Is there an echo in here?   salon.com

By David Weinberger

February 20, 2004 | I'm a little confused about the meme du jour, "echo chambers" -- those Internet spaces where like-minded people listen only to those people who already agree with them. Here are three places I frequent that seem to fit the bill:

First, I'm on an invitation-only mailing list for moderate lefty Democrats interested in the intersection of ideology and technology. We are all committed to dumping Bush and there's no real possibility we're going to change our minds. Want to argue about it? Not here. We have other things to talk about.

Second, I used to participate occasionally in the Dean weblog comment boards. If you went there to argue that Bush was more deserving of our votes, people would either ignore you or brand you a troll -- and then ignore you.

Third, this fall I went to a baseball game and cheered the Red Sox more loudly than if I had been the only one yelling. My bleacher mates were surprisingly unwilling to talk with me about whether the Sox were deserving of our collective support.

Are any of these really echo chambers? This meme turns out to be as tricky as it is attractive. Worse, as it spreads itself, it's shifting shape, so that the entire Internet can start to seem to be nothing but a set of sealed rooms, each constructing -- and then confirming -- reality out of nothing but proclamations of prejudice and wishes. In echo chambers, the argument has it, the sound of our own voices can drown out fast-changing reality, as supposedly happened to the Dean campaign's online legions.

This is a myth just waiting to concretize into common wisdom. For example, Philip Gourevitch, in the New Yorker, writes : "[Dean's] following, forged largely in cyberspace through online communities, had the quality of a political Internet bubble: insular and sustained by collective belief rather than by any objective reality."

Before we use the failure of the Dean campaign to prove that the Internet routinely creates echo chambers, we'd better be sure that the concept of an echo chamber even makes sense, for the focus on this meme simultaneously distorts the value of the Internet and diverts attention from the truly dangerous echo chambers in our society.

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While most of us had assumed that the Internet would increase the diversity of opinion, the echo chamber meme says the Net encourages groups to form that increase the homogeneity of belief. This isn't simply a factual argument about the topography carved by traffic and links. A "tut, tut" has been appended: See, you Web idealists have been shown up -- humankind's social nature sucks, just as we always told you! Furthermore (says the memester), you Deaniacs were self-deluding, weak-minded children: Wake up and smell the depressing coffee!

The facts are not in question. They show that the links-to-blogs curve follows a ["power law,"](#) that people tend to [buy books](#) that express similar values and views, and that a small number of sites get a disproportionate amount of traffic. But the echo chamber meme, with its "tut, tut," doesn't follow from those facts. It rides on a rationalist view of conversation, defining conversations as the exchange of information with the purpose of discovering truth and changing minds.

Talk about your foolish optimists!

The play of agreement and disagreement is far twistier than this rationalist picture assumes. Conversations iterate differences within agreement. On the lefty mailing list, for example, the participants agree that the Bush administration is apocalyptically bad, so we don't spend time arguing about that. We do robustly argue about what can be done to change the country's direction. We'll happily engage on whether the e-voting machine issue could mobilize the country, or how campaign technology can be integrated. But someone who wants to argue that Bush is a great president is going to be told to "take it offline." The fact that conversations start from a base agreement is not a weakness of conversations. In fact, it's a requirement.

That initial agreement isn't always implicit; it can become a rallying cry. On the lefty list, for example, we don't send a lot of messages that say Bush is a jerk, because we already agree on that and want to talk about what to do about it. On the Dean comment board, though, there were frequently comments that said, "Go Dean!!!", plus or minus a few exclamation marks. Yet even there, most messages iterated differences: How well the governor did in a debate, what he ought to say to Sen. Kerry, why a particular news story was unfair. A message board that only had variants of "Go Dean!!!" (or "Hillary sucks!" on a right-wing board) would quickly lose participants -- it would be too boring.

This explicit repetition of the founding agreement is the only salient characteristic I can find of what are called echo chambers. And from this I conclude: So what?

A conversation is a social group, and social groups serve many social functions. Some are debating groups. Some are places for people to show how clever they are. Some aim at political change. Very few aim at changing minds about the founding agreement, if only because it's so hard to pull up the planks of conversation as we walk on them. The comment blog of a presidential candidate is not about changing minds, any more than is the Red Sox rooting section. It's about forming a political movement. It binds supporters socially. It keeps their enthusiasm up. It lets them collectively work out interpretations and feelings within a group of people they trust precisely because of their shared agreement. Likewise for the right-wing sites. Likewise even for extraterrestrial-conspiracy mailing lists.

