

# The short-term benefits and long-term harms of echo chambers

Evaluating the epistemic benefits of remaining versus leaving an echo chamber from an internalist perspective

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## Author's declaration

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## Abstract

In this paper I analyse the definitions and evaluation of the epistemic status of echo chambers as appears in the philosophical literature. From this analysis, I define echo chambers as enclosed environments where consonant beliefs are reinforced while external views are filtered out through omission and discrediting. I argue from this definition and in engagement with previous literature that typical features of echo chambers, if rational and truth-conducive, may not be epistemically problematic. However, I argue that from within an echo chamber, unable to verify if one's own echo chamber is truth conducive, there would arise potential long-term harms through being unable to correct developing mistakes in one's sources over time. This is despite short term epistemic benefits of echo chambers such as to resist misinformation and prematurely dismissing established beliefs. I conclude that if one is in an echo chamber, unable to verify its truth-conduciveness, there would be benefit in periodically engaging with countervailing views over the long term, if not the short term.

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# 1. Introduction

A troubling trend in polarizing political issues is the increasing extent to which disagreements extend even to factual accounts of events and the reliability of authoritative sources of knowledge. This is particularly evident in debates around scientific scepticism, such as those concerning climate change, vaccinations, and conspiracy theories like those propagated by Flat Earthers. A common explanation for this trend, and for why groups seem to ignore or resist counterevidence, is that they are caught in echo chambers. This term is often seen as pejorative, suggesting that individuals within echo chambers are behaving improperly and should change their behaviour (Lackey 2021, 208). The concern is that echo chambers might promote the spread of misinformation, further polarize the political landscape, or make some groups overly dependent on potentially misleading information or sources.

Echo chambers are typically viewed negatively; however, their definition and problematic features are not always clear. I define echo chambers as enclosed environments where consonant beliefs are reinforced while external views are filtered out through omission and discrediting. I particular compare previous echo chambers definitions and analyses by Nguyen (2020b), Lackey (2021), and Elzinga (2022). From this definition, I argue that the usual problematic features of echo chambers—such as a lack of independence and diverse counterinterviews—may not be as problematic if they arise from a rational basis and are truth conducive. However, particularly if one considers the internal context of an echo chamber, there could have potential harms if one cannot verify one's own echo chamber to be truth conducive. From this I argue that there are cases where echo chambers are useful over the short term to resist prematurely dismissing beliefs if uncertain, however over the long term it could still face harms from insulating features of echo chambers such as lacking verification whether one remains in a truth-conducive echo chamber over time and through pre-emptively

dismissing counterarguments that could provide a greater pool of evidence for a belief. I conclude that echo chambers have short-term benefits when formed from reliable, truth-conducive beliefs, but without routinely exiting the chamber to engage with counterviews either individually or institutionally, there is a risk of becoming insulated from valid criticism and potentially being misled.

## 2. Defining Echo chambers

Generally, echo chambers, as discussed by Napolitano (forthcoming), are curated informational environments that amplify the views of their inhabitants while silencing counterarguments and dissenting voices. These echo chambers often arise in discussions about partisanship, polarization, and misinformation. They help explain why different groups of people disagree on basic facts despite having similar access to information through the internet and other media (Napolitano forthcoming).

The concept gained renewed interest following the 2016 U.S. presidential election (Elzinga 2020, 373). Since then, the term has been used in discussions about selective media usage, such as Trump's preference for Fox News (Lackey 2021), and in efforts to understand the relationship between echo chambers, the "Post-Truth Era," and the apparent resistance to counterevidence among polarised groups (Nguyen 2020b, 1). Echo chambers provide a unique way to explain how our information and social structures contribute to polarizing attitudes and beliefs. Rather than suggesting that polarization arises from irrationality or a disregard for the truth, echo chambers highlight that their inhabitants may genuinely believe those views to be rational truths when considered from the perspective within the echo chamber.

In this section, I will discuss the different definitions of echo chambers from the literature and argue for focusing on echo chambers as enclosed environments where consonant beliefs are reinforced while external views are filtered out through omission and discrediting.

