50, we must seize the opportunity of crisis and: "Use it to understand better what is going on around us. We mustn't see a disaster or crisis purely as a threat... If we prevent better, the recovery process can be a wonderful opportunity, or it can be a catastrophe." Governments, the public, private and third sectors can apply valuable lessons and build back better. Part of this lies in succession planning, diversity, proactive leadership resilience and continuous improvement, as covered by our feature (from p14 onwards).

Because as we keep our feet firmly planted in the present, while remembering and drawing upon what has been learnt from the past, we have to keep both eyes firmly fixed on the horizon to anticipate the future, and make sure that in solving current problems, we do not unintentionally create new risks, or exacerbate latent threats.

Overcoming toxic polarisation

Peter T Coleman is a social-organisational psychologist and researcher in conflict resolution and sustainable peace, best known for his work on intractable conflicts and applying complexity science to conflict and division. **Emily Hough** discusses some of the themes raised in his forthcoming book with him

Peter T Coleman writes in a blog: "The USA, and much of the globe, is seeing unprecedented levels of political, moral and cultural polarisation, leading to spikes in violence, hate crime among citizens, government dysfunction and an incapacity to respond effectively to national threats such as pandemics, climate change and economic meltdowns."

I ask him to expand upon what he considers to be the underlying reasons, based on research for his book, *The way out: How to overcome toxic polarisation*. Coleman replies: "In the US, the current spike in polarisation is part of a 50-something year trajectory," adding that a deeper, more embedded set of problems are driving today's issues and that what we are seeing is not a temporary spike in polarisation, but a long-term trend. "And the sources of this are different to those we usually think about," he notes.

To understand, we must look to science – from biological differences between conservatives and progressives in brain sensitivity to threat – to how moral value differences affect political leanings.

"Add to this the epidemic of loneliness we are in the midst of, alienation from others, the deconstruction of the value of churches or religion, dissipation of family structures and people moving away," he explains, "and we develop a desperate need to have a sense of belonging somewhere. People can find this in the current tribalism of the political sphere."

> The dance between tradition and progress is healthy. It is when they become split off, extreme, vilified and toxic that they start to destroy themselves and become chronic

Coleman's position is that if you look at these and many other factors through the lens of science, they will all have an effect to some degree: "But what is most important is how they affect each other to create syndromes, to create patterns, which are complex and, in some ways, compensatory. We study how these many factors interact and align as complex systems, where you have a variety of different elements at different levels, from brain structures, to social and institution and cultural structures, and under some conditions these start to reinforce one another in such a way that they become very difficult to change. Changes in leadership strategies and policies don't seem to have an impact, as there are so many other factors that are pulling us apart," he says.

However, for over 400 years, our primary way of problem solving has been to try to find the essence of a problem, focusing in on brain structures, social differences, moral value and normative differences, or the effect of the media: "They find one thing that is a powerful explanatory factor or predictor and organise their story around that," says Coleman. But the truth is that life is more complicated, and so are the dynamics of this type of more chronic polarisation. Take, for example, how the major wildfires on the West Coast of the USA were recently weaponised. "Studies of disaster diplomacy show us that sometimes crises bring us together, unite us even if temporarily, but in this case, in places like Los Angeles and San Francisco that were covered in smoke for weeks, political actors in the media started to blame Antifa for the fires. This is how crises are weaponised, and it has become part of a chronic pattern; every time we experience a crisis that could potentially unite the country, it is used as fodder to divide us," Coleman expounds. These constellations of factors start to get in the way of goals that typically unite us: "And Covid-19 is another example of this," he notes.

For the past 20 years Coleman has been working with a multidisciplinary team that studies intractable long-term conflicts, and another that systemically studies peaceful societies. "In both these societies, communities and people are stuck in highly stable systems," he explains. "I'm trained as a social psychologist, but I work with anthropologists, political scientists and mathematical modellers. We think of both of these kinds of societies as complex systems."

Complexity science is applied in sophisticated ways in physics, ecological systems, biology and chemistry, then many of these insights can be brought into human social dynamics and into peace and conflict. "I have been working with those systems and trying to translate insights from the research into thinking about problem solving in a different way," he says. Coleman draws upon Karl Popper's *Of Clouds and Clocks*. "A clock problem is mechanistic, applying thinking from Newtonian mechanics. Newton's theory was so predictive and so powerful that we thought we could work everything out with equations and algorithms, like taking a clock apart."

Cloud problems, on the other hand, are made of different elements, like a gaseous cloud where things move and interact in different ways. They do not respond to clock fixes. "Popper said we thought most of the problems in the world are clock problems and we just don't know enough about them yet, but came to see that more complex problems are actually all cloud problems and we need different lenses and methods for them," Coleman explains.

The weaponisation of crises has become part of a chronic pattern; when we experience a crisis that could potentially unite us, it is used as fodder to divide us

John Holcroft | Ikon Images

When problems are more complex than just about how people talk to each other, differences in values or misunderstandings, direct intervention is unlikely to solve the issue. You cannot work in direct ways when dealing with complex problems, even if you have the best intentions. If there is no understanding of how these problems work, there are often unforeseen consequences.

