Rationally Speaking #198: Timur Kuran on "Private Truths and Public Lies"

Julia Galef: Welcome to Rationally Speaking, the podcast where we explore the
                        borderlands between reason and nonsense. I'm your host, Julia Galef, and
                        with me is today's guest, Professor Timur Kuran.

                        Timur is a professor of economics, political science and Islamic studies at
                        Duke University. He's the author of several books including *Private Truths,
                        Public Lies: The Social Consequences of Preference Falsification*.

                        This book came out almost exactly 20 years ago now. But I picked it up
                        recently because the concept of preference falsification has kept popping up
                        in articles about recent current events and trends, as a particularly useful
                        lens through to which to analyze those trends. I really enjoyed the book and
                        found it very useful, and that's what we're going to talk about today.

                        Timur, welcome to Rationally Speaking.

Timur Kuran: Thanks for the invitation.

Julia Galef: First, just a basic overview, how do you define preference falsification?

Timur Kuran: Preference falsification is the act of misrepresenting one's desires because of
                        perceived social pressures. It aims specifically at manipulating the
                        perceptions of others about one's motivations.

Julia Galef: What would an example be?

Timur Kuran: Let me give you a couple of examples that will illustrate two extremes.
                        Suppose I'm with a group of friends and several of them indicated their
                        interest in going to see a particular movie. But I'm not interested in going to
                        the movie. Perhaps I want stay home and read a book, or I'm interested in
                        going to a ball game, or I'm interested in watching another movie -- but I
                        think I will, if I admit that or if I communicate that, I will disappoint them, I'll
                        hurt their feelings, I'll be ridiculed. So I say, "Oh, I'd love to come along." That
                        is one example of preference falsification. I've indicated that I'll do
                        something that I really would rather not do.

                        Let me give you a rather different example. Suppose I'm in the dictatorship
                        and the dictator announces that there's got to be a huge celebration of his
                        achievements and everybody is going to gather in the town square. I would
                        rather not go to it. I think the dictator is doing a terrible job. My family's
                        been hurt by the repression -- but I go there and I clap as he's speaking. I
                        cheer the regime's achievements to communicate that I'm a loyalist. I
                        conform to what others are doing. That's another example of preference
                        falsification.

Julia Galef: In some sense, this concept of preference falsification is one everyone's
                        familiar with. We've all been in that situation of not wanting to object to the

plan that our group has made, et cetera. But where your book really contributes a lot of value, I think, is in pointing out some of the consequences of that common phenomenon. What are one or two of the most common or the most consequential outcomes produced by this phenomenon?

Timur Kuran: The most consequential outcome is that inefficiencies persist, and patterns that many people object to, patterns that make many people uncomfortable, persist. They persist indefinitely, because people think that if they object, if they make a fuss, if they try to organize an opposition, nobody will follow them. It's not necessarily the case that you'd have to think that you are actually in the minority in terms of what people really feel. You could fail to raise an objection even if you're quite certain that 90% of the people feel exactly like you.

Julia Galef: Why? Why would you hesitate to object in that situation?

Timur Kuran: You might object because you've seen that people who have indicated that even that they have doubts have been crushed, have been punished, have been ridiculed. And you think that other people also understand that, and so they will not step out to defend you even if they secretly admire what you're doing, unless they sense that a critical mass has formed.

You yourself might be willing to object and take some risks if 20% of a particular group of a particular community has expressed opposition, or is campaigning against the status quo, against some inefficiency -- but you will not if other people have not gone first. You won't take the first step. And others are doing exactly the same calculation, and so they're refraining from moving.

The negative consequence is that a policy or regime that many people dislike, that perhaps the majority intensely dislike, survives out of fear.

Julia Galef: Tell me if I'm understanding this correctly. It sounds like there are two main components to the consequences of preference falsification.:

One is that people may underestimate how many others agree with them, because no one else is speaking up.

The other is a coordination problem, where even if everyone has an accurate understanding of the general views of the rest of the public, they may not speak up, because they can't count on the fact that other people will also speak up and give them cover. Is that right?

