

MEDIA

Escape the media ‘echo chamber’

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Were you surprised at how the presidential election turned out? Your answer probably depends on which candidate you supported. Many Democrats were shocked at Hillary Clinton’s loss. But a lot of Republicans claim they saw Donald Trump’s win coming for a long time. How can both reactions be right?

The answer is that many people are trapped inside “media echo chambers.”

A media echo chamber forms when people don’t use journalism or news editorials to learn about new ideas or perspectives. Instead, they only read articles that reinforce their pre-existing opinions. This leads to a false sense of the world. The echo only gets louder via social media, as articles “liked” or “shared” by like-minded friends or family fill up peoples’ news feeds, often with over-the-top shocking language (“[Dear White People: What Are You Willing to Sacrifice for a Worried Muslim Woman Like Me?](http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2016/11/muslims-immigrants-minorities-lgbt-white-allies) (<http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2016/11/muslims-immigrants-minorities-lgbt-white-allies>)), dire warnings (“[Jeff Sessions Was Deemed Too Racist To Be A Federal Judge. He’ll Now Be Trump’s Attorney General](#)”)

(http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/trump-attorney-general-jeff-sessions-racist-remarks_us_582cd73ae4b099512f80c0c2”), or anger (<http://www.breitbart.com/big-government/2016/11/17/top-10-violent-actions-trump-supporters/>).

Take, for example, a man we’ll call “Bob.” He’s a married, late middle-aged white voter without a college degree, who lives on several rural acres in Connecticut’s “Quiet Corner.” He made a solid living in the 1980s and 90s, but never quite recovered from the Great Recession. For years, he’s felt that no one is listening to him or addressing his needs. Instead, he says the government is spending too much money bailing out big bankers and paying for other people’s health care and college tuition. He doesn’t see any personal benefits from it, and wants things to go back to the “good old days,” when he was optimistic about his future. So when he heard a candidate promise to “Make America Great Again,” Bob put a Trump sign on his lawn.

He is your stereotypical Fox News Channel viewer. He loves watching Bill O’Reilly and Sean Hannity, and is outraged by their stories about political correctness and “safe spaces” on college campuses. He also writes Facebook posts about how Hillary Clinton needs to be jailed, based on what heard from conservative legal experts on those shows. His Facebook friends, meanwhile, share articles from conservative opinion journalism sites like [Breitbart](http://www.breitbart.com/) (<http://www.breitbart.com/>) and [Gateway Pundit](http://www.thegatewaypundit.com/) (<http://www.thegatewaypundit.com/>) with headlines like, “[NBC Promotes Race War After Donald Trump’s Historic Victory](http://www.thegatewaypundit.com/2016/11/nbc-promotes-race-war-donald-trumps-historic-victory-video/) (<http://www.thegatewaypundit.com/2016/11/nbc-promotes-race-war-donald-trumps-historic-victory-video/>),” “[Black Grandmother Faced ‘Backlash’ for Supporting Donald Trump](http://www.breitbart.com/big-government/2016/11/09/black-grandmother-faced-backlash-supporting-donald-trump/), (<http://www.breitbart.com/big-government/2016/11/09/black-grandmother-faced-backlash-supporting-donald-trump/>)” and “[University Admissions Officer Blasts Christians and Conservatives as ‘Worthless Trash](http://www.breitbart.com/big-government/2016/11/13/university-admissions-officer-blasts-christians-conservatives-worthless-trash/). (<http://www.breitbart.com/big-government/2016/11/13/university-admissions-officer-blasts-christians-conservatives-worthless-trash/>)”

What do those articles tell him? They say the “mainstream media” is against him, that he’s under attack from left-wingers, and that there’s a culture war going on. Bob becomes convinced that Trump is the only person who can help him win that war. All of that persuades Bob not to trust anyone who doesn’t share his world view.

Now let’s meet a woman we’ll name “Andrea.” She’s 29, white, grew up in the suburbs, is highly educated with a master’s degree in English Literature, and lives among Yale graduate students and like-minded urban professionals in New Haven’s East Rock neighborhood. She’s a professional activist, working and volunteering for causes like gay rights, reproductive rights, and immigrant rights. Even though she voted for Bernie Sanders in the primaries, her Facebook photo has been Hillary Clinton’s “I’m With Her” logo for the past four months.

Andrea was stunned when Clinton lost, because her go-to sources for news, left-leaning hosts on [MSNBC](http://www.msnbc.com/) (<http://www.msnbc.com/>), liberal comedy shows like [The Daily Show](http://www.cc.com/shows/the-daily-show-with-trevor-noah/) (<http://www.cc.com/shows/the-daily-show-with-trevor-noah/>), and websites like the [Huffington Post](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/trump-attorney-general-jeff-sessions-racist-remarks_us_582cd73ae4b099512f80c0c2) (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/trump-attorney-general-jeff-sessions-racist-remarks_us_582cd73ae4b099512f80c0c2), [The Nation](https://www.thenation.com/) (<https://www.thenation.com/>), and [Daily Kos](http://www.dailykos.com/) (<http://www.dailykos.com/>), all told her Trump was a racist, a bigot, a homophobe and an Islamophobe. She’s convinced that no one takes him seriously, and that no one except hard-core racists and misogynists would ever vote for Trump over Hillary Clinton.

After the election, Andrea is gripped with fear, as she reads stories with headlines like, “[Donald Trump Has Unleashed a New Wave of Bullying in Schools](https://www.thenation.com/article/donald-trump-has-unleashed-a-new-wave-of-bullying-in-schools/) (https://www.thenation.com/article/donald-trump-has-unleashed-a-new-wave-of-bullying-in-schools/),” “[Gay Man Brutally Attacked By Trump Supporters on Election Night](http://www.advocate.com/election/2016/11/10/gay-man-brutally-attacked-trump-supporters-election-night) (http://www.advocate.com/election/2016/11/10/gay-man-brutally-attacked-trump-supporters-election-night),” and “[Muslim Women Across America Face Attacks In The Wake Of Donald Trump’s Win](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/attacks-muslim-women-trump_us_5824f46ce4b0ddd4fe798f10) (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/attacks-muslim-women-trump_us_5824f46ce4b0ddd4fe798f10).”

So what does Andrea now think? She’s worried for her safety, the safety of the immigrants she works with, and her LGBT friends. She’s convinced Trump’s win has ushered in a new era where people will feel empowered to attacks minorities and vulnerable people, and the president will cheer it on from the Oval Office.

For both Bob and Andrea, the echo chamber has become deafening. Their pre-existing thoughts and fears are reinforced by the only media they see, and given credibility since it’s shared by trusted friends and family.

So what’s the solution? It’s to break out of the media echo chamber and become more critical consumers of news and information. Just as people like to think they have a diverse group of friends, they should also take pride in reading diverse opinions. If an article angers or scares them, they should seek out stories from the opposing side. They shouldn’t automatically believe shocking headlines or incendiary facts. Instead, they should consider the biases of the source, and consider why someone may hold an opposing view.

Debate and opposing ideas shouldn’t be something to fear or avoid. Instead, they should be considered a uniquely American privilege, thanks to our First Amendment freedoms of speech and the press.

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