

# **Trapped in the Feed: Echo Chambers, Algorithmic Media, and the Crisis of Representation**

**Quade Young**

## **Thesis Statement**

Echo chambers on algorithm driven platforms like TikTok and YouTube create fragmented realities, reinforcing users' pre-existing beliefs while narrowing exposure to diverse perspectives, ultimately distorting public discourse and undermining democratic media representation.

## **Introduction**

In today's digital world, social media platforms have evolved from tools of connection to powerful engines of information distribution and how someone shows their identity. Algorithms now curate what users see, shaping not only what content is popular but also what content is possible. My argument is that echo chambers (which are digitally enforced bubbles of similar content) distort representation in media by reinforcing ideas and suppressing diverse or different views. Platforms like TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram claim to democratize voice and visibility, yet their algorithmic structures often promote homogenized, polarizing, or narrowly tailored content and ideas that reflects and reinforces the user's existing beliefs.

This paper goes into the mechanics of echo chambers, their psychological and political impact, and the implications for media representation in the algorithmic age. The study will use key ideas from media theory and academic research on how people behave online to look at how these artificial algorithms affect how we think about truth, identity, and democracy.

## **What Are Echo Chambers and How Did We Get Here?**

The idea of an echo chamber isn't new, it actually started long before social media, with people surrounding themselves with like minded communities or news sources. With this, digital platforms have taken this to a whole other level. Echo chambers online are made when algorithms learn what we like and start showing us more of only just that. Over time, users mostly see content that lines up with their views, while different or opposing ideas are completely filtered out.

A study published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2021) shows how social media can limit exposure to diverse viewpoints, leading to the formation of groups of like minded users. These online communities often reinforce shared beliefs and can frame opposing views as not just different, but threatening or misinformation.

This cycle of reinforcement does more than just shape opinions but it even goes as far as to affect behavior and language. As people spend more time in these digital echo chambers, they begin to start using the same phrases, expressions, and even tones of the group they identify

with, similar to real life. It becomes less about having a belief and more about performing that belief in a recognizable way. This creates strong group identities and makes it harder for people to step outside their ideological bubbles. In some cases, even neutral or fact based content can be interpreted the wrong way simply because it comes from "the other side." The longer someone stays in an echo chamber, the harder it becomes to imagine or engage with different perspectives.

With all this being said, this tendency to seek out familiar views didn't start with social media. People have always gravitated toward information and communities that confirm their beliefs - whether it was through certain newspapers, talk radio, religious groups, or social circles. What changed with social media was the scale and speed. Tech companies built algorithms to keep users engaged for as long as possible, and they realized that showing people content they already agreed with was the most effective way to do that. The result was a built in system that prioritized emotional engagement and agreement over diversity of thought, this is because it keeps us scrolling, liking, and sharing. What was once a natural human habit became a powerful digital tool for capturing attention.

### **The Role of Algorithms in Shaping Representation**

People often assume that anyone can be seen on social media, and in theory, that's true. Although, visibility is actually filtered through algorithms that make judgments about what content is "worth" showing to the person. These judgments are based on things like watch time, likes, comments, and share - not on fairness, accuracy, or social value. That means algorithms often boost content that is dramatic, emotional, polarizing, or familiar, while filtering out content that is challenging or unfamiliar.

This sorting has huge implications for how people and communities are represented online. Safiya Noble's book on *Algorithms of Oppression* (2018) explains how search engines and social media platforms shape public knowledge. She argues that these systems do more than reflect bias, they continuously produce and amplify it. A perfect example - search engines are actually trained on biased data and give attention to what is more popular rather than what is fair or balanced, and have historically produced racist or sexist results due to such bias around the ideas.

On platforms like YouTube, we see similar trends to this. A person or user who watches a few conservative videos may be led, through the recommendation system, to much more far right conspiracy content. Although, Ledwich, Mark, and Anna Zaitsev (2019) argue that according to their findings, the algorithm mostly sends their visitors towards mainstream media channels, including those on the left wing and center, even when the suggestions can favor similar material. They ultimately came to the conclusion that the responsibility should instead be put on the user viewing it as well as the content producers.

So when we talk about representation in digital media, we're not just talking about who gets to post. We're talking about who sees it and how they're portrayed. Algorithms shape the digital landscape in ways that can exaggerate stereotypes, amplify harmful narratives, or silence

underrepresented groups altogether, but it is also **our responsibility as consumers to be educated about these ideologies** and recognize when we are being put in a toxic echo chamber.

## **TikTok and Political Echo Chambers**

TikTok takes the echo chamber game to a whole other level. The For You Page (the main page on TikTok) is completely personalized, meaning what I see and what you see could be totally different. And it happens fast. You like or watch a few videos, and the app adjusts your whole feed according to the data it collects (such as shares, likes, comments, etc.).