Timur Kuran: Absolutely. And these are not mutually exclusive. They may be present in different situations and of course, at different levels. Sometimes it's the case that you falsify your preference because you really don't know that a lot of people think exactly like you. You might agree to go to a movie when, in fact, if you would've said, "This is really not a good movie. I've looked at Rotten

	Tomatoes and it's a low rating, and I've heard about it." It might be the case that if you had just said that, several other people would've said, "Let's just reconsider this. There are other things showing."
Julia Galef:	Or even, "Thank you. I'm so glad someone said that."
Timur Kuran:	There are other situations you can imagine where you actually know that a lot of people have suffered from a situation. You know because of private information, because you've interacted with them privately, you know that they dislike something.
	You can be in an organization, in a department meeting and know that there are several of your colleagues who object to, let us say, the chairperson -- something that the chairperson is doing. But that they are afraid to offend the chairperson. You will then falsify your preference, knowing that others are doing exactly the same.
Julia Galef:	In your book, you have some ways to model how these factors interact with each other. What are some of the main determinants of whether someone will end up speaking out, in light of these factors? Or main determinants of whether opinion will end up shifting on an issue?
Timur Kuran:	One factor, of course, is the information that is available to people. That now we may change the preference we express because we just received new information. We thought that a particular government was doing quite well -- and then the stock market crashed, and an appointment went up, and we thought about what they were doing again… That's one thing. Our preferences may change. What I call our private preferences may change because we learn things that we didn't know before. That's one thing.
	Another factor that influences what preference we're going to express publicly is our sense of how popular alternative positions are. If I learned that now it is quite acceptable to object to the preying on young women at Hollywood, I will express that, now I know that this is happening, and I know that it's acceptable to condemn that predatory behavior. I will express a preference that I might not have two years ago.
	A third factor is that the very act of preference falsification creates discomfort, and this can vary from individual to individual.
Julia Galef:	Like, how much discomfort a given individual feels from falsifying their preferences will vary depending on the individual?
Timur Kuran:	Exactly. That will depend on the individual, and for any given individual that will vary from context to context. It's not the discomfort I feel from going along with a group, and not the movie that I would rather have gone to. That's not going to have a long-term impact on my happiness. A little bit of discomfort, but once I get there, I'll just go with the flow and I might even enjoy most of it.

On the other hand, there are other types of preference falsification that may lead to enormous guilt, and in the long run, also shame. If a crime is being committed, if people are being treated terribly -- as in the case of Hollywood in the case of Harvey Weinstein -- and I have not said anything, I have watched people's careers be destroyed because they tried to resist, and I haven't said anything... I will feel guilty because of that. That's another effect. Again, how much guilt one feels will vary from one individual to another.

Julia Galef: The way I'm understanding the model is that we end up finally sometimes getting out of the inefficient, suboptimal equilibrium, in which there's some policy that gets publicly supported even though most people don't actually privately support it. We get out of that, because there is some small subset of the population who experience enough discomfort falsifying their preferences, or maybe who just don't care enough about maintaining their reputation, compared to other people, that they end up speaking out. And that triggers a cascade where then other people become more comfortable.

Timur Kuran: Exactly. It's a combination of those things. And may also be, in addition to what you mentioned, it may also be that the people in the vanguard may also just know more than others. It's usually a combination of these.

Usually in contexts where there's a great deal of repression, typically knowing that the equilibrium is inefficient is not enough to motivate that vanguard to come and trigger the change. In addition, they have to have a have a sense that they've reached the limit of their tolerance.

You think of the Arab spring, where there was a sudden explosion of opposition to Mubarak. Or think of the demonstrations in Tunisia and Cairo. Many of the people who went to the squares to demonstrate against their dictators were afraid to call for justice and new policies, they did not have a history of political activism. They were people who were just simply fed up with the regime.

Once they got the demonstrations going, other people who were not fed up to that degree joined in. Then there were some people who joined because all along they wanted to join a demonstration like this, but they just didn't have enough courage. Then there are other people who also learned something from the demonstration. The very fact that all these people went out to demonstrate made them think again about the policies of the regime and made them look at it in different light.

Julia Galef: What we've been talking about is a kind of uplifting side effect of preference falsification. But there is an interesting inverse of that, that you talked about briefly in your book -- a way of using your model to explain why new regimes, after some revolution or upheaval, can be so oppressive.

In which, correct me if I get this wrong, but: after there's been this tidal shift and suddenly it's become known consensus that people don't like the

regime, and there's going to be a shift... Then suddenly even the minority of people who did like the regime are going to start pretending that they didn't like it at all along. They're going to falsify their preference to side publicly with the rebels and the new regime.

