

An essay on echo chambers.

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July 2018

Echo chambers are a significant influence in our society and nation. The purpose of this paper is to gain better understanding of the character and nature of echo chambers so that we can be prepared to survive the echo chamber gauntlet.



PREFACE

Motivated Reasoning

The processes of motivated reasoning are a type of inferred justification strategy which is used to mitigate [cognitive dissonance](#). When people form and cling to false beliefs despite overwhelming evidence, the phenomenon is labeled "motivated reasoning". In other words, "rather than search rationally for information that either confirms or disconfirms a particular belief, people actually seek out information that confirms what they already believe".^[2] This is "a form of implicit emotion regulation in which the brain converges on judgments that minimize negative and maximize positive affect states associated with threat to or attainment of motives"

Some time around 1970, Ford Motor Company in Louisville, Ky initiated a program to hire hard core unemployable people to work as assembly operators. At that time I was a General Foreman in production assembly. Because of the dramatic challenges of integrating the hard core unemployable into the existing culture, a series of training sessions were conducted to better equip management employees. It was in one of those sessions that I encountered a life altering experience.

There were approximately 40-50 salaried employees participating in the training session. We were subjected to a variety of lectures and exercises designed to help us understand and deal with the cultural differences we would face as we managed what seemed to be unmanageable people.

The instructor told us we would be doing a problem solving exercise. We could not take notes but were to listen carefully to the problem and determine individually the correct answer. The problem was simple enough. It involved the sale of a mule between two farmers. There were three or four purchases and repurchases for different prices. The problem to be solved was who finally owned the mule and how much did the seller profit?

Given a few moments to think about our answers, the instructor asked us to share our answers. I thought that was unnecessary since it was such simple problem and I had determined the correct answer almost immediately. Expecting that everyone else would have the same answer, I was surprised that there were four or five different answers. At that point I was feeling some satisfaction in having the correct answer.

Next we were instructed to form groups based on our answers. Four or five groups emerged. The number of people in the groups varied from 10-12, 7-8, etc and my group with 4. Again, I was a bit surprised how few had gotten the answer correct. Once we were grouped, the instructor told us to discuss our answer within our group. Following that discussion, we were told that we could change groups if we so desired. The largest group gained some members, one of whom was from my group.

The next step involved each group sending a representative to the other groups to convince them that their answer was correct. Following some passionate argument and pleas, once again we were given the opportunity to change our answer and join the agreeing group. I was pleased that none of my group departed but mystified that none joined us.

The final step involved each group sending a representative to work out their answer in writing on the white board. I represented our group and was pleased at how clearly I was able to illustrate the correct answer. Confident that people would finally realize how mistaken they were, I welcomed the final opportunity for people to change their minds and join my group.

I watched with disappointment as another of my group departed for the largest group. No one joined my group. There were now three groups. My group with myself and one other, a second group with 4-5 people and the large group with everyone else. At this point, it is important to understand how invested I had become in the exercise. My mind was racing and my emotions were deepening. I was truly flabbergasted at the results of the exercise. It had become personal.

To conclude the exercise, the instructor chose two people to represent the farmers and provided money for the transaction. I should not have been surprised that he chose me to be one of the farmers. To assure that there would be no question about the outcome, we methodically acted out the transactions. Carefully we passed the money with each exchange. At the conclusion, I possessed the money and was asked to count it for everyone to see. Convinced I had calculated the answer correctly, I gladly complied.

WRONG! I was wrong. There was no doubt.

The impact of that moment for me cannot be overstated. I was embarrassed and shamed. My arrogance and self-righteousness were exposed. How could I have been so deaf and blind? Any thought of humble acceptance escaped me. Thankfully the obvious outcome spared me the unfamiliar words: "I was wrong". Almost immediately, the thought crossed my mind, "If I was wrong about this, what else am I wrong about?"

Perhaps, for the first time in my life, I came to grips with the possibility that I could be wrong. That experience altered the lens through which I view myself and the world around me for the rest of my life. For that reason the subject of echo chambers has attracted my attention.

It is within the confines of echo chambers that we are shielded from the possibility of being wrong and subject to all the perils of such.

Table of Contents

I. Introduction

II. Echo Chambers - Really?

III. The Importance of Being Wrong

IV. To Err is Human, To Admit it Superhuman

V. Embracing Our Wrongness

VI. Why Is It So Important To Be Right?

VII. Who Are We?

VIII. A Better Question

IX. Surviving and Thriving in Echo Chambers

X. Surviving and Thriving in Echo Chambers - Self-Delusion

XI. Surviving and Thriving in Echo Chambers - Self Awareness

XII. The Perfect Echo Chamber

XIII. Pathway to Surviving and Thriving in Echo Chambers

INTRODUCTION

An echo chamber is a metaphorical description of a situation in which information, ideas, or beliefs are amplified or reinforced by communication and repetition inside a defined system. Inside a figurative echo chamber, official sources often go unquestioned and different or competing views are censored, disallowed, or otherwise underrepresented. The echo chamber effect reinforces a person's own present world view, making it seem more correct and more universally accepted than it really is. (Wikipedia)

...an unfortunate and largely unintended consequence of the rise of social media is that instead of being better informed and exposed to ever-broadening viewpoints, research shows that Americans today are more polarized and draw from shrinking pools of news. R. Sunstein

In the last decade or more, our government and society in general has become more polarized. The ability (willingness) to communicate with those who do not share our views/beliefs has become an endangered species. There seems to be general agreement that a prevalence of echo chambers is a significant factor contributing to the state of our society.

Echo chambers are ubiquitous. Social media, news outlets, blog feeds, churches, families, neighborhoods, communities. If there is a context where differences exist, a “safe room” (echo chamber) will emerge and like-minded people will seek refuge.

Echo chambers are not a new phenomenon. They are the consequence of human nature's inclination to tribalism.

