The Cycle of Hedonism: Why Echo Chambers Perpetuate a Lack of Contentment

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According to a 2018 study conducted by the Pew Research Center, approximately 97% of teenagers use at least one of several major online social media platforms. The vast majority of these teenagers report feeling positive while engaging with social media, describing its effect as making them “feel more connected to what’s going on in their friends’ lives.” (Pew Research Center). And yet, several studies have found social media to have an “addictive” effect on consumers, describing its possibility for engagement to be more attractive than the likelihood of social connection itself. In fact, according to a more recent study conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2022, about 54% of teenagers state that it would be difficult to “give up” social media (Pew Research Center). Following the original discovery of these revelations, more research was conducted on the distinction between the hedonistic tendencies social media invoked in its users and the satisfaction users would feel by interacting with others. As a result, researchers noticed a key difference in the function of the brain’s anticipatory and reward systems. According to Dr. Kent Berridge of the University of Michigan, the dopamine-based anticipatory system, which causes our feelings of desire, often causes more stimulation in the brain than the opioid-based reward system, which causes our feelings of pleasure. In other words, there is a limit on one’s perception of pleasure, but not on their capability to feel prolonged desire, which means that social media users may feel compelled to keep using the platform even as their contentment wanes (Berridge). Douglas Abrams, author of “Have You Renounced Pleasure?” elaborates on this idea, discussing how the “hedonic treadmill,” or the unsatisfactory nature of pursuing pleasure alone, is futile if the end goal is to maintain a state of fulfillment. If one’s feelings of contentment are brought upon solely by the physical pleasures they experience, their contentment will not last (Abrams). As such, in the case of addiction, where one’s compulsion to pursue pleasure exceeds their capability to control their desires, the amount of satisfaction one gains becomes minimal and they are never truly content. Today, with the advent of modern social media’s echo chambers, teenagers must face new types of online interactions, many of which entirely change the method by which teenagers interact online. These new spaces and the implications they propose raise a new question: To what extent do the falsities within social media’s echo chambers affect today's teenagers’ capability to maintain long-term states of contentment?

There are a wide variety of opinions surrounding how social media’s echo chambers influence teenagers’ ability to maintain a state of contentment, as the differences in the environment surrounding users that are a part of such closed communities in comparison to more open social media platforms lead to social interactions in the two kinds of communities to be wildly different and impact users quite divergently. According to Matteo Cinelli, from the Department of Environmental Sciences, Informatics and Statistics at the Ca’Foscari University of Venice, social media’s echo chambers form when exposure to diverse perspectives is limited and the formation of groups of like-minded users framing and reinforcing a shared narrative is promoted. As such, these echo chambers are often full of similar information and self-reinforcing opinions that create confirmation bias, and sometimes falsified information, also somewhat commonly known as “fake news” (Cinelli et. al). Although the confirmation bias in echo chambers allows users of the platforms they are in to feel momentary bursts of pleasure due to the satisfaction they feel from finding agreeable opinions, these temporary highs soon wane and the users are left in an unending pleasure cycle that does not offer them a long-term state of contentment without falling back into the same cycle (Berridge). Thus, despite the possible favorable effects of positive reinforcement that may occur within echo chambers, the detrimental effects that echo chambers are more likely to lead to—including tolerance to pleasure, addictive behaviors, and vulnerability to real-world conflicts—are not conducive to the ability to feel content in the long term by any degree, and, in fact, hinder this capability.

One of the largest hindrances for those utilizing echo chambers is the eventual tolerance to pleasure caused by the repetitive positive reinforcement that occurs within them. According to David Robert Grimes, journalist at The Guardian, social media’s echo chambers are often host to large streams of confirmation bias, where the reinforcement of other, similar opinions drowns out any point of counterargument and causes members to become wary of alternate points of view (Grimes). In other words, the confirmation bias in echo chambers creates and perpetuates a cycle of constant positive reinforcement in which opinions similar to ones previously discussed are held to a higher regard than dissimilar ones, which are scorned. More often than not, this cycle leads to opinionated topics within such echo chambers straying further and further from reality as members become more and more disillusioned with the world, but at the same time, these members of such echo chambers also gain repetitive bursts of pleasure or satisfaction corresponding to the consistent reinforcement of their opinions. And yet, according to ‪Masha Ksendzova, Ph.D. Candidate at Boston University with experience in the research of materialistic desire, it has been found that when similar types of pleasure are experienced repetitively in a small time period, the brain becomes desensitized to this pleasure, and requires more of it in order to achieve the same level of satisfaction as before (Ksendzova). Abrams concurs, stating, “...scientists have found that the more we experience any pleasure, the more we become numb to its effects and take its pleasures for granted…It is like a drug that must be taken in ever-greater quantities to produce the same high” (Abrams). In terms of echo chambers, this means that the pleasure one feels from echo chambers would, at some point, stop causing contentment in the user, and instead become the user’s baseline level of pleasure. As such, the more that users remain engaged with echo chambers, the harder it is for them to regain the same amount of pleasure. Thus, regardless of how much effort members of echo chambers expend in order to gain pleasure, they will never truly be content.