But the leaders of the rebels know that fact. And so once they acquire power, they have a reason to believe that some of the people who are pretending to be loyal to them are just pretending. They're going to have a strong interest in drawing those people out, or limiting their ability to undermine the new regime.

Timur Kuran: You've put it very well, better than I could've done.

Julia Galef: I doubt that, but go on.

Timur Kuran: When one of these huge shifts that takes place in the course of a revolution and the course of an uprising, fear changes sides.

The people who had stood on the sidelines all along and had hoped that the demonstrations would not succeed, who had hoped that the status quo would persist, a point comes when they realize that a new world has been born, and that the sources of fear are different. Power has shifted. And they have to now, in self-defense, start falsifying their preferences in a different way.

To go back to an example from recent times, there must be people in Hollywood who were quite comfortable with the environment that existed, who perhaps had behaved like Weinstein and who were hoping that the public opinion would not shift. That Weinstein would prevail.

But at the moment, given that public opinion has shifted, they will not defend Weinstein. They will, in fact, argue that all along they've been quite disturbed by the predatory behavior of some people and by the tolerance shown to them, and that the only reason they had not said anything or they had not acted is because they were afraid of retaliation from people like Weinstein.

That's a good example from recent times, of fear changing sides.

Julia Galef: There's one piece of your model that I wanted to poke at. We touched on this a little bit already in terms of people having varying preferences about how much they care about upholding their reputation by conforming to consensus, versus how much they care about being true to their own private preferences and not falsifying them. And that variation in those factors is why things can end up changing eventually.

I was comparing that model to what I see in the world around me. And it seems to me that what's going on is less about variation in people caring about their reputation, or how much they are able to express themselves --

and more about people having different communities that their reputation is defined in. A dissenting opinion can be find its way into the public sphere not because someone is willing to take the bullet and go out there and be the first one to say it, but because the person who ends up saying it cares about their reputation in a smaller community of people who are contrarians. His reputation is bolstered by saying this thing that's taboo in other communities.

Does that make sense? Does that contradict your model?

Timur Kuran: No, that makes a tremendous amount of sense, and it makes even more sense today given the modern information technologies that we have than it would have 30 or 40 years ago when we all watched the same television programs and heard the same news from major newspapers.

Now, our sources of information are quite fragmented. Our communities are fragmented. We self-select into certain communities and, for that reason, the reputational considerations that drive the preferences we express differ.

Now problems arise when people who have self-selected into different communities online, different communities and social media, have to somehow interact with each other. We live in a country with a single government. To protect the United States, we haven't divided the country into a blue country and a red country. We do interact sometimes. We live physically in the same neighborhoods, and frictions arise when people who have self-selected into different communities with different social norms, different political sensitivities, they interact with one another and inevitably, the preferences that they expect express come in conflict.

It's exactly for that reason that, in polls now, we find that a majority of Americans would prefer not to live in a neighborhood where their neighbors belong to the opposite party.

This has, of course, been communicated a great deal. But *why* that is the case has not received much attention. The reason, I believe, is that talking to somebody from the opposite party, given that the parties have polarized, leads to greater discomfort than it did in the past. It requires greater preference falsification if you're going to get along. And if you insist on telling the truth, you're going to hurt a lot of feelings.

Julia Galef: Right, and be unpopular too.

Timur Kuran: And be unpopular at the same time. You can avoid that by going to communities where the majority of the people, maybe all of the people, think like you politically.

Julia Galef: Yes. That's actually an interestingly different spin on this phenomenon. Because usually when people bemoan the fact that Americans are segregating politically more and more now, they frame it in terms of people

not wanting to hear opinions that are different from theirs. But there is this flipside, which is people not wanting to make others uncomfortable by speaking their mind.

Which you maybe you could say, well, people "shouldn't" be uncomfortable when we speak our mind -- but in fact, they are. And so, you know, not wanting to make others uncomfortable is kind of an understandable, and not entirely selfish, motivation.

Timur Kuran: Absolutely. From a policy standpoint, we might ask whether we should be anticipating all of this discomfort, whether we should be doing things to reduce that, whether we should deliberately diversify the opinions that people get exposed to during their college education.

Julia Galef: I have a multiple-choice question for you. Assuming we could just completely eliminate preference falsification. In all of society people just communicate their true and private preferences. How would that affect society? Your choices are:

A, it would probably make society strictly better off -- that there would be upsides and no downsides.

B, it would make society better off on net. So maybe there would be downsides, but they would probably be outweighed by the upsides.

