Chapter 8
Credible to Whom?
The Curse of the Echo Chamber

Nathan Rodriguez
University of Wisconsin – Stevens Point, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter adopts a case study approach to examine the echo chamber effect online. Individuals cobble together personalized newsfeeds by active choice and those choices are often accompanied by subtle manipulations in social media and online search engine algorithms that may shape and constrain the parameters of information on a given topic. In this chapter, the author studied vaccine-hesitant discourse in an online forum over a five-year period. Those conversations exhibited characteristics of what would be considered an echo chamber, as defined by Jamieson and Cappella (2008). The implications of this case study suggest that the echo chamber within the realm of vaccination can lead individuals toward content and information of dubious veracity, with significant implications for public health.

INTRODUCTION

Search engines, mobile apps, and social media have radically reconstituted the process of acquiring information. Traditional intermediaries with specialized knowledge now vie for attention in the digital realm. Motivated participants in online spaces may actively contest notions of what constitutes expertise, and what authors, sources and narratives enjoy the digital ethos that can persuade others.

In many instances, this commingling of experts and laity is innocuous and user-friendly. Personalized online experiences may help individuals decide which movie to stream on Netflix, which restaurant to patronize, or which tourist destination might be worth a visit. At the same time, a significant middle ground exists where a lack of exposure to alternative points of view has a variety of consequences on a personal and societal level.

Communication has been transformed from a supply- to a demand-economy due to declining advertising revenues and the evolving habits of readers and viewers (Brants, 2013; Van Cuilenburg et al., 1999). This means that consumers who formerly had a narrow range of media options now have a panoply of voices vying for their attention: alternative media outlets, bloggers and vloggers, close friends and distant...
Credible to Whom?

relatives, and professional journalists at legacy media institutions. In this restructured setting, individuals assemble a daily information flow that may or may not contain viewpoints that contradict their own, resulting in a positive feedback loop, or echo chamber (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008). The consumers of news have now become the gatekeepers.

Viewers and readers not only have access to a broader range of media sources, but also the ability to connect with one another to discuss those representations. One of the most fundamental changes in the digital era is not that individuals have an enhanced ability to seek out information, but that information is pushed back to the individual at an increased rate through social media networks. The notion that people receive more information from friends and family than mass media has circulated for several decades, with studies confirming three-quarters of people follow the news primarily for social purposes (Katz & Lazarsfield 1955; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2010, p. 150). Social recommendations therefore have a significant influence on whether individuals choose to click on stories, the assumptions they make regarding credibility, and whether they decide to share the story (Cole & Greer, 2013, p. 676; Xu, 2013, pp. 769-771).

Individuals no longer access information through one or a few mass media sources, but “literally assemble information associatively by interacting with it online” (Peters & Broersma, 2013, pp. 4-5). Social networking platforms have become a critical part of information flow, even more so for younger individuals, and these trends are likely to persist because media consumption patterns developed in early adulthood tend to endure (Davies & Enyon, 2013; Rankin, 2013, pp. 105-106; p. 154). If the acquisition and recirculation of news and information is fundamentally a social process, an individual’s desire to seek out information inside or outside this personalized echo chamber may be determined by social ties.

Finally, readers and viewers continue to drift at greater rates into niche-based interpretive communities, and the (re)construction of events becomes a more active and involved process as official discourses blend with vernacular narratives. Certain interpretive communities perceptually lie beyond the bounds of more mainstream or acceptable political discourse, and such groups deserve greater academic attention to better describe the nature of online conversations that bind these individuals together, often in opposition to representations by mainstream media outlets.

This chapter begins with an overview of how the circulation and recirculation of news and information has changed during the past few decades in order to argue how the architecture of new media systems makes a personalized echo chamber a more likely outcome than in the past. Conspiracy theories in particular complicate discussions of credibility, and a case study approach toward vaccine-hesitant discourse is used to demonstrate the relative perils of ascertaining the credibility of information found online. The concluding discussion evaluates the implications of this continually evolving media environment.

BACKGROUND

Legacy Media Meets Social Media

In the halcyon days of network television in the mid- and late-20th century, legacy media institutions helped form an agreed-upon “grand narrative” (Lyotard, 1979) that could at least offer a recognizable point of reference for current events. By selecting what was considered fit for discussion, that grand narrative also dictated the “bounds that are set on thinkable thought” (Chomsky, 1989, p. 147). The digital