Tribalism is pervasive, and it controls a lot of our behavior, readily overriding reason. Think of the inhuman things we do in the name of tribal unity. Wars are essentially, and often quite specifically, tribalism.

Genocides are tribalism – wipe out the other group to keep our group safe – taken to madness. Racism that lets us feel that our tribe is better than theirs, parents who end contact with their own children when they dare marry someone of a different faith or color, denial of evolution or climate change or other basic scientific truths when they challenge tribal beliefs. What stunning evidence of the power of tribalism!

How Tribalism Overrides Reason, and Makes Risky Times More Dangerous

Not unlike other facets of our society, echo chambers are benefactors (victim?) of the digital and technological revolution.

Since we've become so attached to social media, we are less and less required to interact with people who disagree with us. Technology allows us to reach across state lines (and even oceans) to find people who share our beliefs and values. Until social media designers can address the fact that these platforms allow the increasing polarization of users into small, tight-knit communities, stopping the proliferation of misinformation will continue to be a challenge. [The social media “echo chamber” is real](#)

I would suggest that technology has unleashed the ever present malevolent potential of echo chambers in ways never imagined. Some would suggest that the existence of democracy is threatened.

The subject of echo chambers has become increasingly personally relevant. After recognizing my self imposed political/social echo chamber, I made a decision to dampen the echoes and open myself to different sources.

My efforts have met with mixed success. The peril of trading one echo chamber for another is real, namely will most likely join another echo chamber. The most significant result of my decision, thus far, is that it has become a catalyst for more serious thought and investigation into the character and nature of echo chambers. This paper is an attempt to address questions, ideas and issues that I have encountered related to echo chambers.

Echo Chambers - Really?

Wrestling with the idea and implications of echo chambers requires more than a cute meme and a few pithy quotes. After all, who wants to consider that their comfortable social/ideological confines may be a threat to democracy.

I remain convinced that awareness and understanding of echo chambers is important to personal and societal well-being. However, it is too simplistic to assign echo chambers sole responsibility for the deep division in our country. To do so is akin to assigning parents sole responsibility for their children's outcome. Echo chambers are incubators for our development as human beings, for good or ill. Echo chambers greatest peril for ill is their appeal to and nurturing of our natural inclinations toward tribalism, group think, confirmation bias and certainty.

There is equal opportunity for good. Echo chambers can function as a "deliberating enclave".

... "enclave deliberation," ... defined as "that form of deliberation that occurs within more or less insulated groups, in which like-minded people speak mostly to one another." ... (Sunstein)

The main value of deliberating enclaves is not that they increase conversation across differences, but that they enable like-minded people to make progress in what they agree about.

The real problem with echo chambers therefore isn't that they consist of people who believe the same things and whose discussions strengthen their beliefs. The real problem is that some of them are wrong — in their beliefs, their methodology, or, often, in both. [David Weinstein](#)

The most significant human trait that sustains and encourages the proliferation of and participation in harmful echo chambers is our unwillingness to entertain the possibility that we may be wrong.

The Importance of Being Wrong

A whole lot of us go through life assuming that we are basically right , basically all the time , about basically everything : about our political and intellectual convictions , our religious and moral beliefs , our assessment of other people , our memories , our grasp of facts . As absurd as it sounds when we stop to think about it , our steady state seems to be one of unconsciously assuming that we are very close to omniscient .

Far from being a sign of intellectual inferiority , the capacity to err is crucial to human cognition . Far from being a moral flaw , it is inextricable from some of our most humane and honorable qualities : empathy , optimism , imagination , conviction , and courage . And far from being a mark of indifference or intolerance , wrongness is a vital part of how we learn and change . Thanks to error , we can revise our understanding of ourselves and amend our ideas about the world .

... it is ultimately wrongness , not rightness , that can teach us who we are .

Schulz, Kathryn. Being Wrong: Adventures in the Margin of Error

The above quotes capture the paradox each of us find ourselves in as we strive for meaningful and authentic lives. An unrelenting pursuit of rightness is pitted against our incontrovertible fallibility. Amazingly, left to our own devices, rightness will almost always win out.

Our desire for rightness leads us to echo chambers where our “rightness” is amplified and error is filtered out. Like a butterfly from a cocoon, we emerge in the beauty of our rightness, confirmed in our infallibility.

The cost of rightness can be high.

The avoidance of controversial issues or alternative solutions creates a loss of individual creativity, uniqueness and independent thinking. Rightness binds and blinds us.

An “illusion of invulnerability” (an inflated certainty of our rightness) can prevail.

Stereotyping of, and dehumanizing actions toward, dissenting persons can develop. As true believers we can produce fantasies that don’t match reality.

Interpersonal communication outside our echo chamber is stifled. Immersion in the comfortable confines of an echo chamber may result in significant losses, not the least of which, can be family and community relationships. Echo chambers reinforce our natural tendency to restrict our relationships rather than expand our social interactions.

Residing within an echo chamber strips our lives of serendipity and wonder. We trade off the opportunity to engage the endless diversity of the world around us.

We are not unlike “an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.” (C.S. Lewis)

There is no price too high to maintain our rightness.

Embracing Our Wrongness

The most significant human trait that sustains and encourages the proliferation of and participation in harmful echo chambers is our unwillingness to entertain the possibility that we may be wrong. Without awareness and acceptance of our human fallibility, echo chambers will be a natural consequence in a society that is increasingly polarized.

...embracing our fallibility not only lessens our likelihood of erring , but also helps us think more creatively , treat each other more thoughtfully , and construct freer and fairer societies .
Schulz, Kathryn.

The challenge is how do we cultivate a healthy understanding and acceptance of our “wrongness”?

To err is to wander , and wandering is the way we discover the world ; and , lost in thought , it is also the way we discover ourselves . Being right might be gratifying , but in the end it is static , a mere statement . Being wrong is hard and humbling , and sometimes even dangerous , but in the end it is a journey , and a story . Who really wants to stay home and be right when you can don your armor , spring up on your steed and go forth to explore the world ? True , you might get lost along the way , get stranded in a swamp , have a scare at the edge of a cliff ; thieves might steal your gold , brigands might imprison you in a cave , sorcerers might turn you into a toad — but what of that ?
Schulz, Kathryn.