The confirmation bias within echo chambers does not simply lead to members becoming desensitized to positive reinforcement, however. In addition to the necessity for increasing levels of reinforcement, this repetitive pleasurable stimulus ends up causing a pleasure cycle, where users are unable to remove themselves from the echo chamber without feeling discontent at the removal of the pleasurable stimulus, even if one is already desensitized to it. According to Susanne Becker, Professor of Clinical Psychology in the Department of Cognitive and Clinical Neuroscience at the Central Institute of Mental Health at Heidelberg University in Germany, “...displeasure...is induced by events or stimuli that are perceived by an organism as negatively valenced and can be caused by the reception of a punishment or by the omission or withdrawal of a reward” (Becker et. al). Thus, if one tries to remove themselves from a pleasure cycle, such as one in an echo chamber, the resulting displeasure can make it nigh-impossible for them to complete the task. Abrams aligns with this idea, stating, “One could be good at maintaining positive states but easily fall into an abyss of a negative state from which one had a hard time recovering” (Abrams). In other words, the displeasure one feels at any point (such as the displeasure one feels by removing themself from a pleasure cycle) could have a strong enough effect to render one incapable of recovering for the time being. Thus, if one is within the pleasure cycle caused by an echo chamber, they may not be able to leave due to the backlash caused by such an attempt, leading to addictive behavior without an end in sight. As such, one engaging with echo chambers will never permanently retain a state of contentment.

Not all researchers would agree with this assessment, however. Berridge, for example, stated that the lack of conflicting ideas (and the increase in reinforcement) within certain aspects of social media leads to a decrease in unexpected anticipation, which means that the dopamine (anticipatory) system is not used. Instead, the opioid (pleasure) system is what is called into action, and the real enjoyment any one user experiences would only occur as a result of contentment rather than the pleasure cycle (Berridge). Since the relevance of opinions within echo chambers is based upon the confirmation bias within such echo chambers, there would be very few opinions causing an anticipatory effect, and as such, pleasure cycles causing addictive behavior would not occur, according to Berridge. Instead, Berridge may agree that the calm state brought about by the lack of conflicting opinions would lead to a state of contentment that would outweigh any pleasure cycle effect that would occur.

In addition to debate regarding the anticipatory effect, other critics of the idea that echo chambers cause pleasure cycles that have an addictive effect argue that the level of contentment one feels from echo chambers outweighs any pleasure cycle effect that may occur, as the calm state brought about by the lack of anxiety-inducing factors caused by conflicting opinions is conducive to a fulfilling state of mind. Andrew O’Hagan discusses a similar scenario as he reminisces over his time watching a Disney film. He states, “Never for a second did it appear to me implausible. Never for a moment did it look unreal or exaggerated or in any way fake. If it was fabricated or designed, then it appeared so, to me, only in the way life was fabricated or designed…” (O’Hagan). Similar to O’Hagan’s feelings while watching the film, members of echo chambers often have opinions that are constantly being reinforced by others, where the truths of reality are hidden by the “truths” they wish to perceive. Some may assume that similar to the “magic” of Disney, the falsities of echo chambers may provide users with an escape from reality, so that they can remove the threat of their negative anticipations. However, this idea is fundamentally flawed. After all, echo chambers are not considered “temporary escapes” by those who are inside them. And when the echo chambers do eventually break, they absolutely shatter the views of those who are inside, as they are unprepared for the reality that they then truly see. According to C Thi Nguyen, an assistant professor of philosophy at Utah Valley University, the only way to break an echo chamber is to “attack the echo chamber at its root and repair that broken trust,” in reference to how members of echo chambers try to undermine the credibility of relevant authority figures. When this occurs, however, members of the echo chamber suddenly become aware of the worldview that defined what they refused to believe, and are thus faced with a reaction of extreme shock and displeasure, rather than pleasure at the unanticipated effect (Nguyen). And although Berridge does believe that unanticipated effects are often precursors to the dopamine cycle, he would likely agree with Abrams that the shock factor of one immensely displeasurable realization about the world could and would instead destabilize any contentment in effect, eventually leading to a complete lack of contentment for such a member of an echo chamber.

The advent of echo chambers today has made social media a much more conducive place for effects such as pleasure cycles but has also made it far less conducive to open-ended discussions involving opinions beyond those affected by confirmation bias. As such, it becomes increasingly important to understand the extent to which echo chambers have an effect on the level of contentment experienced by their users, particularly the teenagers of today. Despite the possible use for echo chambers to lead to contentment via a superficial “escape from reality,” echo chambers are known to cause a tolerance to pleasure, which makes it far more difficult for members to gain the same levels of satisfaction from them with recurrent use. As a result of this pleasure tolerance and the anticipatory effect, echo chambers have also caused pleasure cycles, which have, in turn, led to addictive behaviors, in which the displeasure caused by the attempt at leaving an echo chamber hinders those who may hope to halt themselves and stop using them. Even those who can escape or are forcefully removed from echo chambers are often unprepared for the reality of the world. Unless echo chambers become more like current social media, and break down the regular behavior of discrediting reputable figures or evidence, those who are inside will always become stuck in the pleasure cycle and will be unprepared when the echo chambers eventually break.

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