DEVELOPING DIGITAL AND MEDIA LITERACY SKILLS

Social Media and the News

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Social Media Creates Echo Chambers

One of the unique features of social media is its ability to curate specific content for individual users. Social media algorithms take data such as likes, shares, comments, and searches to determine what a person is interested in seeing online. Then these algorithms promote content that matches what a person wants to see and encourages engagement on the platform. The strategy is a winning one for social media companies. The higher user engagement rises, the more likely it is that advertisers will buy valuable ad space on these platforms—and use the algorithms to place the ads in front of the users most likely to respond.

However, there is an unintended consequence of creating tailored social media feeds that feel comfortable and familiar. It also creates echo chambers in which people increasingly see only content with similar viewpoints and perspectives because that is what the algorithms promote. At the same time, the algorithms push content that does not agree with a person's interests and views lower in their feed, so they are less likely to see it. As a result, users miss out on a wide range of ideas and topics, creating a biased media experience.

Echo Chambers

Information and news come from many sources and represent many viewpoints. But when people are repeatedly exposed only to information, perspectives, and opinions that reflect what they already know or believe, they may have trouble even considering other facts or views. This is often described as an echo chamber. Echo chambers reinforce a person's existing views by limiting the scope of what that person reads or hears on any given topic.

Echo chambers are supported by confirmation bias, a type of bias in which a person tends to pay attention to and favor information that confirms what they already believe. Confirmation bias is a universal human trait; everyone has some of it. On social media, confirmation bias can funnel users into groups where most people think the same way and hold similar beliefs. "Social media sites foster confirmation bias because of their basic function. Regardless of the specific algorithm, social media sites like Facebook, Reddit, Twitter, Instagram, and even YouTube, serve the same basic function: to connect groups of like-minded users

Social media algorithms use data such as likes, shares, and comments to determine what individual users are interested in seeing online.

> "The fact that social media platforms confirm what we already believe is the reason many people use them in the first place. If the platforms didn't do that, they wouldn't be successful."[27]
>
> —David McRaney, *Science* journalist

together based on shared content preferences,"[26] says Marielle DeVos, an American University student in political science.

Confirmation bias may even explain why people are drawn to social media. "The fact that social media platforms confirm what we already believe is the reason many people use them in the first place. If the platforms didn't do that, they wouldn't be successful,"[27] says *Science* journalist David McRaney.

Many people experienced echo chambers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Perhaps they did not know anyone who had died of COVID-19. Perhaps they had a long-standing distrust of government, so when a friend posted an article on Facebook about pharmaceutical companies conspiring with politicians to create the COVID-19 scare to control people, this article rang true. Then these people began searching social media to learn more and turned up articles that described COVID-19 as noth-

A man is treated for COVID-19 in a hospital. During the COVID-19 pandemic, social media platforms spread misinformation about the origin and severity of the disease.

The Exposure Effect

Social media promotes another type of bias called the exposure effect. Exposure effect is the idea that when a person is repeatedly exposed to the same news or information from many sources, that person is more likely to believe and reshare it. While this bias is part of human nature, social media makes it easier for people to be bombarded with the same information from many sources. When information goes viral on social media and is shared over and over by many users, the exposure effect causes users to pay more attention to it. They believe that if everyone is sharing information, it must be important. Social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram often place popular content prominently in users' feeds, along with how many views, likes, and shares it has gotten. However, just because something is popular does not mean it is accurate or even newsworthy.

ing more than the flu. They may have joined a new social media group in which they encountered other people who expressed similar suspicions about the dangers of COVID-19.

Echo chambers are not unique to social media. They exist anywhere people get information, whether online or offline. However, the internet and social media make it easier for echo chambers to thrive because the whole point of social media is to provide an easy way to connect with like-minded people, groups, and news sources.

Filter Bubbles

Social media platforms and the algorithms they use to present personalized feeds create a type of echo chamber called a filter bubble. The term *filter bubble* refers to the way social media and internet search engines filter information before it reaches a user. Anywhere a person goes online, algorithms behind the scenes track the websites they visit and what they click on. For example, a user might search for information about skis. Suddenly, multiple advertisements and content about skiing, ski equipment, and ski vacations pop up on the person's social

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