My motivation for writing about echo chambers comes from a deep concern about the political and cultural climate that exists in our country today. The depth of division and polarization rivals the civil rights and Vietnam eras. Although protests and violence have not matched those eras, it seems that the potential for doing so is real.

It is my belief that echo chambers are an amplification device that fuels division and polarization that dominate our cultural landscape. Echo chambers are not new but a natural consequence of our desires as humans to confirm our rightness. My goal is not to eliminate echo chambers, they will always exist. What is important is to understand the dramatic transformation that echo chambers are experiencing through continued technological advances, particularly the emergence of social media and the impact they have on our culture.

We have unprecedented access to information in unlimited quantities controlled by algorithms designed to maximize information relevant to our personal lives. Such access has potential for positive impact on our lives. The driving force for the development and continued enhancement of social media is economic, not social/political or altruistic. Unfortunately, an unintended consequence of social media, i.e. Facebook et al, is that it has become the drug of choice that feeds our insatiable appetite to confirm and reinforce our rightness. Essentially, our Facebook (or other social media) echo chamber is our

“safe space” where we can fire our salvos of sometimes vitriolic and/or hateful rhetoric. Protected by anonymity and absence of personal interaction or accountability, we can finally fulfill our dream of “telling them what I really think”. A cursory review of comments in response to a controversial post can be shocking and disheartening.

Whatever our politics, inhabiting a bubble makes us more shrill. Nicholas Kristof

The dynamics of echo chambers feed our natural inclinations toward tribalism. Tribalism is pervasive, and it controls a lot of our behavior, readily overriding reason. Think of the inhuman things we do in the name of tribal unity. Wars are essentially, and often quite specifically, tribalism. Genocides are tribalism – wipe out the other group to keep our group safe – taken to madness. Racism that lets us feel that our tribe is better than theirs, parents who end contact with their own children when they dare marry someone of a different faith or color. Denial of evolution or climate change or other basic scientific truths when they challenge tribal beliefs. What stunning evidence of the power of tribalism!

It matters little whether our cause is right or wrong in terms of the effects of echo chambers on our society. As long as we believe we are right, we will find justification for our words and actions. The digital age has unleashed the latent malevolent nature of echo chambers.

To Err is Human

The real problem with echo chambers therefore isn't that they consist of people who believe the same things and whose discussions strengthen their beliefs. The real problem is that some of them are wrong — in their beliefs, their methodology, or, often, in both. [David Weinstein](#)

The most significant human trait that sustains and encourages the proliferation of and participation in harmful echo chambers is our unwillingness to entertain the possibility that we may be wrong. Without awareness and acceptance of our human fallibility, we will be vulnerable to the ill effects of echo chambers.

...embracing our fallibility not only lessens our likelihood of erring , but also helps us think more creatively , treat each other more thoughtfully , and construct freer and fairer societies .

Schulz, Kathryn.

The challenge is how do we cultivate a healthy understanding and acceptance of our “wrongness”?


This paper is not written to initiate/encourage a movement against echo chambers. My motivation for writing grows out of personal participation in my own echo chambers and significant life experiences that revealed my fallibility. Through no effort of my own, I have come to understand the impact and importance of echo chambers in my life. It is my purpose to present each reader with an opportunity for reflection and introspection. This is personal not corporate or political.

It can be helpful to use the concept of natural frequency to understand the dynamics of echo chambers and how acceptance of our fallibility can reduce, perhaps eliminate, the negative/destructive aspects of echo chambers.

Natural frequency is the [frequency](#) at which a system tends to [oscillate](#) in the absence of any driving or [damping](#) force.¹

What is meant by resonance?

- If a system is [forced to oscillate at its natural frequency](#) ' f_0 ', the [amplitude](#) of the motion will increase and we say that the system is in **resonance**.
- [All objects have a natural frequency](#). For example a wine glass will ring at its natural frequency f_0 .
- If someone sings loudly enough at f_0 , the glass can be made to [resonate and the amplitude may grow enough to shatter the glass](#).



Understanding that I am not a physicist, let me propose an analogy of natural frequency to the physics of echo chambers.

Supposing the natural frequency of the echo chamber in which we reside is f [rightness]. An external application of f [rightness] will cause the echo chamber to oscillate and achieve resonance i.e. resonate with us. In simple terms, “they are playing our tune” or “on my wave length”.

So what’s the problem? The application of f [rightness] at increasing amplitude can grow enough to, as in case of a glass, shatter the object. Perhaps my analogy breaks down with destruction, but I think, at a minimum, it supports Nicholas Kristof’s assertion: *Whatever our politics [et al], inhabiting a bubble makes us more shrill*. I do believe that if we are exposed to increasingly stronger reinforcement of our rightness, in the absence of any driving or dampening force, it will result in unhealthy (destructive) consequences. For the system (echo chamber) to achieve resonance and allow us to reside there healthily, there must be driving or dampening forces to protect the system.

It is my premise that awareness and acceptance of our human fallibility fills that requirement. I would also suggest that a natural frequency analogy supports the idea that individual action can be a force that prevents destructive outcomes.

Hopefully, this discussion can help explain the importance of awareness and acceptance of our human fallibility. Unfortunately, in the face of our unrelenting desire to be right, the question of how to we achieve awareness and acceptance of our human fallibility remains.

Why Is It So Important To Be Right?

It is my premise that awareness and acceptance of our human fallibility is the key to avoiding the negative consequences of our own particular echo chamber. That premise is a stark contrast with our unrelenting desire to be right, the quality that is the creative force of echo chambers.

