

Deutsche Welle Global Media Forum 2017  
sef: Session

## Breaking up filter bubbles. How to retain diversity

Rebekka Hannes

**The internet and social media are often suspected of creating political echo chambers. But is this a new phenomenon? Do algorithms and filter bubbles really influence public opinion? What can journalists and the media do to reach people across political divides? How can people from different echo chambers be engaged in a dialogue? sef: discussed these questions with journalists from around the world during a session at the Deutsche Welle Global Media Forum on 19 June 2017.**

“Filter bubbles don’t matter as much as everyone thinks,” Dr Andreas Jungherr, Junior Professor of Social Science Data Collection and Analysis at the University of Konstanz, stated bluntly. His research

has not shown any correlation between the information presented by algorithms, which lead to the formation of filter bubbles, and political polarisation: “Filter bubbles do not polarise more than any other resonance rooms,” Jungherr summarised. To him, filter bubbles simply receive so much attention because many logics and consequences of online communication have not been analysed sufficiently yet.

### Political information or political entertainment?

The existence of the phenomenon was recognised and the term “filter bubbles” coined by Eli Pariser in 2011. According to Jungherr, people have different motives for media use: they do look for political information on the internet. But they may also seek this type of information for political entertainment. Whether people tend to look for different angles on the same topic depends on their social structures. “If you choose political content for entertainment, you are less likely to look for varying opinions,” Jungherr explained. For many people, their professional and leisure life do not necessarily require them to look at different opinions. “Being interested in information you don’t need in your daily life requires a high level of education,” he cautioned. Generally, it is a big ask of people to do so. However, not looking at various opinions does not necessarily lead to political polarisation. “Discussing political topics with the same group of friends as your resonance room is more likely to fend off divergent opinions,” Jungherr concluded.



Dr Andreas Jungherr, Ute Lange (Moderator) and Frederik Fischer (l.t.r.)

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## “Perspectives as a service”

Frederik Fischer looks at filter bubbles from a different angle. To him, it does not really matter how big the phenomenon is. Rather, he has no doubt that journalists need to deal with the problem of a more polarised society. Fischer himself has mixed feelings about the political developments in recent years: Trump, Brexit and the rise of populist movements around the world are worrying phenomena in themselves. But they might also have served as a wake-up call for journalists. Fischer’s assessment: “Some of us have realised that we have been caught up in our own filter bubbles for a long time.” As a result, there is an emerging trend Fischer calls “perspectives as a service”. His own start-up is one of those services: at piqd.de – and now also piqd.com – curators recommend one piece of inspirational journalism a week that they write a short review about. The topics cover a wide range from politics to online gaming and health.

Fischer developed the idea for piqd while studying for a Master’s. Every morning, he and his fellow students from different world regions used to recommend the most important headline stories from their home countries. This way, they all read many stories they otherwise would never have heard about. Even more importantly, they were confronted with various angles on the same topic. As a result, one of the main takeaways from his studies is the realisation that it is a journalistic duty to broaden people’s horizons.

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## Why are societies more polarised?

The ensuing discussion evolved around one fundamental question: even if filter bubbles are not the main reason, why do we seem to be seeing more polarised societies?

Jungherr acknowledged that the discussion about bubbles and bots reveals that patterns of communication and political information have changed – even though the existence of filter bubbles has so far not been shown by research. Worrying political trends and the increasing failure of election forecasts have left both media and politics stranded. Trying to regain putative control, politics is now trying to regulate big players like Facebook and Google similarly to more traditional media companies. To Jungherr, this is the wrong approach: “Of course it is important to pay attention to Facebook and Google regarding their stands on political information. But regulation is not necessarily data-driven.” Instead, politics should reflect its own agenda, as group-based politics also fosters group-based tensions, in Jungherr’s view. These tensions are repeated in and fuelled by social media, but they have not been created by technology itself. Rather, to Jungherr, this divide has

always been there: “Social media have simply made them easier to see. It is easy for politics and journalists to blame algorithms,” he concluded.

Fischer weighed in on this hypothesis: “Social media do connect people who did not feel as if they were part of the political discussion before.” Facebook groups, for example, give people from all corners of the world the opportunity to voice their opinions. No matter how peripheral or obscure their views may be, people will find peers. This is especially important for people living in rural areas, where local newspapers still hold a monopoly on reporting. As a consequence, political information is often one-sided. The availability of information on the internet has changed this to a great extent. At the same time, political journalism by big online newspapers caters mainly to people living in metropolitan areas.

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## Making people talk to each other again

How, then, can people from different echo chambers be motivated to talk to each other again – whether online or offline? Fischer presented a number of encouraging initiatives in this area. For example, the German weekly newspaper Die Zeit is pursuing an interesting path. Within their project #D17, they send journalists back to their home towns to report. This way, information about local developments and challenges finds its way to a different audience. At the same time, the quality of reporting is ensured because journalists covering the stories for the national newspaper are no outsiders to the local areas. In June 2017, Die Zeit also conducted the offline experiment “Deutschland spricht” (“Germany talks”): readers were asked to answer a couple of yes or no questions about politics. Then they were paired with a person from their area who had a contrasting opinion on these questions. As a result, 1,200 people engaged in political conversations with people they would not have met otherwise. Member-funded journalism platforms like The Correspondent and Krautreporter also try to engage readers. Their credo “everyone is an expert for something” aims to make the reader part of reporting and to break the wall between the reader and the newsroom. An online editor from DW Bulgaria echoed the importance of such initiatives: “Many discussions nowadays remain online. It is one of the duties of media to dig deep and bring opinions to the real world,” she urged her colleagues.

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## The media’s changing role – a worldwide phenomenon

A journalist from Egypt shared an insight into similar discussions from his country. In Egypt, the group of voters who suddenly changed their game

with their voter preferences is called “the sofa party”. They were not interested in politics before the regime changed. However, the society was obviously divided before. This was not only the case under Mubarak, when people had no chance to voice their opinions. In this journalist’s opinion, studying the impact of social media and filter bubbles on the polarisation of public opinion is even more interesting in post-conflict societies.

A journalist from Gambia drew attention to a different challenge: “We as journalists used to be part of

agenda setting, especially during elections. But this is not true anymore.” To Jungherr, this reflects what he perceives to be a decrease in the trust in political journalism. This has several causes: on the one hand, a decrease in the quality of journalism is often the result of cuts in funds, etc. On the other hand, the news in many countries, e.g. the USA, has been highly politicised by labelling as mainstream media or even lying press.

The debate showed that filter bubbles, echo chambers and a changing role of and trust in media do not seem to be solely Western phenomena. Countries with diverse backgrounds are experiencing a similar shift due to a change in communication options. Even though many positive projects and initiatives were presented during the discussion, major challenges lie ahead for journalists, media and politics in making people from different echo chambers curious about different opinions and perspectives.



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#### Further information

Visit our **website** for further information as well as the **audio recording of the session!**

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