C, the effect would be very unclear and hard to predict, or

D, it would probably make society worse off on net.

… I guess there could be an E, It would be strictly worse. But that sounds unlikely since we've been talking about ways that preference falsification harms society. Those are the only options.

Timur Kuran: I would say probably this is an empirical question.

Julia Galef: For sure, yes.

Timur Kuran: I would say probably B or C. There would be certainly disadvantages to living in a society where you always know exactly what other people are thinking. If you walk into a room and you've just gotten your dress or a new suit. You suddenly see on everybody's foreheads a sign that they don't like your taste, I don't think it would be a better world. We would find we're disappointed more often than we need to be. Some preference falsification serves a good purpose, just like white lies sometimes serve a good purpose.

Julia Galef: What if we limit the domain just to preference falsification about public policy, as opposed to opinions about individuals?

Timur Kuran:	There, I think, that on balance we would benefit, if people were forced to reveal their private preferences, and we conducted negotiations over what policies we're going to select on the basis of what people actually want, as opposed to what they are willing to say that they want. There would still be trade-offs. For any given policy, like the tax policy that's being negotiated in Washington, it's going to have pluses and minuses. There's going to be winners and losers. You're going to pay more taxes for some reasons, more of some kinds of taxes, and less of others. We'd still have to make the tradeoffs -- but at least we would base that on what people actually think, as opposed to what they're saying that they're thinking.
Julia Galef:	Would it then therefore be better to just always have votes be anonymous? Like when the public votes on something, that's anonymous -- they can choose to share their opinion online if they want, but they don't have to. But what about votes like in Congress?
Timur Kuran:	I think that especially given where we are now, I think we would benefit greatly if votes in Congress, after all the discussions had taken place in public, that votes were by secret ballot. For exactly the same reason why we have a secret ballot in presidential elections. Our ballots are secret because the founders recognize that if our ballots were opened, if they could be seen by everyone, that we would be influenced by what was popular and we wouldn't express ourselves honestly. The same applies to our representatives in Congress.
Julia Galef:	Of course, then we couldn't ... It would be harder to choose who to re-elect, because we wouldn't know whether they actually voted in our interests.
Timur Kuran:	That is correct, and that is one of the costs. They could actually tell us that they voted a certain way and they could vote differently. That is a cost of this. But I think given where we are, I think the pluses would outweigh the minuses. It's worth trying that. Now, of course, in many voting bodies, it is possible for members to ask for a secret ballot. It's unlikely though, in many situations, that people will actually ask for a secret ballot when they're on the unpopular side. Because the very act of asking for a secret ballot would signal that you have something to hide. For that reason, you may have to decide in advance whether the vote is going to be by secret ballots or by open ballot. At universities, promotion decisions are by secret ballot. There's no rule that universities have to follow that, but the reason is that there are usually people who are strong supporters of particular candidates or strong opponents of particular candidates. They might be quite influential members, senior members in the department. If you're a younger person, you might not want to cross them openly. In a secret ballot, if you think that a particular position, a particular candidate deserves a different treatment than the senior professors, you may actually go against them.

Julia Galef:	I was just noticing another potential, arguable downside of having *less* preference falsification, which is the increasing social openness that white supremacists feel empowered to have in the last year or so.
	This is the complaint that a lot of people have about Trump's administration, and some of the communities online that have brought these strains of American thought out into the open. That they've caused … It's not necessarily the case that there are more people who hold these views than there were 20 years ago. But it may arguably be the case that people are starting to notice, "Oh, hey, we now have a common knowledge that a lot of these views exist, and so I feel much more free to say these things, and go on these marches, and lobby for these policies in public."
	That could arguably be bad.
Timur Kuran:	That is a danger; on the other hand, it is better to know that such views exist and such communities exist, so that we can take measures that will cause those groups to get smaller over time. We need to study what is actually motivating people to adopt those views. We're not going to know what to study if they're completely hidden. This is an advantage that needs to be considered, along with the major disadvantage that you mentioned.
Julia Galef:	So far we've been pointing at examples that fit the model of preference falsification and the kind of consequences that it causes. We've talked about how, for example, we see these cascade effects where inefficient equilibria can eventually shift, because one or two people start to lead the charge and then things snowball, like in Arab spring. We've talked about how it fits the data that we see of regimes becoming oppressive, because they know that some of their supporters are falsifying their preferences and actually had preferred the original status quo, et cetera, et cetera.
	I'm wondering if there's any harder evidence for this model. I mean, there is clear, hard evidence that preference falsification *exists*. We can look at anonymous surveys versus public beliefs and see the difference. We can look at … Actually, are you familiar with the book *Everybody Lies* by Seth Stephens-Davidowitz?
Timur Kuran:	I have not read it. I know of it.
Julia Galef:	Okay, great. It would be right up your alley, I think. He looks at Google Trends – so, the prevalence of different search terms that people look for on Google. That's kind of a way to get at people's private interests and preferences and beliefs, especially when they search for publicly unpopular things like the N-word. Anyway, so that-
Timur Kuran:	I am familiar with that research not the book itself, but there are many articles and so on that make the same point.

