

Presentation Script for “Internet Surveillance and Social Media Echo-Chambers”

Trigger Warning [Slide 2]

Jokes aside, I have serious concerns as to whether this subject has the potential to make some people very angry. Hopefully it does not, but please let Jon or I know if I have said anything upsetting.

Some Background Info [S3]

To those of you that know me: ‘sup. To those of you that do not, you might find it useful to get some background information on me to understand where I’m coming from:

1. My undergrad degree is in philosophy, so I like to get to talk about things that may or may not be controversial and may or may not have definitive answers.
2. I am fascinated by psychology and sociology, but I do not have any formal education in either of those things.
3. I was a bartender for 5 years before law school.

An Observation [S4]

As I grew up and particularly during my time as a bartender, I noticed that people tend to get upset when you argue with or criticize them. Obviously, there are exceptions, and maybe it’s just when I do it; but hey it was my experience.

Since logic was literally a required course for my degree, I couldn’t figure out why my arguments wouldn’t work despite my (perhaps misplaced) confidence in their validity.

“Why Not?” [S5]

During undergrad, I learned about Plato's allegory of the cave. For those of you who already know what this is, great. For those of you that do not, I'll try to explain it.

Plato described the human experience as being akin to sitting in a cave with a fire behind you, watching shadows flicker on the wall. The shadows were controlled by what he called 'masters,' and watched by what he called 'slaves.' For Plato, slaves were unable to turn their heads and see what the masters were doing; they only saw the shadows on the wall and interpreted this as their reality. Plato saw philosophizing as gaining the ability to turn your head and see what was actually happening. However, Plato also mentioned that trying to tell people what was actually going on was nigh impossible, since most people only see the shadows on the wall, and they are unable to turn their heads. The shadows are all they know.

In short, the cave is the matrix and turning your head is the red pill. Whether or not philosophizing is actually the red pill, who knows; I'm just using the story to provide context.

I'm not trying to say that people who do not agree with me need to 'pop the red pill.' Rather, my point is that *I believe it is very hard to convince anybody of anything that is contrary to their truth*. The same goes for me; I try to catch myself, but I'm only human and sometimes I fail in doing so.

For those of you that read the comic I posted, great. For those that didn't, I'm going to briefly discuss its content anyway so no worries.

At law school, I continued to notice the aforementioned trend i.e., people often react negatively to being disagreed with in matters where they harbor strong beliefs. Everyone here is undoubtedly intelligent; I can honestly say that I've never felt like I was the smartest person in the room. More like the opposite of that.

However, the obvious concentration of intelligence does little for determining where people fall on subjective spectrums. In talking to people about their courses, beliefs, and opinions, I can confidently say that I've met people from all walks of life that believe all sorts of things. Some people believe one thing, others believe the opposite, others believe something in the middle and others still have no opinion regarding the subject at hand whatsoever. However, whether arguing with people about their belief leads to discussion or discord is almost unanimous i.e., people tend to dislike, avoid or get upset when their beliefs are challenged. Furthermore, the extent that people dislike or get upset at the challenge rises in relation to how strongly the belief is held.

Again, there are exceptions, but this is just my experience; maybe I'm just a jerk. If we assume that I'm not, then why does this happen?

Back in 2010, Brendan Nyhan (Professor of Government at Dartmouth College) and Jason Reifler (Professor of Political Science at the University of Exeter) wrote “When corrections fail; The persistence of political misrepresentation.”^[1] The paper argued that, once a belief is held to the point of where it becomes a very strongly held belief i.e., associated with the subject’s identity, evidence that is contrary to that belief will be interpreted by the subject to *strengthen* the previously held belief instead of weakening it. I can personally think of several examples where I’ve observed this in others, but in the spirit of triggering the least amount of people possible I’ll stick to the experiments done by Nyhan and Reifler. Their 2010 paper interviewed Americans, using questions regarding their political alignment and the existence of WMDs in Iraq. Many Americans that identified as politically conservative i.e., supporters of the Bush administration, failed to accept or did not learn that WMDs were never found in Iraq. The driving rationale behind these rejections was the identifying belief i.e., the subject’s political alignment. Nyhan and Reifler released a second paper^[2] in 2015 that observed the same phenomenon when people were asked about the effectiveness of vaccines.^[3]

“Why Care?” [S6]

As mentioned in previous lectures, more and more people are citing social media platforms (“SMPs”) as their primary source of news. While people have always been able to choose where they get their news from, SMPs share information in a way that is relatively new.