Coleman raises the 'My country talks' initiative, premised upon the contact theory of getting people in a community together to discuss their differences over a drink. "This can have a great effect. But under some conditions, it can backfire; you have to understand those conditions," he notes, citing political differences in the USA. "Take those who support Donald Trump and those who are against him. Both have deeply rooted, highly emotional, volatile sets of attitudes and feelings. This is more than about how we talk to one another and how we discuss the issues – it is about loyalty, legacy, the media, what's truth and what's not truth," he says. "Under those conditions, having a coffee together could easily backfire and lead to explosions. Well-intentioned people trying to bring people together sometimes cause more harm than good. You could be setting people up for a toxic encounter."

He continues: "There are groups with experience in facilitating these kinds of conversations where people

can actually hear each other and discover things about themselves. Then attitudes can start to shift. These groups often recognise that when problems are deep – like abortion – you can't have a quick conversation, they are too important, they need to be facilitated, and this takes time," he says. Bridge-building organisations can move beyond conversations once understanding has been established between different points of view in a community. He terms this powerful mobiliser of real change 'positive deviance', citing the example of a local community group in Richmond, Virginia. "This was the epicentre of the slave trade, where institutionalised racism was born in the US and there is long legacy around that," Coleman explains. "One group sprung up to take on racial dialogues and bring different points of view together. Its influence spread into other places, a good example of positive deviance, where solutions emerge from within systems, not from outside them. They can navigate tensions within a system and, if they attract sufficient resources, they can grow in impact.

"This is a very different model, what I call 'community immunisation', because these are the local actors who know local conditions, understand local power dynamics and are generally more trusted – church-based, youth groups, women's groups – all tend to be less threatening, and it is here you can find actors effectively addressing divisions."

He continues: "Whether in conflict work, humanitarian work or child protection, in the context of this type of cloud problem, we find an ecosystem of local actors, often working on a shoestring budget. But it is important to understand their needs, and not to assume it is just about money. They need to be provided with the necessary support without derailing them."

Unexpected brokers

In a landscape of distrust, such as conflict areas in Kashmir and the Middle East, even under very difficult conditions with active violence, war and acute levels of distrust, unexpected groups often help to broker information across the divide. One such example hails from Mozambique during its civil war, where fishermen were allowed to cross enemy lines to sell their goods. "Everybody wants to eat. This group was low power, so the fishermen were trusted. But they were also sources of information and provided connectivity between the sides. Groups such as this are existing 'immune systems', even if they are not necessarily intentionally working the problem you are focused on."

I ask about how issues can fester online before they spill over into the real world. He replies: "This is fascinating because the social media landscape is so young. We know that only around 23 per cent of the population get their news on social media, but they tend to be the more provocative voices. And part of that is the business model of these platforms."

Two years ago, Coleman was invited to a pop-up meeting about polarisation on the Internet. "It was fascinating group; there were only about a dozen of us. The first thing the facilitator did was write a question on a whiteboard: 'What kind of dialogue should we be having in order to promote a healthy virtual society?' When I asked what was meant by dialogue, I was met with silence." He explains: "In my experience, most people

who use that term mean debate – you have an attitude on something, I challenge you and then we get into a game or argument. It's a default argument position, winning the argument and weaponising others' flaws and assumptions.

"Dialogue is the opposite, in my world it's about a space for discovery and learning about yourself, about the confusion and ambiguity you have on an issue, the complexity of the issue, the other's experience and the sources of those." The consensus was that there is no place on the Internet where you can do that – the major platforms are about social comparison, competition and confrontation. "And that's the currency – the more provocative, challenging or humiliating you are to the other side, the more viral you go and the more likes you get."

It would seem there's no room for nuance; it is increasingly difficult to hold the impartial, pragmatic middle line. "That's true, especially in television and journalism," Coleman agrees. Many major news outlets are following similar dynamic: "And that is an addiction to outrage. A paper published in *Science* at the end of last year, looked at how our addiction to outrage is similar to an addiction to heroin; the same parts of our brains are triggered.

"In itself, polarisation is not the problem," he says. "In a two-party system it is necessary, you need tension between stability and tradition. The dance between tradition and progress is healthy and all human groups deal with it. It is when they become split off, extreme, vilified and toxic that they start to destroy themselves and become chronic. With these more wicked problems, just focusing on the conflict is treating the symptom, you need to focus on the context. And that is systemic wisdom. Like epidemiology, you can't treat a disease out of existence, you have to understand the underlying sources in order to address it," he says. CRJ

■ The way out: How to overcome toxic polarisation *by Peter T Coleman, is published by Columbia University Press; thewayoutofpolarization.com*

Peter T Coleman: "Our addiction to outrage is similar to an addiction to heroin: the same parts of our brains are triggered"

Jonathon Heisler

Author

EMILY HOUGH *is Editor in Chief of the* Crisis Response Journal

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