A whole lot of us go through life assuming that we are basically right , basically all the time, about basically everything : about our political and intellectual convictions , our religious and moral beliefs , our assessment of other people , our memories , our grasp of facts . As absurd as it sounds when we stop to think about it , our steady state seems to be one of unconsciously assuming that we are very close to omniscient.

Schulz, Kathryn. Being Wrong

Why is it so important to me that I be right? Kathryn Schulz is helpful ...

...moments of rightness represent both the high – water marks of human endeavor and the source of countless small joys . They affirm our sense of being smart , competent , trustworthy , and in tune with our environment . More important , they keep us alive. Individually and collectively , our very existence depends on our ability to reach accurate conclusions about the world around us . In short , the experience of being right is imperative for our survival , gratifying for our ego , and , overall , one of life’s cheapest and keenest satisfactions . (Being Wrong)

*It’s curious how mightily our thoughts and beliefs defend their territory. Why is it so vital to be right? Well to begin with, if you’re not right, then you are indeed wrong, with all the accompanying sense of humiliation and failure. [***](#)*

It can hardly be overstated how important and powerful is our need/desire to be right. The extent to which we are willing to protect our rightness is frightening... from the mundane to the global...wars, genocide, racism, not to mention the sacrifice of relationships and professions. The cost of rightness is expensive.

Despite our need/desire to be right, there is one incontrovertible reality, our fallibility. The greatest peril of being right is that we lose an awareness that we are fallible... that we can be wrong. Some would argue that we are aware of our fallibility.

i.e. I am unaware of anyone, who would objectively deny their human fallibility e.g. “Of course, we all make mistakes.”

However, I know a lot of people (including myself) that are adamant they are not mistaken in their rightness. Somehow our belief that we are right trumps the truth that we fallible beings. Why is that?

Coincidentally, Erwin McManus in a [recent lesson](#) offers a challenging explanation:

WE ARE STUPID!

Prov. 12: 15 Stupid people always think they are right. Wise people listen to advice.
(GNT)

Wise people are really aware of how often they are wrong. Even when they are right they feel a sense of wrong.

Stupid people always think they are right. They never have to justify their actions. They never have to justify their choices because they think they're right. If you are always right you're not always right, you're always stupid. By choosing to listen you begin to attack the stupidity in your life. Wise people listen to counsel. You never get so wise that you do not need advise.

Stupid people think that wise people don't need advise. And that's why they are stupid. Wise people need less advice and want it more. Wise people need less advice and seek it more. Stupid people need more advice and seek it less. Here's how to know where you fall on the spectrum of stupid or wise. If you are asking people for counsel and input in your life you are wise. If you are looking for people that agree with you, you are being stupid. Ironically, stupid people always pretend they are getting advise.

Who Are We?

As stated earlier, it is not my purpose to launch a movement to eliminate echo chambers. I do hope that readers will gain an awareness of echo chambers and their impact on our society. More importantly, I want readers to understand the personal implications of residing in an echo chamber.

Do not think this is about Republican or Democrat, et al. It is not about giving up what we believe to be right. It is not about proving the other side wrong.

It is ultimately irrelevant whether we are right or wrong about our cause.

Continual, unfiltered exposure to reinforcement of our rightness, will, ironically, result in unhealthy outcomes that can result in destructive consequences. It is revealing to read comments on controversial subjects that appear in social media. There is no limit as to how despicable comments can be. Living constantly in an echo chamber can transform us in ways that are inexplicable. The “safety” of an echo chamber is a darkness that shields us from face to face interaction and allows us to escape responsibility and grants permission for words and conduct that we would never consider otherwise.

Consider two comments posted recently on LinkedIn:

Bull@#\$% comments from trolls or morons are completely useless and waist of my time to read. I am not neatral in what i am.I stand without doubt a hardcore constitutional republican ,a Master automotive technician, and above all a christian. So call me what you want i am confident in my beliefs, ideas and religion.What the naysayers have to say has ZERO EFFECT ON ME and makes no difference to anyone but the one calling names.

... we should all support each other...men ,women and others.we are all gods children.lets stop dividing ourselves into categories.men ,women, black ,white straight ,gay.lets just be one people with the same mission.being good citizens of our wonderful country.I agree that women should not put down other women nor should any group denounce other groups just to self promote or to attack others you dont agree with.Lets debate and find common ground and work together for the greater good for all.

The first comment was, obviously, in response to a subject the commenter did not agree with. The second comment came in response to an idea the commenter agreed with. The most revealing thing about these two comments is that the author of both was the same person.

I wonder which one he would say most represents who he is?

A Better Question

Who am I? is a question worthy of everyone. Of course, I want to believe I am the person who would write the second comment. The reality is that all of us are both. Each of us is capable of either response. Each of us has the inclination to protect our rightness.

Because we are “right” we give ourselves permission to use any and all tools available to protect the “truth”.

We believe we would do so in a civil manner, however, sheltered in our echo chamber, we are released from the constraints of civility. When we are certain of our rightness we justify ourselves and condemn dissenters.

To answer the question “Who Am I?”, requires self-assessment and introspection. Those qualities are counterintuitive when we are over-confident of our rightness. We are not only unable to see and hear dissenters, we are blind and deaf to ourselves.

That dilemma illustrates the depth of the challenge echo chambers present when we seek to answer the question, “Who Am I?”

Perhaps there is a better question... “Who do I want to be?”

I believe in the basic goodness of humanity. Each of us have an innate desire to love and be loved.

Man's nature is not essentially evil. Brute nature has been known to yield to the influence of love. You must never despair of human nature. Mahatma Gandhi

I believe each of us wants to be a good person. ‘Good’ means a lack of self-centeredness. It means the ability to empathize with other people, to feel compassion for them, and to put their needs before your own.

Conversely, we do not want to be evil people. *‘Evil’ people are those who are unable to empathize with others. As a result, their own needs and desires are of paramount importance.*¹

The essential component of evil is not the absence of a sense of sin or imperfection but the unwillingness to tolerate that sense.

