

# The Installation of Everything

*How a Mechanism Once Reserved for Children Now Runs on All of Us*

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## Abstract

This paper extends the concept of installation first developed in Kocher (2026a), which argued that fear-based belief transmission in childhood religious contexts constitutes a violation of developmental autonomy. That paper identified installation as a mechanism, not a message, defined by three co-occurring features: dissent framed as danger, identity fused with doctrine, and departure encoded as catastrophic and irreversible. The present paper argues that this mechanism has escaped its original context. It now operates widely across contemporary political and media life, running through algorithmic content distribution, partisan media, and tribal political identity on all sides of the ideological spectrum. The result is a population of adults who are psychologically and socially constrained from revising their beliefs in structurally similar ways to fear-conditioned children. This paper distinguishes installation from related concepts such as indoctrination and motivated reasoning, demonstrates the mechanism through a concrete case, identifies the structural features of the information environment that reproduce it, and argues that the recovery of the capacity for revision is both possible and urgent.

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*“The mechanism doesn’t care about the content.”*

## 1. A Mechanism, Not a Message

There is a difference between being persuaded of something and having it installed in you. Persuasion operates on the content of a belief. It presents evidence, makes an argument, invites acceptance or rejection. A persuaded person holds the belief at arm’s length, in the sense that they could, with sufficient reason, set it down. Installation is different. It operates not on the content of the belief but on the person’s capacity for revision itself. The goal is to make the

belief feel like identity, so that questioning it feels like self-destruction.

Installation can be identified by three features occurring together. First, dissent is framed as danger: doubt is not an open question but a moral failure, something to be confessed rather than explored. Second, identity is structurally fused with doctrine: to question the belief is to threaten one's belonging, one's community, one's sense of self. Third, the consequences of departure are encoded as catastrophic and permanent. Not merely social friction, but something unbounded: absolute disgrace, permanent exile from the only community that matters.

When these three features operate together, they do not produce believers. They produce people for whom revision feels like annihilation. The belief is no longer something they hold. It is something they are.

This mechanism was once studied primarily in the context of high-control religious environments. It belongs to a much larger conversation.

## **2. Why Not Just Call This Indoctrination?**

The concept of installation overlaps with several existing terms. Indoctrination, motivated reasoning, identity-protective cognition, and epistemic closure all describe related phenomena. A critic could reasonably ask whether installation adds anything new. It does, and the difference matters.

Indoctrination typically refers to the content being transmitted, usually the imposition of a specific ideology or doctrine, often by an identifiable authority with deliberate intent. The focus is on what is being taught and who is teaching it. Installation is a description of mechanism, not content or intent. A belief can be installed without any single authority doing the installing, without deliberate design, and without the person being aware it is happening. The algorithm has no ideology. It installs whatever content triggers the relevant emotional architecture.

Motivated reasoning and identity-protective cognition, as described by Dan Kahan and colleagues, refer to the cognitive tendency to process information in ways that protect pre-existing beliefs, particularly when those beliefs are tied to group identity. This is real and well-documented. But it describes a bias in how people evaluate evidence once they hold a belief. Installation describes the prior condition: the structural shaping of the environment that makes motivated reasoning not just likely but nearly inescapable. It is the difference between describing someone's poor footing and describing the ice under their feet.

The precision matters because the remedy differs. If the problem is motivated reasoning, you might try to improve critical thinking or slow down information processing. If the problem is installation, improving critical thinking is insufficient, because the mechanism operates on the conditions under which critical thinking can occur at all. The ice is still there.

### **3. The Same Three Features**

Open any major social media platform. Watch what happens when a person on either side of any significant political question posts a view that deviates even slightly from their tribe's current consensus.

Dissent is framed as danger. The deviation is not treated as an honest difference of interpretation. It is treated as evidence of bad faith, of corruption, of having been compromised by the enemy. The person is not wrong. They are a traitor, a plant, a useful idiot, a collaborator. The content of the deviation barely matters. What matters is that it crossed a line.

