Grant Blank

Do Echo Chambers Exist?

A Cross-National Study of Germany and the United States

CAIS Report

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The idea of an "echo chamber" in politics (Pariser, 2011; Sunstein, 2009) is a metaphorical way to describe a situation where only certain ideas, information and beliefs are shared. People inside this setting will only encounter things they already agree with. Without free movement of ideas and information people inside the echo chamber will believe that this is all there is. Under these circumstances anyone who disagrees is misinformed at best and willfully ignorant at worst.

To date evidence on echo chambers has been mixed. But most studies have been conducted on social media, many on Twitter, and this severely limits their generalizability. Even if Twitter is polarized, it is only one part of a much larger media environment. Individuals tend to use multiple media to access news and political information. In fact one of the key characteristics of the Internet is that it gives everyone access to an extremely heterogeneous collection of media. It is important to consider the entire range of media that people use in a high-choice media environment.

Data

The data from the Quello Search Project (http://quello.msu.edu/research/the-part-played-by-search-in-shaping-political-opinion-the-quello-search-project/) include 2,000 Internet-using respondents from each of seven countries (France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States), for a total of 14,000 respondents. The questionnaire asks about five different measures of whether a respondent was in an echo chamber. The project included both passive measures, like how often respondents read or saw political information that they disagreed with, and active measures, like how often respondents used search to check political information they saw in online media. The data also contain numerous variables on politics, political media use, and political opinions. For my fellowship I proposed to use these data to write a systematic comparison of political media use and echo chambers in Germany and the United States.

Results and Discussion

In fact I was able to do more than I hoped. I completed an analysis of all seven countries and wrote a paper about it. The main point that comes out of the results is that, regardless of how we measure the presence of an echo chamber, almost no one is likely to be in an echo chamber. These results are strong and consistent across all seven countries.

Media diets and choices are fundamental when it comes to assessing the threat of potential echo chambers. The results show that the number of media an individual chooses to incorporate into their habits is related to their likelihood of becoming caught in an echo chamber. Having a diverse media diet is a step toward exposure to diverse information and perspectives. Individuals may expose themselves to opposing viewpoints in many ways, from passively encountering information they disagree with, to actively checking multiple sources or using other media to verify information. In each case we found that media diversity predicts acts which help the individual avoid an echo chamber.

Whatever may be happening on any single social media platform, like Twitter, when we look at the entire media environment there is little apparent echo chamber. People regularly encounter things that they disagree with. People check multiple sources. People try to confirm information using search. They discover things that change their political opinions. This applies even to people who have no interest in politics. Thus, the possibility of being in an echo chamber seems exaggerated.

Echo Chamber Theory in a High-Choice Media Environment

According to past work on echo chambers, selective exposure to news and political information, and political polarization narrowly define and measure the likelihood of being in an echo chamber. These studies focus on exposure to different ideas whether it be through a self-report survey or through analysis of trace data from a social media platform such as Twitter. Consistent with this work, we have included exposure to different ideas as a dependent variable but we push beyond this narrow conceptualization and operationalization of the term.

A high-choice media environment does not simply mean that individuals develop strategies to deal with the many media options available, though of course they do so as they develop their news and political information repertoires (Webster & Ksiazek, 2012). People also develop strategies for making use of different media, often in complementary ways (e.g. checking a story using a different media). Consequently, focusing only on whether or not someone is exposed to differing views is a flawed approach because it does not consider the nuanced and possibly strategic use of multiple media in a high-choice environment. Exposure to different ideas is one proxy for likelihood of being caught in an echo chamber but so too are acts individuals take which can, intentionally or otherwise, help them avoid echo chambers.

We consider the acts individuals take to avoid echo chambers as they choose which media to use and how to use them in a high-choice media environment. We use these acts as a proxy for likelihood of being caught in an echo chamber. This is because news and political information seeking are a complex set of communication practices which should be studied across platforms (Garrett et al., 2012), and a simple measure of exposure, particularly when few or even one media source is considered or recalled, cannot capture the notion of an echo chamber.

Future work on echo chambers should consider the various types of choices individuals can make in this high-choice media environment, including the diversity of media they make use of and the consequences of that diverse use in terms of how and when different media are combined. Future studies might draw on the idea of dual-screening (Vaccari et al., 2015), fact-checking practices, and other ways in which individuals use media in complementary ways as they seek out news and political information.

Broader Implications

Studies of a single medium, especially the popular studies of a single social network site like Twitter, are of limited value. A single medium does not generalize to the entire media environment. Consider that in our data young respondents age 18–34 say they have accounts on an average of five social media. Studying one of those five social networking sites, no matter how large the dataset, remains a single case study. Though valuable for other purposes, this case does not help us understand the other four social media; it is even less able to help us understand how people consume other online and offline media. The diverse characteristics and affordances of print media, television, or political websites add further complexity. The value of studies of a single medium is waning. Unless we have a special theoretical justification, we should stop doing them.

This implication relates to the fact that, despite touting the potential of the Internet to expand media and communication possibilities, researchers often overlook this complexity when it comes to understanding the political communication practices of individuals and the implications of those practices. As researchers, we sometimes do not act as if we believe that the Internet and related technologies have expanded communication possibilities in a meaningful way. If we believed it, we would study individuals and their choices in this environment in all its multiple media glory.

Tangible Outcomes from the Project

An early version of the paper was presented to the Düsseldorf Institute for Internet and Democracy Tagung in July 2018. The full paper has been given at the International Journal of Press/Politics conference in Oxford in October 2018. A revised version of the paper has been submitted to the International Communication Association conference.

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