The poor in spirit do not commit evil. Evil is not committed by people who feel uncertain about their righteousness, who question their own motives, who worry about betraying themselves. The evil in this world is committed by the spiritual fat cats, by the Pharisees of our own day, the self-righteous who think they are without sin because they are unwilling to suffer the discomfort of significant self examination.

¹ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/out-the-darkness/201308/the-real-meaning-good-and-evil>

Unpleasant though it might be, the sense of personal sin is precisely that which keeps our sin from getting out of my hand. ²

I want to be a good person and I trust that you do also. Because we reside in an echo chamber does not mean we are evil people.

However, the nature and character of echo chambers is such that if we choose to reside in an unmitigated echo chamber the trajectory of our lives will bend toward evil not good.

How can the negative power of echo chambers be mitigated?

² People of the Lie M. Scott Peck pg 76, 72

Surviving and Thriving in Echo Chambers

I submit that the answer to the question ... “How can the negative power of echo chambers be mitigated”? starts with what I have asserted from the beginning of this article.

The most significant human trait that sustains and encourages the proliferation of and participation in harmful echo chambers is our unwillingness to entertain the possibility that we may be wrong.

The idea that we can mitigate the power of echo chambers by embracing our fallibility is counterintuitive. The very reason we reside in echo chambers is because of our desire for confirmation that we are right. Kathryn Schultz is helpful in understanding the importance of error.

Far from being a sign of intellectual inferiority , the capacity to err is crucial to human cognition . Far from being a moral flaw , it is inextricable from some of our most humane and honorable qualities : empathy , optimism , imagination , conviction , and courage . And far from being a mark of indifference or intolerance , wrongness is a vital part of how we learn and change . Thanks to error , we can revise our understanding of ourselves and amend our ideas about the world .³

While we intellectually accept that we may be wrong, to consistently adopt that frame of mind is a daunting task. As we have seen, the desire to protect our rightness rejects any notion that we may be wrong. At the same time, accepting our fallibility is the only effective antidote to the irrational notion that we are infallible.

There is a deep aversion to being wrong. It feels wrong and counterintuitive to look for evidence that contradicts our rightness.

If we relish being right and regard it as our natural state , you can imagine how we feel about being wrong. Quite unlike the gleeful little rush of being right—we experience our errors as deflating and embarrassing. In our collective imagination , error is associated not just with shame and stupidity but also with ignorance , indolence , psychopathology , and moral degeneracy . (Shultz)

I have observed in my personal interactions, most likely because of writing this article, a correlation between interpersonal conflict and perceived implications of wrongness. Even in ordinary conversations about the most mundane subjects, an innocent remark

³ Schulz, Kathryn. Being Wrong: Adventures in the Margin of Error (p. 5). HarperCollins. Kindle Edition.

perceived as a challenge to my rightness can initiate a defensive reaction, if not conflict. The need to defend my position transcends any possibility that I might be wrong. Too often that results in, at worst, anger, resentment, disrespect and/or verbal abuse. At a minimum, an opportunity to communicate effectively and gain better understanding of the other person's beliefs has been squandered.

It is naive to think that just knowing we need to acknowledge our fallibility will enable us to do so.

.. a widely discussed study found in the last decade that political partisans, when presented with contravening facts, leads to a hardening of the original position. Brendan Nyhan, summarized: "the general idea is that it's absolutely threatening to admit you're wrong." "Cognitive dissonance"—the "backfire" which we experience when we encounter some reality that stands in tension with our presumptions—is painful. So, digging in our heels, when faced with contrary facts, is a natural defense mechanism to avoid that cognitive dissonance."^{4 5}

If facts don't necessarily have the power to change our minds and more education is not a solution, we are faced with the discomfiting reality that any solution must come from within ourselves.

The major threats to our survival no longer stem from nature without but from our own human nature within. It is our carelessness, our hostilities, our selfishness and pride and willful ignorance that endanger the world. Unless we can now tame and transmute the potential for evil in the human soul, we shall be lost. How can we do this unless we are willing to look at our own evil? Evil can be defeated by goodness. When we translate this we realized what we dimly have always known: evil can be conquered only by love. The first task of love is self purification.⁶

"Nothing will make us so charitable and tender to the faults of others, as, by self-examination, thoroughly to know our own." ~ Francois Fenelon

⁴ <https://www.tokensshow.com/blog/how-not-to-be-a-sectarian-ten-not-so-easy-practices>

⁵ http://archive.boston.com/bostonglobe/ideas/articles/2010/07/11/how_facts_backfire/

⁶ People of the Lie

Surviving and Thriving in Echo Chambers - Self Delusion

"Nothing will make us so charitable and tender to the faults of others, as, by self-examination, thoroughly to know our own." ~ Francois Fenelon

A common trait that qualifies a person to be a member of good standing in an echo chamber is self delusion... *the state of having a false idea about yourself or the situation you are in.* The lure of echo chambers is the reinforcement and validation of an opinion or belief that we deem to be true.

In the face of relentless and increasing volume of confirmation for our opinion/belief, we become more and more convinced of our rightness. Correspondingly, we become less and less willing/able to entertain the possibility that we could be wrong and consequently we reject any dissenting voice.

Ultimately, we become self-deluded, a self-delusion that is a two-sided coin. One side is the delusion that we are omniscient and the other side is the delusion that we are infallible.

Unfortunately, whichever side comes up, we lose.

Despite rational consensus that human beings are neither omniscient nor infallible, we inexplicably persist in the delusion that we are an exception. A convenient argument for resisting warnings about echo chambers and mitigating any peril they may present comes in the form of, "Yes, but since my opinion/belief is TRUE, I have no reason for concern."

The negative impact of echo chambers is indiscriminate. Relative to negative outcomes, it does not matter whether we are right or wrong. If we are absolutely certain of our opinion/belief, the reverberations within our echo chamber, which confirm our certainty, will deafen and blind us to any dissenting voices. In our self-deluded infallibility, we are able to justify responses, that we would never otherwise consider, toward any and all dissenting voices.