Identity is structurally fused with doctrine. You are not a person who holds certain views about immigration, taxation, or gender. You are a conservative or a progressive, a patriot or a radical, saved or unsaved in the political theology of your community. The views are not positions you hold. They are properties of what you are. To change your mind about one is to threaten the coherence of the whole. The social cost is not disagreement. It is excommunication.

And the consequences of departure are encoded as catastrophic. Not merely social embarrassment or the loss of an argument. The stakes are existential: civilization is at stake, the country is at stake, children are at stake, everything is at stake. Every election is the most important election in history. Every policy dispute is a battle between good and evil. The frame is always infinite. There is no off ramp that doesn't feel like surrender to darkness.

These are not metaphors for religious dynamics. They are the same dynamics, running on different content, through different delivery systems, at industrial scale.

### **4. The Mechanism in Motion**

Abstract description is useful. Seeing the mechanism operate in a specific case is more useful.

In February 2021, Senator Lisa Murkowski of Alaska voted to convict Donald Trump in the second impeachment trial, one of seven Republican senators to do so. The vote was a matter of constitutional judgment about whether the events of January 6th met the standard for conviction. Reasonable people disagreed about the correct answer. But within the Republican

political ecosystem, the vote was not processed as a legal judgment. It was processed as betrayal. The Alaska Republican Party voted to censure her. Primary challengers emerged immediately. Colleagues distanced themselves publicly. The message transmitted through conservative media was not that she was wrong. It was that she had revealed what she really was: a collaborator, a RINO, disqualified from belonging.

Watch the three features at work. Dissent framed as danger: the vote was not a policy disagreement but a moral defection, evidence of corruption or cowardice. Identity fused with doctrine: a Republican senator who voted this way was not a real Republican, not a real conservative, not on the right side. Consequences encoded as catastrophic: the political and social costs were immediate, total, and framed as permanently disqualifying.

The content of the legal question was almost entirely irrelevant to this process. What mattered was the signal: that deviation from the tribal position, on any matter coded as identity-bearing, would be treated as existential betrayal. Every other member of the Republican caucus received that signal. The installation was not aimed at Murkowski. It was aimed at everyone watching.

This is how installation propagates at scale. Not through direct persuasion of each individual, but through the public punishment of visible deviation, which communicates to the entire community what the cost of revision is. The mechanism does not need to convince anyone of anything. It only needs to make the cost of changing your mind legible.

The same mechanism runs in the opposite direction. In 2020, when Senator Bernie Sanders' supporters faced the prospect of their candidate losing the Democratic primary a second time, several prominent progressive commentators who expressed willingness to vote for Biden were met not with disagreement but with accusations of betrayal, sellout, complicity. The content of the position was beside the point. The transgression was the revision. The signal to the broader community was identical: deviation from the tribal position, at the moment of maximum stakes, costs you your standing.

One clarification is necessary here. Installation is not the same as holding strong beliefs. A person can be deeply committed to a position, argue for it with intensity, and still remain capable of revision if the evidence shifts. That is persuasion operating at high stakes. Installation is specifically the condition in which revision has become structurally impossible without identity collapse, regardless of what the evidence shows. The difference is not the strength of the belief. It is whether the capacity for revision survives.

## **5. The Delivery System Changed. The Mechanism Didn't.**

Installation in high-control religious contexts operated through weekly ritual, parental authority, community belonging, and the slow accumulation of social consequence for expressed doubt. It was effective because it was consistent and total.

The algorithmic content environment operates through a different architecture but achieves structurally similar results. The feed learns what produces engagement. Outrage, threat, and tribal vindication produce engagement. The platform optimizes for the emotional states that keep users scrolling, and those emotional states are precisely the ones that installation requires: the sense of being embattled, the sense that the stakes are infinite, the sense that anyone who disagrees is not mistaken but dangerous.

This is not speculative. Internal Facebook research, reported by the Wall Street Journal in 2021, found that the platform's own recommendation algorithm was amplifying divisive and extreme content because such content drove higher engagement metrics. Engineers proposed changes. Leadership declined to implement most of them, citing concerns about reducing engagement. The algorithm does not intend to install beliefs. It simply rewards content that triggers the threat response most reliably, and punishes, through invisibility, content that invites reflection or genuine revision.

