Bursting the News Filter Bubble

Online technologies can create echo chambers that reinforce our world views, but does this necessarily mean we need to open ourselves up to alternative facts?

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After the US presidential elections, Google searches for *Breitbart* news peaked as people, many of whom weren't Donald Trump supporters, took to the right wing website to try and understand the views they were espousing.

Since then there have been frequent calls for more of us to step out of our social media echo chambers and to "burst the filter bubble" created when social media feeds and search engine personalisation emphasises content similar to content you have viewed or liked before, creating echo chambers that reinforce rather than challenge particular views. So, your Facebook feed only exposes you to views you already agree with, and to information that supports those views, leading to a general deterioration in public and political debate as we seem unable or unwilling to engage with different perspectives.

If we believe this argument, then Facebook presents an information-access issue that insulates users from diverse perspectives that would improve political discourse. But it's hard to conduct empirical research to see if this is actually the case because companies control their data, users typically don't state their politics explicitly, and the impact of proprietary algorithms can only be guessed at.

The research that has been conducted – mostly in the US – paints a complex picture of the role of technology in reinforcing cognitive bias. Whether you're liberal or conservative, you're more likely to believe information that confirms your prior beliefs (https://goo.gl/vlgGh2). Furthermore, political affiliations have a large say in which media sources and blogs are preferred (https://goo.gl/sSJH8I; https://goo.gl/VmwPb9). However, most people consume pretty centrist media, with only a relatively small number – particularly Republicans – consuming a highly polarised media diet (https://goo.gl/bJqIjv).

The idea that online and offline consumption of news media radically differ may be overstated. In fact, users of social media (https://goo.gl/w9OciL; https://goo.gl/cI6I8Q) and personalised news aggregation sites (https://goo.gl/phFRQP) are more likely to be exposed to – not insulated from – diverse perspectives. So, if we're in a bubble, this seems to be down to personal selection of sources (https://goo.gl/YnSk9n) rather than algorithms that direct which content we view (https://goo.gl/MVBezu) or discuss (https://goo.gl/ac6Zc0). Insofar as there is evidence for filter bubbles, they're a symptom, not a cause, of echo chambers.

Many of the calls for us to burst out of the filter bubble and take a more even-handed approach to the sources we consume pay little heed to the legitimacy of the arguments being espoused. This is concerning given the long history of false equivalence – the suggestion that opposing arguments deserve equal airtime even when they do not have equal evidence.

In the case of climate science, for example, research suggests that one echo chamber is based around a small but powerful group of denialists who repeat and amplify individual sources of climate science denial, while in contrast those who trust the science on climate change repeat information from multiple sources (https://goo.gl/WngbpT; https://goo.gl/IRxJTu). These "sides" do not have equivalence, and moralising over the emergence of bubbles based on broad sources of high quality evidence is misguided.

However, the tendency of news outlets to report opposing sides with equivalence – in an attempt to avoid bias – makes it harder for people to navigate this evidence (https://goo.gl/ayMQcX). Your ability to reconcile these competing claims is related to how you think about corroboration and expertise (https://goo.gl/n7iGGQ). Proposing that we "burst our filter bubble" might, in fact, legitimise denialist perspectives, resulting in their repetition and more widespread acceptance.

A recent report indicated that Americans felt better informed in 2016 than in 2011 (https://goo.gl/XaEfTD). It also indicated that placing value on evidence trumps partisanship on politically contentious issues such as climate change and support for health care reform. That's where our focus should be.

While focusing on filter bubbles can give false equivalence to misinformation and strengthen prior biases, exposure to others' experiences can provide a grounding for an empathetic discussion and understanding of evidence and how people treat it.

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