The first step toward overcoming self-delusion is to become self-aware. Self-awareness is a learned skill that requires courage and resolve to develop. Self-awareness involves, self-examination, introspection. "Know Thyself" is an aphorism from antiquity.

*Socrates says ..., that people make themselves appear ridiculous when they are trying to **know** obscure things before they **know** themselves.*

Self-awareness is essential to overcoming negative outcomes of echo chambers, which magnifies the challenge we face.

...even though most people believe they are self-aware, self-awareness is a truly rare quality: We estimate that only 10%–15% of the people we studied actually fit the criteria.⁷

"For the wise have always known that no one can make much of his life until self-searching has become a regular habit, until he is able to admit and accept what he finds, and until he patiently and persistently tries to correct what is wrong. – Bill W."

⁷ <https://hbr.org/2018/01/what-self-awareness-really-is-and-how-to-cultivate-it>

Faced with disturbing conclusions that,

- 1) the default condition for those who reside in an echo chamber is self-delusion, and,
- 2) the first step toward surviving and thriving in echo chambers is the necessity of self-awareness and,
- 3) there is an innate resistance to any form of self-examination and
- 4) there are prevailing, relentless narratives that engender fear and promote judgement on any dissenting voice and eschew self-awareness.

...further emphasizes the magnitude and complexity of echo chambers and diminishes optimism for a society characterized by our most virtuous human values.

Accepting the premise that self-awareness is essential to surviving and thriving in echo chambers, the immediate question to be addressed is, “How do I become self-aware?”

Surviving and Thriving in Echo Chambers - Self Awareness

1. I know I am right.
2. I think that I am right.

Who are we?

Are we #1 or #2?

The truth is that we are both. Each of us has the inclination to protect our rightness and because we are “right”, we have permission to use any and all tools at our disposal to protect the “truth”. We believe we will do so in a civil manner, but sheltered by our echo chamber we are released from any constraints of civility.

To become different from what we are, we must have some awareness of what we are.

Eric Hoffer

Humility is not about having a low self-image or poor self-esteem. Humility is about self-awareness.

Erwin McManus

The most difficult thing in life is to know yourself.

Thales

The following citation, in reference to a recent Starbucks incident, further illustrates the importance of self awareness.

Starbucks has an ambitious plan to try to address discrimination and unconscious bias by training nearly 175,000 of its workers one afternoon later this month. According to David Rock, director of the NeuroLeadership Institute, eliminating bias would require people to become completely self-aware and objective about their own thoughts, and Rock says no one's found a way to do that.

"Any strategy that essentially relies on people to try not to be biased is doomed to fail; that's the heart of the problem," he says.⁸

⁸<https://www.npr.org/2018/05/17/611909506/starbucks-training-focuses-on-the-evolving-study-of-unconscious-bias>

A prerequisite of self awareness is the greatest challenge to surviving and thriving in echo chambers. To see and truly understand ourselves is the only antidote to the self-deceiving nature of echo chambers. Self-deception is a path of least resistance. The lure self-deception is so consuming that any thought that we can will ourselves into self awareness is, ironically, self-deceiving.

Self-awareness occurs when we are exposed by light from external sources which strip away the shadows of self-deception and leave us profoundly naked and humiliated. It is in those moments that we cannot only see who we truly are, we are also able discern who we should be and what changes are needed to transform us.

Three examples of dramatic events of self-awareness from the Bible illustrate the power of such events to change lives.

Apostle Peter

“Even if everyone else falls to pieces on account of you, I won’t.”

“Don’t be so sure,” Jesus said. “This very night, before the rooster crows up the dawn, you will deny me three times.”

Peter protested, “Even if I had to die with you, I would never deny you.” All the others said the same thing.

All this time, Peter was sitting out in the courtyard. One servant girl came up to him and said, “You were with Jesus the Galilean.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I swear, I never laid eyes on the man.”

“I don’t know the man!”

Just then a rooster crowed. Peter remembered what Jesus had said: “Before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times.” He went out and cried and cried and cried.

King David

The Lord sent Nathan to David. When he came to him, he said, “There were two men in a certain town, one rich and the other poor. The rich man had a very large number of sheep and cattle, but the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb he had bought. He raised it, and it grew up with him and his children. It shared his food, drank from his cup and even slept in his arms. It was like a daughter to him.

“Now a traveler came to the rich man, but the rich man refrained from taking one of his own sheep or cattle to prepare a meal for the traveler who had come to him. Instead, he took the ewe lamb that belonged to the poor man and prepared it for the one who had come to him.”

David burned with anger against the man and said to Nathan, "As surely as the Lord lives, the man who did this must die! He must pay for that lamb four times over, because he did such a thing and had no pity."

Then Nathan said to David, "You are the man!"

Then David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the Lord."

Saul of Tarsus

Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

"Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked.

"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

It is my opinion that humans are incapable of truthful self-awareness without external influence. Those influences can range from serendipitous, confrontational, coincidental to self-imposed. They maybe characterized as spiritual, dramatic, tragic, unjust, prophetic and/or mystical.

Every one of us, in the course of our lives will encounter many and varied external influences which can give us, at least, a glimpse if not an indelible view of ourselves. When we recognize those encounters and become more truly self-aware, the trajectory of our lives will bend toward virtue.

The following are two examples from my own experience.

A significant part of my career at Ford Motor Company included working as an internal consultant for organizational change, specifically training and development in participative management. Effective communication skills were a critical factor to any success. Accordingly, I had the opportunity for my communication skills to be assessed and improved. I must admit that, at that time, my opinion of my communication skills was very high. In fact, I felt the assessments were unnecessary. A part of the assessment was to participate in a role play exercise which involved conflict and required skillful communication for resolution. The exercise was video taped. After completing the exercise, I was pleased with my performance and was looking forward to reviewing the video.

