

ECHO CHAMBERS = DEMOCRACY

David Weinberger

“ A democracy needs such “echo chambers,” even though their discussions inevitably appear like nothing but a bunch of homogenous supporters rah-rah-ing each other. ”

Talking together is the fundamental political act. While the Internet is certainly providing new features and new forums for talk, it is not transforming the near-genetic basics of how human conversation works. In this case (despite the overall premise of this anthology), the technology isn't changing the nature of democracy so much as clarifying our understanding of democracy. And that may be no less important.

Our confusion about the role of conversation in democracy is manifested in the persistence of the question whether the Net is enhancing or dismantling the political conversations we think essential to democracy. Rather than opening us up to a wider range of opinion, is the Internet barricading the doors of belief? Will we use the fact that we have more control online to hang out exclusively with people like ourselves, or will

we use the frictionlessness of web connectivity to engage with people from different walks of life? Will the Internet become an enhanced public forum or a set of “echo chambers?”

We’ve been unable to resolve these questions for three reasons.

First, the Net is too young and is not yet what it will be. We don’t know what effect it will have once its first generation of users has grown up with it as a ubiquitous part of civic life.

Second, the empirical research that exists is extraordinarily hard to interpret. Do we look at the patterns of links between websites? That doesn’t necessarily tell us how the information flows. Do results vary based on topic? Over time? By demographic? Perhaps we form echo chambers around political candidates but not cultural topics. Around TV shows but not movies. Around reality TV shows but not sitcoms? When we link to people with whom we disagree, are we cursing insensibly at them or engaging in a rational back-and-forth?

Third, even if we knew which vectors to follow, we would still have the enormously difficult task of comparing the results to the state of openness in the real world. As Yochai Benkler, the author of *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom*, says, the question is not whether the Net will make our political discourse perfect, but will it make it better. The law professor Cass Sunstein reports that only low double digit percentages of links point to opposing viewpoints, and Benkler is right in responding that he doesn’t know whether that’s a cause for rejoicing or despair. To what could we compare such statistics? To the percentage of space newspapers give over to views that oppose their editorial positions? Typically, that’s a few Op-Ed columns and some percentage of the half-page of Letters-to-the-Editor that papers run. How often do people read the columnists they disagree with? How much time in the day do you spend talking rationally and calmly about matters of state with people

with whom you disagree? How deep does the disagreement have to go before you are too angry to talk, or simply see no point in pursuing the discussion? Have you ever actually sat down for a long, respectful conversation with a neo-Nazi or an out-of-the-closet racist, a conversation in which you're open to having your ideas changed?

Me neither.

The question, therefore, is not whether the Internet is closing us down or opening us up, but rather what assumptions make the persistence of online echo chambers—the same kinds of cliquish gatherings that have always existed on land—seem simultaneously so urgent and so hard to resolve.

This urgency is undergirded by our belief that democracy is a conversational form of governance. It's not enough (we believe) that everyone gets to vote. Everyone also has to be able to talk about her beliefs in public so that those beliefs can be well informed and well reasoned. Yet when we look out across the Net, rather than seeing people engaged in deep conversation, we see clusters of people saying the most godawful things and, in so doing, giving permission to others to say even godawfuller things. There's no denying the despair we all feel when turning over certain rocks on the Net. Hearing sentiments that are forbidden from the real world public sphere uttered in the perceived privacy of the Internet legitimates those sentiments. This is worse than an echo chamber: It is a room full of people egging each other on to the most extreme and vile opinions. "You think you hate her? Here's how much I hate her..." is not a helpful trope in a democracy.

It would be foolish to argue that this never happens. But how much does it happen? How important are such echo chambers? What influence do they have on our democracy? And why have so many people focused on them as the example of the Net's effect on democracy? After all, we could look at hateful real-world groups and despair for our democracy, but we recognize that such groups are the evil we

have to live with in order to get the benefits of our freedom to assemble and to speak.