According to a 2024 study by Pradana and Efendi, it doesn't take much engagement to get pulled into a political filter bubble. A couple of interactions with left leaning or conservative content, and suddenly your feed becomes saturated with similar perspectives. Once that happens, escaping the bubble becomes difficult, due to the algorithm reinforcing the same types of content over and over.

On TikTok, these political echo chambers aren't just about ideology but they come with a distinct style. Leftist and conservative TikTok each have their own sounds, aesthetics, jokes, and trends. It's not just what users believe but more how they express and perform those beliefs. This makes switching between ideological spaces feel awkward, even alienating.

What's crazy is how much of this appears to be harmless fun. But beneath the surface of memes and viral challenges, TikTok is shaping real world political identities. These curated spaces can deepen division by portraying opposing viewpoints not just as incorrect, but as laughable or threatening. That affects more than just political discourse - it shapes how groups are perceived in culture at large.

## **What Echo Chambers Do to the Brain**

Echo chambers don't just change what we see - they change how we think. When you keep hearing the same things over and over, it starts to feel true. This is called the "illusory truth effect." Even if the info is wrong, repetition makes it feel right - even when you know it's truly false. It messes with your brain.

This is exactly how misinformation spreads. If a lie fits your worldview and you see it enough, you might believe it without even questioning it. And even when you *do* see opposing views, you're likely to dismiss them. That's the confirmation bias in action - we all tend to accept what confirms what we already believe and reject what doesn't.

A 2018 study by Bail et al. tried something interesting, they showed people content from the opposing political side on Twitter before it became known as "X." Instead of becoming more open, people actually got *more* extreme. So just seeing the other side isn't enough. If the trust isn't there, it doesn't matter.

Echo chambers can also mess with our emotions. Constant agreement feels good because it's validating. But this also makes a disagreement feel more personal and threatening. That's where tribal thinking kicks in or you're either with us or against us. That mindset makes empathy and compromise really hard and it twists how groups are perceived.

### **Not All Echo Chambers Are Bad**

Here's the thing, not every echo chamber is harmful. Some actually help people feel safe and supported, especially if they're not represented enough in mainstream media. These spaces can give people a voice, a community, and a sense of identity.

#NativeTikTok is a good example, giving indigenous creators a place to share their cultures, languages, humor, and activism, often in ways that aren't as visible in mainstream media. It's a space where people can reclaim their narratives, connect with others who share their heritage, and combat against harmful stereotypes or erasure. Another example is LGBTQ+ TikTok which gives queer youth a place to express themselves and see people like them. Disability Instagram is another one, full of community, education, and advocacy. These might look like echo chambers, but they serve a purpose - offering belonging in a world that often excludes.

So what's the difference between helpful and harmful echo chambers? It comes down to intention and impact. If a space is empowering people and pushing back on toxic stereotypes, that's different from a space that spreads misinformation and shuts out other views. Not all echo chambers are equal, and as consumers we need to get better at telling the difference.

### **Why It Matters for Democracy and Media Literacy**

When people are stuck in different information bubbles, it becomes hard to agree on basic facts. That messes with everything, especially when it comes to democracy. You can't have productive conversations or solve problems if everyone is looking from their own or a different version of reality.

The 2020 U.S. election and the Capitol riot on January 6 shows how extreme this type of thing can get. People weren't just angry but they truly believed the election was stolen. That belief came from the media bubbles they were in, and those bubbles were reinforced by social media algorithms.

This isn't just about politics. It's about how the media affects our ability to connect with each other. When people are misrepresented (or not represented at all) it leads to more division and less trust. It makes it harder to work together, even on things we all care about.

That's why digital literacy is so important. Consumers need to educate themselves and understand how these platforms work, how to check sources, and how to step outside their own bubbles. Social media companies also need to take more responsibility. The system currently rewards outrage and repetition when it should be rewarding truth and understanding. But users aren't powerless, we can challenge the feed by actively seeking out nuance and engaging with a broader range of perspectives.

## **Conclusion**

Echo chambers are shaping our digital lives in ways that go further than just politics or media preferences, but they are influencing how communities are represented, who gets seen, and how entire groups are understood or misunderstood. As algorithms quietly guide our attention, we need to be more aware of how that power impacts both the content we consume and the identities we recognize.

If we want a healthier media environment and a more connected society, we need to rethink how we use these platforms. That means being more mindful about what we consume and share, pushing for transparency from tech companies, and building digital habits that encourage curiosity instead of confirmation. Echo chambers aren't just a tech issue - they're a representation issue. Recognizing that is the first step toward creating more just, inclusive, and democratic media space.

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