Echo Chambers
The notion of the “public sphere”

- What is this?

- How old is this term/idea?
  - Jurgen Habermans (1962): “made up of private people gathered together as a public and articulating the needs of society with the state”

- Where is it?
  - In the 18th century: salons, coffee houses, etc
  - In the 20th century: mass media – television, newspapers
  - In the 21st century: Internet-based media, social networks
Some background: 
Change in news options in the US

- From 1940s – 1980s
  - Three major television broadcast networks doing news: ABC, CBS, NBC
  - In 1980 – evening newscasts reached 50M homes, today ~20M

- Three/Four major newspapers of record
  - In 1987: 63M subscribers -> today ~20M

- Broad range of new information sources
  - Cable news: CNN, Fox News, MSNBC, etc...
  - Web only news: Intercept, Axios, Jezebel, TheVerge, GatewayPundit, Boingboing, etc)
  - News aggregators: (e.g., Apple News, Google News)
  - Social media: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, and more narrowcast (e.g., gab)
  - Search: Google, Bing, ChatGPT, etc...
What are some of the concerns about all these changes?

- Choices in news sources -> choice of news bias
  - Tendency to pursue news that comports with existing bias

- Echo chambers (first use unclear, but Sunstein popularized)
  - That social media will naturally increase homophily; lack of exposure to contrasting ideas
  - “Enclave deliberation” will reinforce existing ideas and increase polarization

- Filter bubbles (Eli Pariser)
  - That ranking algorithms will naturally segregate people based on their beliefs, with each side being isolated withing ideological “bubbles”

- Economic incentives
  - Engagement/advertising drives clickbait-y content that, in turn, leads to the creation of more hyper-partisan and polarizing content being narrowcast to receptive audiences

- Meta question: what is the concern behind all these concerns?
Barbera paper

- Does two things
  - Tries to break down problem into sub questions
  - Review literature exploring some of those questions

- Also advances a general position
Q1: Do online/social media users tend seek out others with homogeneous views?

- What is the consensus view?

- What are the potential negatives of homophily?
Q2: Do online users avoid information contrary to their opinions?

- Reinforcement seeking vs challenge avoidance

- Inadvertency thesis
  - 20 percent of “friends” cut across ideological lines
  - “weak ties” concept

- Flaxman, Goel and Rao show that news consumption via social media and search engines contributes to increased segregation AND more individual exposure to opposing perspectives than direct browsing
  - Can both be true?

- What is conclusion?
Q3: What about filter bubbles? Are they real?

- What are the findings he reports
  - Social media (e.g., facebook)?
  - Search?

- What isn’t examined here?
Q4: are such issues driving increased polarization?

- Contact hypothesis

- Affective polarization vs ideological polarization

- Asymmetric polarization
  - Which users are more likely to be polarized?
  - Liberal vs conservative asymmetries

- How much can social media be responsible for increased polarization in US?
Q5: What important questions don’t we understand answers to?

- Comparative analysis of social media impact on polarization in other countries
- Longitudinal analysis
- Where is direction of the arrow of causality?
- Side effects of other interventions?
- Others?
- Two he didn’t ask:
  - How does affective context play a role here? (i.e., not all cross-cutting information is the same; some is quite a bit more emotionally charged)
  - How might online media support extremist homophily that would otherwise lack for support?