The connection to the three features of installation is direct. Framing dissent as danger produces outrage, and outrage drives engagement, so the algorithm amplifies it. Content that fuses identity with doctrine generates stronger emotional attachment to the platform, so the algorithm promotes it. Infinite-stakes framing keeps users scrolling because threat does not resolve the way satisfaction does, so the algorithm rewards it. Each feature of installation is, independently, good for engagement metrics. Together they are the product the system is optimized to deliver.

This is not conspiracy. It is optimization. But the product of that optimization is a population repeatedly processed through the functional equivalent of fear-based belief formation, daily, across every screen they own.

## **6. Why This Is Different from Ordinary Persuasion**

The objection will come quickly: people have always tried to persuade each other, propaganda has always existed, political passion has always been intense. What is new?

The difference is not degree. It is mechanism. Ordinary persuasion, including aggressive persuasion, presents a case and invites acceptance or rejection. It operates on the content of the belief. Installation operates on the person's capacity for revision itself. It does not argue for a

position. It restructures the conditions under which any position can be held.

A person who has been genuinely persuaded can, in principle, be genuinely un-persuaded. A person who has been installed does not experience the belief as something they hold. They experience it as something they are. To set it down is not to change their mind. It is to destroy themselves.

The contemporary information environment is systematically engineered, not deliberately but effectively, to collapse this distinction. The goal of installation is always to make the belief feel like identity. The goal of the algorithm is to maximize engagement. These goals converge on the same output.

## **7. Both Sides, Without Symmetry**

The mechanism does not favor any particular politics. This needs to be said carefully, because it will be misread as a bothsidesism that flattens real moral distinctions. It is not.

The claim is not that every political position is equally valid, or that the truth lies somewhere in the middle of every dispute. The claim is that installation, as a mechanism, operates independently of the content it transmits. A true belief can be installed. A false belief can be arrived at through genuine inquiry. The mechanism is not the message.

The distinction that needs to stay clear is this: a system can be factually correct and structurally installed, or factually incorrect and open to revision. These are separate axes. A person told that scrutinizing the mechanism of their belief transmission is an attack on the content of their beliefs will experience the critique as enemy propaganda. The mechanism protects itself by making scrutiny of the mechanism feel like advocacy for the other side.

What this means in practice is that the person on the left who cannot update their views without losing their community, and the person on the right in identical circumstances, are both experiencing the same structural condition, even if one of them is right about the underlying question and the other is wrong. The installation is one problem. The content is a separate problem. Both deserve analysis. Neither substitutes for the other.

## **8. What Installation Destroys**

Democracy is often described as a system of collective decision-making. That description understates what democracy requires at the level of individual cognition.

Democracy requires players who can lose and accept the result, because the result might be corrected next time. It requires people who can change their minds when the evidence changes, because the whole point is that the collective is wiser than any individual. It requires the capacity for what philosophers call reflective equilibrium, the ongoing process of testing your principles against your intuitions and revising both when they conflict.

Installation destroys all of this. A person who experiences revision as self-annihilation cannot accept a loss as legitimate, because the result doesn't just mean their side lost, it means evil won. A person whose identity is fused with a doctrine cannot update on new evidence, because the evidence is, by definition, either confirmation or an attack. A person conditioned to treat doubt as danger cannot engage in reflective equilibrium, because the first move of that process triggers the threat response.

This is not a metaphor for what is happening to democracy. It is a description of the cognitive substrate without which democracy cannot function.

## **9. The Question of Responsibility**

The platforms bear significant responsibility, not because they intended harm but because they continued optimizing for engagement long after the harm was documented. Intent does not determine responsibility. The most consequential institutional failures are rarely produced by bad actors. They emerge from systems whose incentive structures reliably produce predictable outcomes regardless of individual intentions.

Political media, including cable news, podcasts, and newsletters, bears responsibility for the same reason. The business model rewards the emotional architecture of installation: urgency, threat, tribal vindication, infinite stakes. The people producing this content are often sincere. Sincerity does not change the product.