The video was shocking. In my mind I had been polished and convincing, skillfully controlling the situation and reaching a satisfactory resolution. What the video revealed was angry, intimidating facial expressions and body language. My demeanor was controlling and arrogant. For the first time, I recognized what others had known all a long. I was not the person I believed I was. With that realization, I began to understand why many prior difficult interpersonal circumstances had puzzled and frustrated me and defied resolution. That occasion of truthful self-awareness was a turning point which changed me profoundly.

The second example also relates to my communication skills, but in a different context. My confidence (arrogance) regarding my communications skills displayed itself in my role as a father. Five children were a convenient opportunity to utilize my gift. I seemed to be doing reasonably well with our first three children, all boys. The arrival of two girls was a game changer. Thankfully, I was able to translate my professional skills into my role as father. I was pleased with my ability to communicate with our oldest girl who, at the time, was in her early teens. It was on the occasion of Father's Day that I received a card from her.



Appreciative, but a bit puzzled, I opened the card. I can only describe my reaction as stunned. It was a moment of self-awareness that I have not forgotten. My image as a “great communicator” was revealed for what it really was, self delusion.



The peril of unmitigated echo chambers is their inherent character to impede, if not block, external influences which would otherwise provide opportunity for truthful self-awareness. We become blind and deaf to anything other than that which affirms our self-deception. As a result, progress toward thriving healthily in an echo chamber requires at least two personal responses:

- 1) ...intentionally develop a sensitivity to the routine external influences that we encounter in our daily lives. (Essentially, “stop and smell the roses”).
- 2) ... make intentional choices that will expose ourselves to external influences i.e. social relationships, community, neighborhood, family, friends et al.

The Perfect Echo Chamber

The perfect echo chamber.

Only after becoming aware of echo chambers, did I realize that my earliest significant encounter with an echo chamber came by virtue of membership in the Church of Christ (CoC).

Churches of Christ are [autonomous Christian congregations](#) associated with one another through distinct beliefs and practices. Represented chiefly in the [United States](#) and one of several branches to develop out of the American [Restoration Movement](#), they claim Biblical precedent for their doctrine and practice and trace their heritage back to [the early Christian church](#) as described in the [New Testament](#).⁹

Fiercely sectarian and dogmatic, the CoC was a perfect echo chamber. Our belief that we, to the exclusion of all others, were the one true church and our doctrine was unassailable, necessitated constant reaffirmation in our beliefs and constant vigilance for dissenting voices. As a result, in my experience, there was implicit prohibition of any literature, music, icons, or opinions that were not consistent with our beliefs. Only those with whom we were “in fellowship with” were given any voice. Any occasion of deviation would result in swift censure if not “disfellowshipping”.

2000 years of church history was unacknowledged. When our fellowship appeared in the late 18th century and came to believe they had restored the New Testament church, any history post 33AD until the present became irrelevant. Any contemporary voices from outside were suspect and mostly rejected.

Teaching and preaching emphasized our rightness (always Biblically) or attacked (also Biblically) our opposition (anyone who disagreed). As is the case when people reside in unhealthy echo chambers, our fellowship become isolated and voices become shrill and divisive. On the outside the CoC was characterized as “the church that believes they’re the only ones going to heaven”, among other things..

As Michael Hanegan observed, “With no space for diversity or generosity towards difference the only remaining postures are rabid defense and destruction of the Other”.

The CofC was characterized by debate, believing that ration and reason applied to the scriptures made their arguments invincible, debate became an art form. Ironically, differences arose internally and debates were also the weapon of choice in winning those

⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Churches_of_Christ

disputes. As a result, internal differences created numerous factions, all of which asserted their rightness and narrowed the voices in their echo chamber to affirm their positions. Fractured and isolated, the CofC was on path to obscurity and possible extinction.

The CofC story is much deeper and complicated than just being illustrative of echo chambers. They are not extinct but still have vestiges of the characteristics that defined them in the past century. I use the CofC as an example of a “perfect echo chamber” because it is my heritage and I can speak with an authority I would not assume for other contexts.

Because religious beliefs are not only sacred and deeply held, and are almost infinitely varied, every religious denomination, sect, movement, et al creates their own echo chamber. However, not all religious echo chambers result in unhealthy outcomes. An examination of what differentiates healthy and unhealthy religious echo chambers can be helpful in understanding how to create healthier echo chambers in our divided and polarized society.

The journey of the CoC from a “perfect echo chamber” to a less toxic and more hopeful echo chamber parallels my personal journey.

Pathway to Surviving and Thriving in Echo Chambers

Nearing the conclusion of this paper, the intent is to suggest some understandings I believe necessary to navigate the turbulent waters of life in a society dominated by echo chambers.

For too many of us it's become safer to retreat into our own bubbles, whether in our neighborhoods, or on college campuses, or places of worship, or especially our social media feeds, surrounded by people who look like us and share the same political outlook and never challenge our assumptions. In the rise of naked partisanship and increasing economic and regional stratification, the splintering of our media into a channel for every taste, all this makes this great sorting seem natural, even inevitable. And increasingly we become so secure in our bubbles that we start accepting only information, whether it's true or not, that fits our opinions, instead of basing our opinions on the evidence that is out there.
Obama farewell speech

Accepting that echo chambers are a fact of our existence in today's society, two important questions remain. First, how can we survive that experience? Secondly how can we thrive in the on-going reality of echo chambers?

To survive the experience of echo chambers, it necessary to understand the breath and depth of the peril we face.

- Echo chambers can be a catalyst for evil.

The poor in spirit do not commit evil. Evil is not committed by people who feel uncertain about their righteousness, who question their own motives, who worry about betraying themselves. The evil in this world is committed by the spiritual fat cats, by the Pharisees of our own day, the self-righteous who think they are without sin in because they are unwilling to suffer the discomfort of significant self-examination.