Julia Galef: Yes. Anyway, so that seems like good evidence for the *existence* of preference falsification, but what about hard evidence for the kind of social consequences that your model predicts *result from* preference falsification?

                      It's hard, I'm sure.

Timur Kuran: If I can reformat your question a little bit…

Julia Galef: Sure.

Timur Kuran: Does preference falsification explain social change? Is this the major factor, the major phenomenon, or are there other factors? In the context of the change in social norms in the United States regarding sexual harassment, what is ultimately driving that?

                      Could it be that women have, over time, become more powerful, and now we have women having played an important role in the labor force for many, many decades -- we have enough women who have a reputation, an impeccable reputation, to stand up to Harvey Weinstein? Is that what ultimately led to a change in norms?

                      I don't think these two explanations would be mutually exclusive. I think certainly the fact that we have many more successful women, women who are contributing more to the labor force, we have women in high places, many more women in high places -- certainly, this is a factor.

                      But what preference falsification helps us understand is why this norm changed *explosively*. It's not that all of sudden in 2017 the proportion of women in high places tripled, and for that reason, we moved to new norms.

Julia Galef: So, we can't explain the trajectory of change without some model like preference falsification. Is there any alternate model?

Timur Kuran: Exactly. We cannot explain the fact that for so many years, so many people, including powerful women and men, were quiet as they saw what was going on and why suddenly all of them came out and so many people brought complaints against Harvey Weinstein and many others. That, we can explain now.

                      Now, is there an alternative to the argument that I've given? I think there are disagreements over the roles of various motives, or the relative importance of the various motives we talked about before. Learning something new about the world, versus feeling more comfortable to express your already existing private preferences, to publicize your private preferences. And of course, the expressive factor, the motive to be truthful because, otherwise, you'll be uncomfortable.

                      The relative weight of these factors has been a source of controversy. Recent papers have tried by looking at data in various countries and looking at

major shifts that have taken place, have tried to identify the relative weights that these factors hold or carry.

Julia Galef: How would you distinguish? How would put a number on the weights of preference falsification versus genuinely changing your mind based on your perception of what other people believe?

Timur Kuran: One of the ways that this is being done is in looking at public opinion data, detailed public opinion data, that is collected periodically. When a big shift occurs, they are looking at who is leading the cascade and who is joining the cascade. Is it the educated or the uneducated? If this involves a sudden emergence of opposition to the state on something, is it state employees, or people who work in the private sector?

By looking at who is actually leading the campaign and who is joining later -- and exactly what their incentives are, what their likely knowledge base is, what they would've known about the policies in question -- you can actually tease out the role that learning and losing fear are playing.

Julia Galef: Interesting. But you couldn't still, I assume, disambiguate between people's private beliefs changing because of social proof, versus people's private beliefs always having been the same, but their public belief changing because they feel like they had more cover now?

Timur Kuran: This you can do in principle if you anticipate that a change is coming. You can actually have experiments done at various times that create -- for different samples that you have carefully selected, create different conditions. Change the amount of information that they are given. Change the setting in which they are asked to express their preferences. The people there, in the audience in front of which they're expressing their preferences.

Of course, you can always identify whether the preference falsification itself is taking place by asking people something in public and then asking them, the same people, anonymously what they think. It is possible to do this. We just have to start anticipating the need for this type of information. We have to design our surveys accordingly and start collecting data in various ways under various conditions to be able to identify what exactly is driving changes in public preferences.

Julia Galef: Right, that makes sense.

Timur Kuran: Of course, in principle, this is possible -- and there are, in repressive regimes, secret services often do essentially this, by collecting information in settings where they give people anonymity and then asking the same things publicly. But they don't share this information with others. This sort of information becomes public after these regimes have fallen and their archives are opened up to the public.

