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Decentralized Media Industry Places New Demands on Readers

By: Timothy B. Lee – November 7th, 2012

Conor Friedersdorf has a really important post about the way the conservative media led the Republican Party astray during the 2012 campaign. There are some obvious advantages to having a media ecosystem that is able to exercise "message discipline," playing up conservative talking points and downplaying information that might undercut conservative positions and Republican candidates. But there's a real danger that message discipline will simply become an echo chamber—that the "news" in partisan media will increasingly consist of repeating each others' inaccurate talking points and systematically ignoring contrary evidence. I think that's how the conservative movement managed to convince themselves that they were on the verge of a Romney victory: facts suggesting Romney success were quickly circulated among conservative outlets. Evidence that Obama would win were quietly ignored. And so anyone who primarily paid attention to conservative media outlets got a fundamentally skewed picture of reality.

I won't belabor the implications for the conservative movement. Please read Conor's article for those. I hope everyone involved in conservative politics takes it to heart.

But it's worth discussing how the Internet made this media ecosystem possible. The conservative echo chamber simply wouldn't have been possible before the Internet. In 1980, if you picked up the biggest newspaper in your town, or flipped on any nightly news program, you were likely to get a relatively accurate, high-quality account of the day's news. Fringey media sources existed, but their low quality was reflected by their low production value and low circulation.

Today, in contrast, there are vastly more media outlets than one could possible keep up with, and there are many fewer obvious signs for which ones are reputable. This places a much greater responsibility on the consumer to make wise judgments about which outlets merit his attention. And unfortunately, a lot of consumers are bad at this.

This is a particularly serious problem because misinformation has a way of compounding itself over time. For example, if you convince yourself that President Obama was born in Kenya, then you're going to start to start placing more trust in media outlets that confirm this view, and less trust in ones that dispute it. Sites that spread misinformation about the president's birth likely traffic in other falsehoods. And so over time you can wind up

adopting an entire suite of false but internally consistent beliefs about the world. And as you adopt a worldview that's increasingly out of sync with reality, the accurate information presented by mainstream news sources will look to you like partisan misinformation.

The only way to avoid this kind of echo chamber effect is to make a habit of consuming media from a wide variety of ideological perspectives. You should be reading some conservative writers, some liberal writers, some libertarian writers, and some mainstream, "straight news" outlets. Personally, my Twitter and RSS feeds are dominated by liberals and libertarians, so I've made an effort to seek out and follow conservatives. I rarely agree with what they have to say, but I still find it helpful to have a sense for what a significant faction of American politics believes.

Second, when reading the writing that comes from an ideological persuasion opposite your own, it's important to try to empathize with their point of view. I've encountered lots of otherwise intelligent people—both liberals and conservatives—who seem completely baffled by the worldview of their ideological opponents. Your ideological opponents really aren't as stupid or dishonest as you think they are. If you don't understand how they reached the conclusions they do, it's possible they understand things you don't.

So when reading the work of an ideological opponent, try to do so with a sympathetic eye. See if you can re-construct in your own mind how the writer came to the conclusions she did. If you can't, do some additional research until you can fill in the missing pieces of her argument. A good way to tell if you've mastered this useful political art is by taking an ideological Turing test: try to write an argument for a position you disagree with in a way that a person who does agree with that position would find indistinguishable from the real thing. If you can do that, chances are you have a solid understanding of the views of your ideological opponents. If not, then maybe your opponents have grasped some insights about the world that you have not.