The major threats to our survival no longer stem from nature without but from our own human nature within. It is our carelessness, our hostilities, our selfishness and pride and willful ignorance that endanger the world.

Unless we can now tame and transmute the potential for evil in the human soul, we shall be lost. How can we do this unless we are willing to look at our own evil?

M. Scott Peck - People of the Lie

Certainty, conviction, and dogmatism reduces our anxiety in the face of life. Having all the answers feels good. That's the upside. The downside is that certainty, conviction, and dogmatism makes you suspicious and wary toward people who have different beliefs. And that suspicion sows the seeds of intolerance.

Richard Beck

- Residing in echo chambers can be dehumanizing.

Living in an unmitigated echo chamber can dehumanize ourselves and our dissenters. It is a dark place that brings out the worst in us. Erwin McManus describes that place as a biopsy of our souls. A context where what is inside of us is pulled out and made public, revealing any malignancy within us. Aberration becomes normal.

A relentless bombardment of filtered information and media affirms and reinforces our beliefs and biases. The deeper our convictions about our rightness, the more we believe we are omniscient. In essence, we transmute into God and cease to be responsible to anyone but ourselves. In that sovereignty, we are no longer restrained by a virtuous human nature, but are free to act in ways, inhuman or otherwise, necessary to protect our rightness. We abdicate our humanness. Correspondingly, we see our detractors as less than human and deserving of our actions.

We all seem to exist in huge feedback loops, squelching dissent, and growing more extreme in our thinking, blithely ignoring evidence that our respective positions might be wrong. In fact, we want little to do with each other.

Michael Frost

In the absence of a realistic understanding of echo chamber's potential for malevolent outcomes, we will be content to revel in our self-delusion of omniscience.

In the digital age, it is unrealistic to think we can opt out of echo chambers in our daily experience. The important question is, how can we thrive?

Five keys to thriving in echo chambers.

1. Recognize and cultivate the positive potential of echo chambers.

There is opportunity for good. Echo chambers can function as a “deliberating enclave”.

...“enclave deliberation,” ... defined as “that form of deliberation that occurs within more or less insulated groups, in which like-minded people speak mostly to one another.” ... (Sunstein)

The main value of deliberating enclaves is not that they increase conversation across differences, but that they enable like-minded people to make progress in what they agree about.

2. Continually seek to be self-aware.

The human mind is an overconfidence machine . The conscious level gives itself credit for things it really didn't do and confabulates tales to create the illusion it controls things it really doesn't determine . David Brooks

3. Continually evaluate your beliefs.

A good place to start [evaluating beliefs] is to be particularly critical of sources that support your beliefs. "I'm always the most suspicious of beliefs that I have or conclusions that I come to that are in line with my own ideology," "So if I have a particular worldview and something supports my worldview, then I have to be especially suspicious of it. Because that's when I'm going to be most vulnerable. Because that's when I'm going to be most vulnerable. That's when my motivated reasoning and confirmation bias are going to try hard to engage... but that's exactly when you should question it the most. It's a high-energy state, and it takes a lot of vigilance and a lot of practice and a lot of dedication. It's a life-long practice, and there's no shortcut to that. You just have to really be dedicated to policing your own thinking."

Dr. Steven Novella

4. Intentionally engage dissenting beliefs through media and relationships to achieve understanding.

Alex "Sandy" Pentland in "Beyond the Echo Chamber" commends the concept of social exploration.

Social explorers spend enormous amounts of time searching for new people and ideas—but not necessarily the best people or ideas. Instead, they seek to form connections with many different kinds of people and to gain exposure to a broad variety of thinking. Explorers winnow down the ideas they've gathered by bouncing them off other people to see which ones resonate.

5. Never forget that you are fallible. With every interaction we experience, we must remind ourselves "I could be wrong."

"Truth is not something we possess, it is, hopefully, a goal to which we strive."
M. Scott Peck

Epilogue:

This chapter concludes a six month journey which began during our winter hiatus in Florida. An excerpt from my first blog post explains why I began writing on the subject of echo chambers:

The subject of echo chambers has become increasingly personally relevant. After recognizing my self imposed political/social echo chamber, I made a decision to dampen the echoes and open myself to different sources.

My efforts have met with mixed success. The peril of trading one echo chamber for another is real. The most significant result of my decision, thus far, is that it has become a catalyst for more serious thought and investigation into the character and nature of echo chambers. This blog post is the first, in what I hope to be a series of posts, addressing questions, ideas and issues that I have encountered related to echo chambers.

Although this chapter concludes this essay, the subject remains of significant interest to me. I have been sensitized to the reality of echo chambers and there are few days that I do not encounter explicit or implicit references to them in my reading or listening. I expect that I will continue write on the subject.

In the beginning, as I became more and more interested in echo chambers, my enthusiasm and passion grew. I initiated a series of blog posts through which I hoped to stimulate some interest on the part others. My assumption was that everyone would see the importance of understanding echo chambers. It did not take long to discover that conversation about echo chambers ranked somewhere behind conversations on race and religion. In an attempt to receive some constructive criticism, I asked numerous people if they would read my posts and give me feed back. With one or two exceptions, my requests went unheeded. Although disappointing, that experience confirmed what I was learning about the difficulty of addressing the challenge of echo chambers personally and societally.

Additionally, I experienced the reality of Facebook's ability to control and influence the information we send and receive. Based on anecdotal evidence, I found that my blog posts on echo chambers, unlike other subjects, rarely showed up on my friends timelines. I interpret that as a result of impersonal algorithms, not something directed to me personally. Unfortunately, the result is the same.

I am undeterred in my belief that echo chambers are a threat to our democracy but more importantly, a threat to our humanity. M. Scott Peck states it well:

The major threats to our survival no longer stem from nature without but from our own human nature within. It is our carelessness, our hostilities, our selfishness and pride and willful ignorance that endanger the world.

George Ezell

Wilmore, KY