

# Building bias: How social media closes minds

The Internet and Social Media have provided humankind with the tools to be the most informed and connected generation that has ever lived. At a moment's notice, a person can access the whole of humanity's intellectual achievements, speak directly to another individual across the world, and then watch a video on YouTube of cats playing piano.

In the halls of cyberspace people can improve themselves in just about every conceivable way, or they can—as T.S. Eliot phrased it—be “distracted from distraction by distraction.” Yet, this virtual community has not produced the sort of E-utopia that one might expect would arise from limitless knowledge, communication, and interconnectivity. In fact, it seems to have produced the opposite. In a world with everything at our fingertips, we're finding ways to keep civil discourse and all manner of progress at arm's reach.

One of the key features of social media is its customizability. One can build their own virtual space, replete with their favorite websites, preferred channels, and select friends. There is almost total autonomy in the content that passes across the computer screen. Naturally, people choose what is most familiar and comfortable. From an ideological standpoint, they will furnish their cyber dwelling with likeminded news outlets. On sites like Facebook many people will either delete or unfollow friends and acquaintances with divergent points of view (all too often people will denigrate the close-mindedness of, say, Trump supporters in a post where they declare that they will unfriend anyone who supports him. Irony can be difficult to detect for some).

The problem with this selectivity is a person creates a cocoon

for themselves, in which they only encounter safe and agreeable content. The news outlets will share similar posts, as will friends and family, thereby cementing their preconceived notions and offering no challenges whatsoever. They, in effect, create a sterile groupthink, devoid of any contention. This is not a good way to develop a well-rounded view of the world or current events.

Over time, the bias becomes calcified to the point where the appearance of a different opinion seems perverse or absurd. This phenomenon runs both ways and drives apart the political poles, producing opinions that are beyond the pale and certainly beyond compromise.

For example, conservatives might have a feed comprising Alex Jones and Breitbart-esque commentary on how Hillary Clinton is the Devil Incarnate and belongs in a maximum security prison. Liberals scroll past link upon link documenting Trump's many off-color remarks and have him pegged as a one-dimensional villain.

In that scenario, any valid points or policy prescriptions from either candidate are drowned by the partisan white noise that pervades these websites. Instead, people will linger in the intellectual prisons of their own creation. This makes a change of mind nearly impossible.

The best thing to do is to reevaluate your own piece of cyber real estate. Build a place with a variety of perspectives. Familiarize yourself with the positions of your ideological foils. Know their stances better than they do, and begin your arguments from there. Read. Learn.

Grow. Don't dwell in some myopic land where you're spoon fed red meat from comfortable sources. Gather as much information as you can. Be informed. Cyberspace is a seemingly endless world of knowledge; we might as well not stand in one place.