Julia Galef: Interesting.

Timur Kuran:	The communist regimes in Eastern Europe were aware of this phenomenon. They wanted to know exactly where preference falsification is taking place, where their support was soft in the sense that people were still supporting the regime but were private in opposition, were waiting for an opportunity to support the opposition.
	The regimes wanted to know this -- if nothing else, to know which populations had to be bought off, and where they have to do things differently.
Julia Galef:	Still, why was it in the interest of people even on anonymous surveys to be honest about their preferences, if they knew that the whole reason they were being asked was so that the government could decide which communities to tamp down harder on?
Timur Kuran:	It wasn't always clear that people knew why these surveys were being done.
	In the case of East Germany, one of the places where information was collected was a particular school, a vocational school in Leipzig. They had been doing this does 1970, and the students just knew that once a year they were asked to fill out a long form. They knew that nothing had ever … There weren't consequences for anyone. And there for that reason, they must have felt relatively comfortable in answering honestly.
	In fact, leading up to 1989 which is when the Berlin Wall came down, the proportion of people giving answers to questions concerning the legitimacy of the East German regime -- the performance of communists, the future of communism and so on -- the percentage of people giving answers that alarmed the regime went dramatically up in the years leading up to the revolution.
	The regime was aware that discontent was building up. Why exactly, they didn't prevent it -- that's, of course, another question in itself. We've got to get into the calculations of the Communist Party in East Germany and their relations with the regime in Moscow and so on.
Julia Galef:	Interesting.
Timur Kuran:	It is possible. The point is that it is possible to track preference falsification, track changes in it, track where it is occurring, and also identify by distinguishing between the types of people whose preferences are changing more than others, and identifying those whose private preferences are not changing… One can actually see what is going on.
	Again, the people who collect this information do not necessarily have incentives to share that information. The East German regime had no incentive whatsoever to share, with either the East German public or the world, the information that discontent with the regime in East Germany was rising.

Julia Galef:	Do you think that the Internet has increased or decreased the effects of preference falsification? I can imagine for one thing that people would be less deceived now. It's harder to deceive entire populations about what people's true beliefs are, because people can speak anonymously on the Internet. It's harder to maintain these situations where no one knows that other people agree with them in the population.

But I could imagine other countervailing forces as well. What you think? |
| Timur Kuran: | The Internet is a brand-new technology by historical standards. We are still learning to use it, and states are still learning to control it.

But another information-technology that emerged, and there was a long learning period -- I'm thinking of the book. When we started printing books, it made it easier for people to disseminate information contrary to what the church was teaching. I could imagine that people felt freer to express their views, and then also that they could find others who shared their own views more easily, because disseminating information had become much easier.

Same is happening with the Internet. We've now discovered a technology that allows us to communicate more easily, that allows us to find others who think like us more easily, to form communities, global communities, in fact, who share interests, who share perspectives. It's just like people who shared the same views found each other through books, and they established intellectual societies, people coming from different parts of Europe and other parts of the world through the books that they had written.

States, of course, were interested in where communities were forming that were doing things that displeased the state. The states were interested in disrupting this community-building.

Now states, at the moment, are trying to figure out how they can do this better, how they can actually control the Internet. China is investing huge sums in forming its own networks equivalent to Twitter and Facebook, and Whatsapp and so on, that are used mostly by the Chinese. And they're doing this in the hope that they can actually control it. To a degree they're succeeding, but anyone from China will tell you there are many discourses that take place on Chinese social media that do not please the government.

Anyway, the point I'm trying to make is that we really don't know how the Internet in the long run will affect the prevalence of preference falsification. You're certainly right that it has made people feel freer to express themselves now, but... |
| Julia Galef: | In one sense. I do think that there are countervailing effects – like, the consequences of expressing an opinion that some people don't like can be greater, because the Internet magnifies these consequences. It was harder to be shamed by the entire world 20 years ago, as a private citizen, than it is today. |

It's also – actually, the thought just occurred to me that it's harder to have separate audiences on the Internet. Maybe there are some opinions that you're comfortable sharing with people in your social circle, or your community or group of friends -- but if you're talking on Facebook or Twitter or whatever, your audience is just the public. And so someone who has different senses of what's appropriate or legitimate to raise than your inner circles do, can just see what you're saying and try to cause consequences for you because of that.

