**The Myth of the Filter Bubble**

**In the past few years, people have increasingly seen themselves as part of opposing teams. There are many different reasons  for this, but one gets blamed a lot: social media .**

**Social media divides us, makes us more extreme and less empathetic. It amplifies our differences and pushes us further apart.**

**New research shows that we might have been largely confused about why this is the case. It turns out that the social media  internet may uniquely interfere with the way our brains work, but not in the way you think.**

**The Myth of the Filter Bubble**

Algorithms give you exactly what you want, or what they think you want. You only see information  that shows you opinions that agree with yours, while other opinions or information are  filtered out.

Since you only see content close to your world view, more extreme and toxic opinions  suddenly seem less extreme and more acceptable. You are trapped in a dangerous filter bubble, and your view of  the world becomes narrower and more extreme.

But is that true? Extreme filter bubbles seem to be rather rare. Studies that investigated what people actually  look at online or are shown by search engines found little evidence that you are ideologically isolated.

It is the exact opposite: online, you are constantly faced with opinions  and world views that are not your own.

It turns out that the place where you are the most  ideologically isolated is your real life, in the real world, with real people. Your real world interactions with your friends, family, colleagues and neighbors are  much less diverse than your online bubble. The filter bubble exists  in your real life, not online.

**Question 1**: Online filter bubbles have been  the prevailing explanation as to why we’ve all started hating each other more over the  last two decades. If that's not the case, shouldn’t the internet open our minds and  make us more empathetic with each other?

**"Your brain is stupid"**

Human brains didn’t evolve to understand the true  nature of reality, but to navigate and maintain social structures.

Our ancestors desperately needed each other to survive, so our brains had to make sure we cooperated. That's why social  isolation or exclusion feels so horrible, because it was actually life threatening.

The way communities worked for  thousands of years is that, sure, you may have disliked a neighbour, but because  you lived close to each other, you also rooted for the same sports club or saw them at the church. You both thought that the people from the other village were idiots. Being physically  close made you familiar and created similarities that bridged the gap of different world views so  you didn’t murder each other.

**Social Sorting**

Our brains are not able  to process the amount of disagreement we encounter on the social internet.

The very  mechanisms that made it possible for our ancestors to work together in the first place  are derailed in ways we were not prepared for. Whether you want it to or not, your brain  sorts people by world views and opinions into teams.

On the digital town square, you encounter people who express opinions or share information that clash with your worldview. But unlike your neighbour, they don't support for your local sports club. You are missing the local social glue your  brain needs to align with them.

For your brain, the disagreement between yourself and them  becomes a central part of their identity.

The engagement driven social internet makes it  worse because it wants to keep you online as long as possible. And the most engaging emotion  is, unfortunately, anger.

The more angry you get, the more likely you are to share and engage,  and this leads to social media amplifying the most extreme and controversial opinions.

It optimizes not only to show us disagreement, but the worst disagreement possible. And because  your stupid brain is sorting people into teams, whatever the worst opinions are, it assigns the  same opinions to everybody on the other team.

**Is there something we can do?**

It is important to be  aware of what social media does to your brain. It's easier to change  yourself than to change the world, so you can self examine why you believe the  things you believe and whether you dismiss or believe information based on who the  person is who is stating that information. The internet comes with a lot of  ups and downs and just like we had to adapt from living in small tribes  to living in cities, we need to adapt to the information age where we have access to  billions of people. Evolution is too slow, so we need to find models that work with  what our brains are able to tolerate. One model that seemed to work well was the pre  social media internet old people might remember: Bulletin boards, forums, blogs. The  main difference to today was twofold: For one there were no algorithms fighting to  keep you online at anycost – at some point you were done with the internet for the  day, as mind blowing as this may sound.

But more importantly: The old internet  was very fractured, split into thousands of different communities, like small villages  gathering around shared beliefs and interests. These villages were separated from each  other by digital rivers or mountains. These communities worked because they mirrored  real life much more than social media: Each village had its own culture and set of rules.  Maybe one community was into rough humour and soft moderation, another had strict rules and banned  easily. If you didn’t play by the village rules, you would be banned – or you could just go and  move to another village that suited you better. So instead of all of us gathering in one  place, overwhelming our brains at a town square that in the end just leads to us  going insane, one solution to achieve less social sorting may be extremely simple:  go back to smaller online communities. Because what our stupid brains don’t realize  is that we are actually all on the same team: Humanity, on a wet rock speeding through space  in a universe that doesn’t think about us.