Unlike other mediums, SMPs 1) are predominantly comprised of user-generated content, and 2) are designed to keep you looking at them for as long as possible. This causes an ‘echo-chamber’ effect. If SMPs are where most people get their news, then that means most people get their news from people they agree with. This promotes unregulated bias and reinforces beliefs, regardless of their truth value.

“Why Am I Talking About This?” [S7]

In recognition of the backfire effect, I feel obligated to note that I could be wrong regarding what I am about to say.

My less-than-original theory is that the events of January 6, 2021 in Washington DC were caused mostly if not entirely due to social media

echo-chambering. SMPs are ultimately corporate vehicles designed to keep you looking at them for as long as possible. They do this by collecting data on you as an individual, observing what your tastes are, and algorithmically feeding them back to you. In short, manipulation.^[4] Personally, I'm an amateur music producer, so whenever I log onto Facebook or Instagram, I see a bunch of ads for drum samples, software instruments, and midi-chord packs. More importantly, I tend to only see posts by people and groups that I already associate or agree with.

“How Does This Relate to Communications Law?” [S8]

For me, the question boils down to a balance between freedoms of expression, assembly, and association on one hand, and the right to life, liberty, and security of the person on the other.

Though I am referring to an American event, I need to be clear that this is NOT a solely American issue. Like the slide says, I see several *Charter* issues here. The first arises from the section 2(b) freedom of expression; regulating SMPs or their users runs the risk of violating people's right to freely express themselves. The same can be said regarding the ss. 2(c) & 2(d) freedoms of association and peaceful assembly. However, there is also the section 7 right to security of life, liberty and security of the person, which I feel is violated by anyone that designs a product to be so addicting that it negatively affects a person or groups mental health or functioning.

I do NOT like the idea of being manipulated by a corporate vehicle, regardless of how well-intentioned its operatives are.^[5] Even if Facebook does connect people, I find it hard to forget that its first objective is to make money. I don't think there's anything wrong with making money, but I do feel as if turning a human being into a 'pecuniary battery' by intentionally designing a product to be as addicting as possible is prima facie and arguably a priori wrong.

However, I also do NOT like the idea of over-regulation. The idea of a totalitarian state frightens me and implementing further regulations for SMPs or their users would have to be done carefully so as not to create a slippery slope into one.

“What Now?” [S9]

My presentation is supposed to introduce the problem; my paper will discuss what has been said in terms of how it might be solved, and possibly try to come up with my own theory as to what a solution might look like. Wish me luck!

Thanks for reading

[1] Nyhan B & Reifler J, "When Corrections Fail: The Persistence of Political Misperceptions" online: (2010) 32 *Polit Behav* 303–330 <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-010-9112-2>>

[2] Nyhan B & Reifler J, "Does correcting myths about the flu vaccine work? An experimental evaluation of the effects of corrective information" online: (2015 Jan 9) 33(3) *Vaccine* 459-64 <[10.1016/j.vaccine.2014.11.017](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.vaccine.2014.11.017)>

[3] It's important to note there were other papers written that tried to replicate Nyhan and Reifler's findings but were unable to; however, as mentioned in the posted comic, Nyhan et al.'s findings were corroborated in a neuroscience paper that 1) observed the same phenomenon in people who identified as liberal as opposed to conservative, and 2) went even further than Nyhan et al. by explaining *why* the backfire effect happens. To paraphrase, the backfire effect occurs because our core beliefs i.e., beliefs that are so strong that they become a part of our identity, are housed in the same part of the brain as the fight or flight response. [Kaplan, J., Gimbel, S. & Harris, S, "Neural correlates of maintaining one's political beliefs in the face of counterevidence" online: (2016) 6:39589 *Sci Rep* <https://doi.org/10.1038/srep39589>]

[4] Facebook and Instagram even go so far as to send you messages on your phone telling you that you have notifications if you haven't checked it in a while.

[5] Here, I'm referring to the leading minds of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Google, etc. such as those interviewed in "the Social Dilemma" documentary. Check it out on Netflix if you haven't seen it, it's fascinating. I am NOT referring to Mark Zuckerberg.