Timur Kuran: Except that most people don't realize that when you put something on Facebook that it is actually entirely public. They think sometimes that they're speaking to a close circle, but anyone in that circle can simply take that information and publicize it.

Now, many people operate in circles where year after year nobody does do that. They share ideas that violate various norms, social norms, and nothing happens -- but the possibility is always there. I think that over time, people will recognize what you just said, that posting something on the Internet provides a potentially much greater audience for your views, for whatever you have posted, than running something in a newspaper in hard print.

Another thing is that it can travel much faster. A storm can erupt on the Internet that ends up destroying your reputation within a few hours. There was the case of a South African, I believe it was a businesswoman, who posted some comments before she boarded a plane from Heathrow. By the time she landed in Cape Town, her reputation was destroyed. It was already old news what had happened, the reaction to whatever she posted was old news.

Julia Galef: I think it was like a tasteless joke about AIDS in Africa or something like that. Justine Sacco, I think, was her name.

Timur Kuran: Oh, you have a very, very good memory, but that's a very good example of how social media publicizes information, and the cascades can work very rapidly on social media.

Julia Galef: Yes. And jokes that ... I don't know. In my social circles, it's often obvious that a joke is sarcastic. Like, a joke is actually anti-racism or anti-patriarchy, even though it's *superficially* pro-patriarchy. It's clearly supposed to be sarcastic -- but then if someone who doesn't share our background, and shared understanding of what would be a plausible thing for that person to be saying, hears the joke, they may interpret it as being *literally* pro-patriarchy.

This has happened. And I think the Internet just blurs ... It messes up people's expectations of how other people will interpret what they are saying, and creates these problems.

Timur Kuran: Because your audience is not always what you think it is.

Julia Galef:	Exactly.
Timur Kuran:	Your audience is sometimes much larger and much more mixed than you think it is. That's why there are risks of social media. I think the generation that is coming of age now will be much more cautious on the Internet than the generation that did not grow up with the Internet. And new social norms will emerge.
Julia Galef:	The Internet is one thing that basically emerged in the time since your book was originally published in the mid '90s. Has there been anything else that you've noticed or observed or learned, in the intervening time, that has changed your model at all? Or updated your thinking about preference falsification and its consequences?
Timur Kuran:	The model itself, the basic model, has held up quite well. Where my thinking has advanced, and I think where others' thinking has advanced, is in recognizing that multiple motives are driving preference falsification. And driving people's decisions to stop falsifying their preferences. And that these interact with one another, and that we don't have a sufficiently good understanding of how the informational motives and the reputational motives for changing one's preferences interact.
	This, I think, is the frontier. If I was writing that book today, I would put more emphasis on the interactions between the informational drivers of preference falsification and the reputational drivers, as well as the effects.
Julia Galef:	Interesting. Great. We're kind of overtime at this point, so I'll just wrap up now, but first, I want to invite you to give the Rationally Speaking pick of the episode, which is a book or blog or article or something that has influenced your thinking overtime. What would your pick be?
Timur Kuran:	My pick would be Thomas Schelling's book *Micromotives and Macrobehavior*.
Julia Galef:	A classic.
Timur Kuran:	This is a classic that was published, I believe, in 1979 or 1980. I was just coming out of graduate school. I received my PhD in 1982. I actually read that book around the time that I turned in my dissertation, which was not on preference falsification -- and it was an eye-opener.
	It was an eye-opener because it indicated that small decisions can have, when aggregated and when joined with other small decisions, can have massive consequences that nobody intended and that nobody would've predicted. You can see how this relates to the work that I did publish in a book in 1995, all the work on preference falsification.
	Individuals were deciding whether to support this policy or that, whether to laugh at a joke or condemn it. They're making minor decisions, but the decisions that they make do affect the decisions of others, and through

cascades, they can have massive consequences. That basic idea goes to Thomas Schelling and I would highly recommend that book to anyone who is interested in social phenomena in general.

Julia Galef: Excellent. We'll link to your book *Private Truths, Public Lies* as well as to Schelling's book which is the generalization of the phenomenon that you're pointing out. Timur, thank you so much for joining us on the show. It's been a pleasure having you.

Timur Kuran: Thank you very much. It was a wonderful conversation.

Julia Galef: This concludes another episode of Rationally Speaking. Join us next time for more explorations on the borderlands between reason and nonsense.