Echo chambers loom large in our thinking about the Web, not just in our thinking about democracy. In part it's because some of the echo chambers appear on highly popular sites. Thus, they are not equivalent to marginalized extremist groups such as the KKK or the Stormfront White Nationalist Community. Yet not all echo chambers are born equal. Shouldn't supporters of a candidate have a spot on the Web where they can be supporters together? Is a site an echo chamber if it fails to rigorously challenge its participants' every view, including a supporter's most basic commitment to his or her candidate?

Further, the most prominent political sites—other than candidates' sites—are not all the hatefests they're often portrayed as by the media. Yes, participants encourage one another in their beliefs, but not all of them are devoted to ever-tightening spirals of hatred. At the progressive site HuffingtonPost.com, reasonable disagreements are common. Present a calm argument against the progressive viewpoint of an article, and you're likely to find just the sort of vigorous debate we want for a healthy democracy, although it may be more rough and tumble than we'd imagined. Trolls and hand-grenade throwers are ignored, flamed, or moderated out, because, by definition, they're not looking for a genuine discussion. Likewise, at the conservative Redstate.com, reasonable discussion is the norm. (You can find plenty of examples of awful interchanges, but you can find plenty examples of everything on the Net.)

Our picture of the Net as a set of hateful echo chambers is encouraged, too, by the premise that the only sites that matter are those with hundreds of thousands of readers. That's how the mainstream media works. But the Web is characterized by a "long tail" of sites with relatively few readers. The echo chamber dynamic is facilitated by sites so large that the commenters are functionally unknown to one another,

and the way to get attention is to be more outrageous than the previous person. That dynamic is missing on the smaller sites that, in aggregate, constitute the bulk of web traffic.

Nevertheless, our focus on echo chambers, our notion that they typify Net dialogue, and our taking them at their worst, tell us something: Our image of what a democracy should sound like is misconceived.

For example, while we can map the links going into and out of a site, and we can analyze the political positions of people who write posts or comment on them, there is little actual data about the readers of these sites. Perhaps the readers are diverse, even though the writers and linkers are fairly homogeneous. Perhaps data would show that in fact we've achieved the democratic ideal on the Web after all: People of all persuasions are reading sites of every persuasion.

Pretty lame, eh? Sounds like I'm grasping at straws to defend the Net? I agree. In fact, that's my point. The previous paragraph is unconvincing because we all agree that people generally don't spend a lot of time reading that with which they disagree. We know that, on- or offline conversation simply doesn't work that way. Never did. Never will. Conversation finds an area of agreement and then explores the differences. It hardly ever in our lives is an isolated exercise of pure, unfettered rationality in which we suspend core beliefs in order to think again about what those beliefs ought to be. Even taking that as an ideal requires a picture of rationality that is unrealistic. Pure reason is a better corrective than architect.

So, what good does conversation really do in a democracy? It helps us work out differences based upon shared ground. Conversations shape our existing ideas and occasionally generate new ideas that are in line with our existing beliefs. We can probably count the times on one hand that conversation changes our minds about anything important.

That doesn't mean conversation is irrelevant or trivial. Even when

conversation doesn't change minds, it serves other social roles, including binding people together so they can engage in effective political action building trust, community and political commitment. From the outside that may look like an echo chamber, but that is how people come to make common cause. A democracy needs such "echo chambers," even though their discussions inevitably appear like nothing but a bunch of homogenous supporters rah-rah-ing each other. Conversation among people who are in basic agreement builds relationships and foments political movement. It also makes possible the rare conversion of beliefs, and, when done in the public forum of the Net, it leaves traces by which opposing views can understand—and thus tolerate—one another better.

The persistence of "echo chambers" on the Net is not a failure of democracy. Rather, their continued existence is evidence not only of the fractures in our society, but of the gap between our ideals of democracy and the mechanics of human social intercourse. We are never able to stand fully apart from our commitments in order to evaluate them in the cool light of rationality. If the Net does nothing but help us accept the primacy of standpoint over reason—while leaving reason some footholds in the wall of belief—it will have done our democracy the valuable service of making it more realistic.

About the Author

David Weinberger is a fellow at the Harvard Berkman Center for Internet & Society. He was an adviser on Net policy to the Dean and Edwards campaigns. He is a co-author of *The Cluetrain Manifesto* and author of *Everything Is Miscellaneous*.