

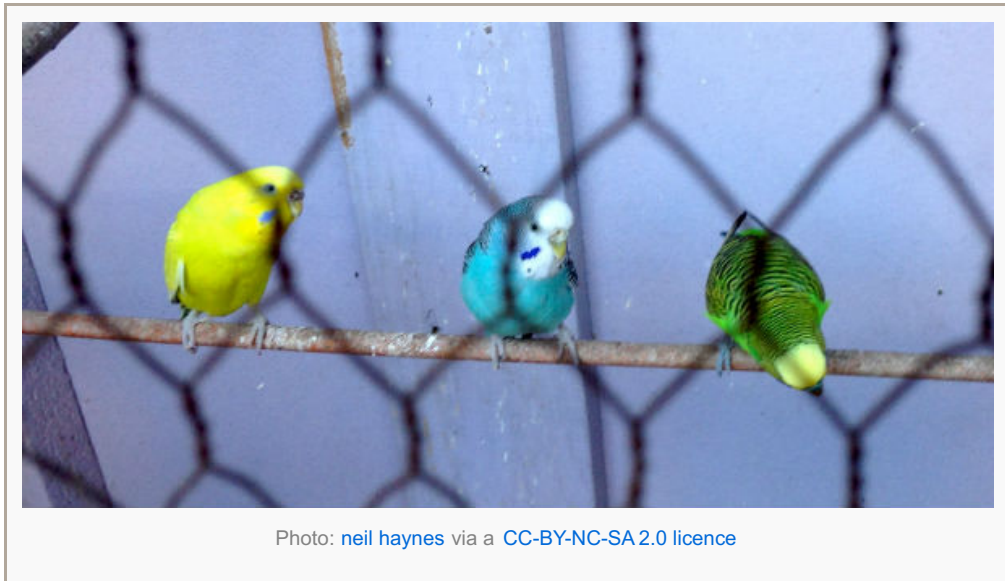
A prison of our own design: divided democracy in the age of social media

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2017-4-3

*Social media companies such as Facebook can sort us ever more efficiently into groups of the like-minded, creating echo chambers that amplify our views, writes **Cass R Sunstein** in an edited extract from **#Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media**. It's no accident that on some occasions, people of different political views cannot even understand each other. The implications for democratic governance and individual freedom should not be underestimated.*



Do echo chambers matter? Exactly why? Some people might not love it if their fellow citizens are living in information cocoons, but in the abstract, that is up to each of us, a reflection of our freedom to choose. If people like to spend their time with Mozart, football, climate change deniers, or Star Wars, so what? Why worry?

The most obvious answer is also the narrowest: violent extremism. If like-minded people stir one another to greater levels of anger, the consequences can be literally dangerous. Terrorism is, in large part, a problem of hearts and minds, and violent extremists are entirely aware of that fact. They use social media to recruit people, hoping to increase their numbers or inspire “lone wolves” to engage in murderous acts. They use social media to promote their own view of the world, hoping to expand their reach. The phenomena to be discussed here are contributors to many of the most serious threats we face in the world today.

More broadly, echo chambers create far greater problems for actual governance, even if they do not produce anything like violence or criminality. Most important, they can lead to terrible policies or a dramatically decreased ability to converge on good ones. Suppose (as I believe) that the United States should enact reasonable controls on gun purchases—saying, for example, that those on terrorist watch lists should not be allowed to buy guns, unless they can show that they present no danger. Or suppose (as I also believe) that some kind of legislation controlling greenhouse gas emissions would be a good idea. (Perhaps you disagree with these illustrations; if so, choose your own.) In the United States, political polarisation on such issues is aggravated by voters’ self-segregation into groups of like-minded people, which can make it far more difficult to produce sensible solutions. Even if the self-segregation involves only a small part of the electorate, they can be highly influential, not least because of the intensity of their beliefs. Public officials are accountable to the electorate, and even if they would much like to reach some sort of agreement, they might find that if they do so, they will put their electoral future on the line. Social media certainly did

not cause the problem, but in #Republic, things are worse than they would otherwise be.

I have worked in various capacities with the federal government and met on many occasions with members of Congress. With respect to important issues, Republicans have said to me, “Of course we would like to vote with the Democrats on that one, but if we did, we would lose our jobs.” There is no question that behind closed doors, Democrats would on occasion say the same thing about working with Republicans. Both sides are worried about the effects of echo chambers—about an outburst of noisy negativity from segments of constituents, potentially producing serious electoral retribution. Social media increase the volume of that noise, and to that extent, they heighten polarisation.

Over the last generation, the United States has seen an explosion in “partyism”—a kind of visceral, automatic dislike of people of the opposing political party. Partyism certainly isn’t as horrible as racism; no one is enslaved or turned into a lower caste. But according to some measures, partyism now exceeds racism. In 1960, just 5 percent of Republicans and 4 percent of Democrats said that they would feel “displeased” if their child married outside their political party. By 2010, those numbers had reached 49 and 33 percent, respectively—far higher than the percentage of people who would be “displeased” if their child married someone with a different skin colour. In hiring decisions, political party matters: many Democrats do not want to hire Republicans, and vice versa, to such an extent that they would favour an inferior candidate of their preferred political party. Here as elsewhere, we should be cautious before claiming causation; it would be reckless to say that social media and the Internet more generally are responsible for the remarkable increase in partyism. But there is little doubt that a fragmented media market is a significant contributing factor.

By itself, partyism is not the most serious threat to democratic self-government. But if it decreases government’s ability to solve serious problems, then it has concrete and potentially catastrophic consequences for people’s lives. I have offered the examples of gun control and climate change; consider also immigration reform and even infrastructure—issues on which the United States has been unable to make progress in recent years, in part because of the role of echo chambers. To be sure, the system of checks and balances is designed to promote deliberation and circumspection in government, and prevent insufficiently considered movement. But paralysis was hardly the point—and a fragmented communications system helps to produce paralysis.

There is another problem. Echo chambers can lead people to believe in falsehoods, and it may be difficult or impossible to correct them. Falsehoods take a toll. One illustration is the belief that President Barack Obama was not born in the United States. As falsehoods go, this one is not the most damaging, but it both reflected and contributed to a politics of suspicion, distrust, and sometimes hatred. A more harmful example is the set of falsehoods that helped produce the vote in favour of “Brexit” (the exodus of the United Kingdom from the European Union) in 2016. Even if Brexit was a good idea (and it wasn’t), the vote in its favour was made possible, in part, by uses of social media that badly misled the people of the United Kingdom. In the 2016 presidential campaign in the United States, falsehoods spread like wildfire on Facebook. Fake news is everywhere. To date, social media have not helped produce a civil war, but that day will probably come. They have already helped prevent a coup (in Turkey in 2016).

These are points about governance, but, as I have suggested, there is an issue about individual freedom as well. When people have multiple options and the liberty to select among them, they have freedom of choice, and that is exceedingly important. As Milton Friedman emphasised, people should be “free to choose.” But freedom requires far more than that. It requires certain background conditions, enabling people to expand their own horizons and to learn what is true. It entails not merely satisfaction of whatever preferences and values people happen to have but also circumstances that are conducive to the free formation of preferences and values. The most obvious way to curtail those circumstances is censorship and authoritarianism—the boot on the face, captured by George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: “If you want a vision of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face—forever.” A world of limitless choices is incalculably better than that. But if people are sorting themselves into communities of like-minded types, their own freedom is at risk. They are living in a prison of their own design.

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