There is nothing wrong with that social function per se. A political convention need not throw its doors open to its opponents; a eulogist doesn't have to afford equal time to those who disagree. The problem with an extraterrestrial-conspiracy mailing list isn't that it's an echo chamber; it's that it thinks there's a conspiracy by extraterrestrials.

Behind the echo chamber controversy lies the question of whether the Internet causes people to solidify their beliefs or to diversify them. Does it open people up or shut them down?

This is a really tough question, and not just because it's hard to quantify.

First, it assumes that it's bad to solidify beliefs because that closes one's mind. But beliefs aren't simply propositions to which we assent. They are also the foundation for action and for political solidarity. The relationships of belief and doubt, and belief and actions, are far more subtle than the echo chamber meme credits. Deaniacs and Bushies alike need places where they can gather with supporters and exalt and commiserate -- and do so without naysayers from the other side.

Second, the existence of echo chambers doesn't mean that the participants only go to echo chambers. Even if I spend most of my online time in my echo chamber of choice, the minority of my time may bring me into contact with a more diverse range of opinions than I would have encountered without the Net. That seems to me to be the relevant statistic, however elusive it might be.

Besides, we humans -- echo chamber participants or echo chamber castigators -- rarely engage in deep, meaningful and truly open conversation with people who fundamentally disagree with us. I have never debated a neo-Nazi, and if I did, I wouldn't do so with an open mind: No way is that son of a bitch going to convince me that he's right. No apologies. Being grounded in some beliefs is a condition for having any beliefs. And that has nothing to do with echo chambers.

So, does the Internet open people up or shut them down? The existence of echo chambers by itself doesn't answer the question. And we should probably worry whether "open" and "shut" are themselves metaphors that shut down our understanding of how we decide, believe and act.

The echo chamber meme is echoing now for several reasons, and not simply because the Dean campaign has faltered. The idea that the Dean campaign managers were deluded by the intensity of Internet support underplays three far more important, and conventional, contributors to that illusion: sky-high polls, record-breaking crowds, and the greatest Democratic fundraising success in history. Further, the Dean campaign managers never believed that they were assured of victory. I was a volunteer policy advisor to the campaign, and in September, I asked Joe Trippi and Zephyr Teachout if they were still worried about John Kerry, now that the senator had bottomed out in the polls and in fundraising. They looked at me as though I were crazy and said, "Absolutely!" In fact, the campaign spent so much money on Iowa and New Hampshire in a bet-the-farm strategy, as [Trippi said](#) at the Digital Democracy Teach-In last week, precisely because they were worried about their chances.

Why is the echo chamber meme running rampant now? Perhaps because we want to hear it. The ground has been prepared by our view of conversations as intellectual discourses, not as complex social interactions that form groups in messy and deep ways. And certainly our perpetual elitism is in the mix: "Those foolish echo-chamber people -- they don't have the sort of elevated, open-minded interchanges that we do!" Then there's the resentment of the Internet that never misses a chance to proclaim the Web no different from the real world at its cynical worst. But even those reasons are not the whole story, for some of the loudest voices urging this particular meme are also genuine Net enthusiasts honestly trying to figure out how Dean imploded.

We can argue later about why this idea has emerged at this historical moment. Meanwhile, the meme's spread distracts us from the true echo chamber: The constellation of media, especially in the United States.

The Internet as a whole presents the broadest range of opinion, belief, feeling and creativity in the history of civilization. If you are not on the Net, you are limited to a diminishing selection of outlets expressing a diminishing range of views. Stories are picked up and replayed. Master narratives determine, with the rigidity of a machine for extruding plastic, the basic way of presenting those ideas.

No, if you want to see a real echo chamber, open up your daily newspaper or turn on your TV. There you'll find a narrow, self-reinforcing set of views. The fact that these media explicitly present themselves as a forum for objective truth, open to all ideas, makes them far more pernicious than some site designed to let people examine the 8,000 ways Hillary is a bitch or to let fans rage about how much better Spike was on "Buffy" than he'll ever be on "Angel." And if you want to see the apotheosis of the echo chamber -- the echo echoing itself so perfectly that it comes perilously close to achieving the 60-cycle om of the empty mind -- consider a president who, rather than read the newspaper, is happy to have his aides pick and choose what headlines he learns more about, because he believes them to be "objective."

We are at a dangerous time in the Internet's history. There are forces that want to turn it into a place where ideas, images and thoughts can be as carefully screened as callers to a radio talk show. The "echo chamber" meme is not only ill-formed, but it also plays into the hands of those who are ready to misconstrue the Net in order to control it. We'd all be better off if we stopped repeating it and let its sound fade.