Political leaders who deliberately cultivate installation, working to make their supporters feel that any deviation from loyalty is betrayal, that the opposition is not wrong but evil, that the stakes of every contest are civilizational, bear the clearest responsibility of all. This is a choice. It is being made consciously, repeatedly, by people who understand what they are doing.

But responsibility is not the most important question. Understanding the mechanism is, because understanding the mechanism points toward what might actually interrupt it.

## **10. What Interrupts Installation**

The antidote to installation is not counter-installation, not replacing one set of installed beliefs with another. It is the recovery of the conditions under which genuine belief formation is possible. Those conditions have a name: introduction. Introduction presents a framework as one way of understanding the world. It invites questions, tolerates doubt, and treats the person as an agent whose conclusions are theirs to reach.

Structurally, the most effective interventions are those that reduce identity threat before introducing disagreement. Research on intergroup contact consistently finds that exposure to outgroup members alone does not reliably reduce polarization. What reduces it is contact under conditions of equal status and shared goals, conditions that lower the perceived cost of revision before revision is asked for. A 2018 study by Bail and colleagues found that exposing Twitter users to opposing views actually increased polarization, because the exposure triggered identity-protective responses without first reducing the identity threat. This is the design principle that interventions aimed purely at increasing information exposure routinely ignore: more content is not the remedy when the problem is the structure within which content is received.

At the individual level, several concrete behaviors follow from this. Read one piece per week from a source you disagree with, not for ammunition but for the purpose of understanding what the best version of that argument actually is. Maintain one relationship where political disagreement is not filtered out, because the practice of maintaining it rehearses the cognitive flexibility that installation erodes. When you notice a piece of content is designed to make you feel that the stakes are infinite, treat that emotional architecture as a warning signal about the content's intent, not as confirmation of its accuracy. Slow down before sharing outrage. The threat response is the product being sold.

These are small interventions against a large system. They matter not because they fix the system but because a person who practices revision regularly is less susceptible to having the capacity for revision foreclosed. The goal is not immunity. The goal is maintenance of a cognitive habit that installation is designed to eliminate.

## **11. The Deeper Argument**

Moral and political frameworks are best understood as coordinating fictions, not arbitrary but constructed. They are built under real constraints: facts about suffering, facts about what cooperation requires, facts about what happens to social systems that render large populations invisible. The game is invented, but the constraints that shape it are real.

The crucial feature of that account is that the game requires players capable of revision. A moral framework that forecloses revision is not a more rigorous version of the game. It is a different game entirely, one that has abandoned the very features that made the original worth playing. A fiction that cannot be questioned or revised in light of new evidence is no longer a coordinating device. It is a weapon.

Installation, at scale, converts coordinating fictions into weapons. It takes the frameworks through which we try to live together, political, moral, and social, and restructures them so that they cannot be revised. It turns the game of collective reasoning into a war of incompatible identities. Wars of incompatible identities do not end through persuasion. They end through exhaustion, or through force.

This is the deeper argument for why installation matters: not because it is psychologically harmful to individuals, though it is, but because it is dismantling the cognitive infrastructure without which human beings cannot reason together about how to live. We invented that infrastructure. It was hard-won. It is not guaranteed.

## **12. Conclusion**

A mechanism that was once confined to high-control religious environments, installation through fear, identity fusion, and infinite-consequence framing, has become a dominant pattern across large parts of the information environment most adults in the developed world inhabit daily. It has no politics. It is equally available to any community willing to use it, and it is being used, because it works.

What it destroys is not strong belief or passionate commitment. It destroys the specific capacity to update when the evidence changes, without experiencing that update as self-annihilation. That capacity is the minimum condition for living together in a world that keeps changing.

If this account is correct, it makes a testable prediction: interventions that increase exposure to opposing views without first reducing identity threat will fail. The evidence from a decade of depolarization experiments is consistent with this prediction.

We are being installed. A person who can see the mechanism has already, in some small way, stepped outside it.

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