

Information Matters: Echo Chambers and Radicalization

In our last installment of Information Matters, we looked at some of the ways in which the financial incentives underlying the internet—in particular, social media platforms—work to curate our information environment in ways that allow us to bypass content that challenges us and, in the process, wind up facilitating the online spread of disinformation.

In this installment, let's look a bit more closely at how these same financial incentives work on the "information" that manages to get through. After all, we might be wondering, aren't we living in an age of unprecedented access to information? If we think we might be caught up in disinformation, isn't the answer a simple matter of doing a Google search?

Somewhat paradoxically, it is partly because we have access to such enormous amounts of information in the first place that it is easier than ever for people to find themselves trapped in a filter bubble or echo chamber.

Filter bubble: a state of intellectual isolation caused by algorithms programmed to selectively present information that aligns with the user's interests, effectively filtering out opposing viewpoints and diverse content.

Echo chamber: a social structure (online and/or offline) in which like-minded individuals reinforce each other's views, often excluding or dismissing opposing viewpoints, frequently leading them to become more extreme over time.

The fact is the vast quantities of information available on the internet make it easier for bad actors to spread disinformation. For one thing, with so many competing sources, disinformation has more places than ever to hide. For

another, this flood of information we all now daily swim within can, understandably, often leave users feeling overwhelmed and uncertain. This in turn can encourage them to seek comfort in ideas not because they are necessarily right, but because they align with their pre-existing biases and beliefs.

The fact that the internet is built around an attention economy presents real challenges for democracies. This is because it is vital for a democracy to have a public that is capable of engaging with facts and ideas in the real world, even when these challenge our individual beliefs. In democracies, we are free to hold beliefs. What we are not free to do is insist that because we hold the beliefs we do, we are entitled to deny reality. When we lose the ability to recognize and engage with reality, we lose the skills needed to meaningfully function in the public sphere.

By filtering out complexity and nuance, the internet's engagement algorithms don't just rob us of the ability to confront reality; they also erode our willingness to try. It is now well known that the internet's algorithms drive us toward increasingly divisive and emotionally charged content. Why does this happen? This happens because it is what has been shown by science to reliably capture and hold our attention (which, remember, is how internet companies make their money).

An important consequence of this is that, over time, these algorithms lead us to segregate into groups of like-minded others, where we gradually learn to regard everyone else as "other", "different", "wrong", "morally worse", and, eventually, "the enemy". In this sense, the internet first segregates us from real people and then invites us to be afraid of them.

In addition, perhaps somewhat ironically, because the internet works on attention, it also works on distraction by dividing up our attention into the smallest possible units that can then be sold to advertisers. The result of this micro-cutting is that concentrating on anything online becomes increasingly hard to do, which is something you may have noticed if you've ever sat down in front of your computer for 30 minutes, only to get up 4 hours later with no idea of what you spent the extra 3 ½ hours doing...

So, put together, what do these algorithms do? They study us to learn what we find compelling. Then, over time, they encourage us to segregate ourselves into like-minded groups, where increasingly we are only ever exposed to ideas and people we already agree with. This accomplished, in order to keep us engaged, the algorithms then feed us progressively more extreme material, further radicalizing us by pushing us deeper into our beliefs, all in the name of corporate profits.

Companies engage in these practices because there is money to be made from them, but notice: all of it aligns just as neatly with the ambitions of foreign powers conducting hostile disinformation campaigns against us in the hope of destabilizing and weakening our country.

Consider this: hostile actors don't need for us to believe anything in particular. They simply need for us to be sufficiently committed to our half-baked beliefs that we are willingly at one another's throats, treating each other as though we are one another's enemies.

Because there is no distinct narrative they are trying to control, they don't have to be careful. They can afford to throw any number of competing ideas into the discussion just to see what might stick. In the end, we do the rest of their work ourselves. In the confusion, and with the help of the algorithms, we allow ourselves to be sorted and then, once in our echo chambers (and without the prospect of any disconfirming evidence that might be used to moderate our views), we allow ourselves to be driven deeper into our respective positions, all while getting angrier and angrier at the other "side". (In disinformation campaigns, the other side is often not even populated by real Americans but is instead populated by foreign-controlled bots.)

In later installments of Information Matters (and in the Additional Resources section of the Lynx Voting Matters Project page), we'll have ideas for you about how to push back against disinformation and some of the more problematic features of the internet. In the meantime, we want to encourage you to reflect on how you use the internet. Are you using it in ways that allow you to protect yourself and build your capacity as a citizen living in a democracy? What would using the internet in this way look like? What sorts of

practices would it entail? Having read the first few installments of this series, how might you use the internet differently going forward and why?