To do so, I will first highlight the narrower definitions of epistemic bubbles and echo chambers as analysed by Nguyen (2020b) and their use in describing how enclosed environments can form and be problematic. Then, I will discuss how these relate to the broader definitions and analyses provided by Lackey (2021) and Elzinga (2020) on echo chambers, arguing for a more neutral definition that can still encapsulate Nguyen's analysis.

## 2.1 Epistemic Bubbles

Nguyen (2020, 5) first discusses epistemic bubbles, defining them as "a social epistemic structure which has inadequate coverage through a process of exclusion by omission." Epistemic bubbles form within an informational community of like-minded individuals who may share similar political views or values. For example, on Facebook, one can naturally create an epistemic filter by sending friend requests to certain individuals, liking their posts, and engaging with the content they share. Over time, this could even without intent, result in interactions primarily with people of similar mindsets or political leanings. This filtering out of other views additionally helps to explain a potential way in which an enclosed informational environment can form, through omitting views.

This feature of omitting views can also cause problems, for instance Nguyen (2020b, 3) states that epistemic bubbles result from impaired informational topologies. We usually filter information that we find important or relevant to our everyday lives and necessarily rely on our selection of outside testimonies for knowledge of the world. However, in this network, contrary views—those from sources not included in our usual network that could counter our current beliefs—can also be omitted. This omission can lead to an overinflated self-confidence in our own views, as there seems to be more agreement than there is. This is what Nguyen (2020b, 7) refers to as the problem of corroborative bootstrapping.



Nguyen highlights two important points here. First, an enclosed informational environment can arise through the omission of views, either technologically or through self-selection. Second, this informational space can be problematic because it encourages more confidence than is warranted and omits potentially valid arguments. This contrasts with another way in which enclosed informational spaces can form, as discussed in Nguyen's definition of echo chambers.

## 2.2 Nguyen's echo chambers

For a definition of echo chambers, Nguyen (2020b, 4) considers epistemic communities that may not exclude other views by omission but still display an apparent resistance to valid counterarguments and evidence. This suggests a different way in which other views are excluded, forming an enclosed environment. According to Nguyen (2020b, 10), echo chambers, as opposed to epistemic bubbles, involve three key parts:

1. "An epistemic community which creates a significant disparity in trust between members and non-members,
2. The disparity is created by excluding non-members through epistemic, discrediting while simultaneously amplifying insider members epistemic credential,
3. Echo chambers are such that in which general agreement with some core set of beliefs is a prerequisite for membership, where those core beliefs include beliefs that support that disparity in trust" (Nguyen 2020b, 10).

The problem with this feature as Nguyen (2020b, 12) describes is that it encourages dismissive attitudes towards counterarguments through disagreement-reinforcing mechanisms. Members who agree with a set of prior core beliefs are deemed credible. Those who do not share these core beliefs are seen as lacking credibility and their counterarguments are dismissed. When exposed to disagreement, it may only reinforce the prior beliefs of the echo chamber community.

An example of this type of case, as described by Nguyen (2020b, 9), is based on the empirical research of Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Joseph Capella regarding Fox News and

Rush Limbaugh in the conservative media. In this case, it is argued that the viewership is made more dependent on a single news source by encouraging a trust disparity against other sources, despite exposure to those other media. This is achieved through:

1. Consistent attacks on the credibility of mainstream media,
2. There being a selection of an inner cadre of sources which are considered acceptable,
3. Development of a private language, using phrases such as SJW (Social Justice warrior), derogatively to emphasise insularity of the in-group,
4. Limbaugh providing counter-explanations for all contrary views, intended to attack those views, and undermining general trust in the integrity of those that put forth those views (Nguyen 2020b, 9).

In this case, the viewership is already encouraged to be dismissive of potential counterarguments from the mainstream media. A trust disparity is reinforced, and membership as credible sources within the Fox News network may require participation in the beliefs against the credibility of other media outlets.

I believe Nguyen helps to describe here another type of enclosed informational space that can develop. While his epistemic bubbles describe an enclosed space formed through omission, his description of echo chambers function instead by establishing trust disparities. This negative credential attribution means that even when counterarguments and evidence are encountered, they may reinforce the prior beliefs of those in the epistemic structure, as prior beliefs set members to be pre-emptively dismissive of these countervailing-views.

## 2.3 Lackey's definitions

Nguyen's narrower definitions help to explain how groups can become insulated from counterarguments and other views. However, definitions such as those by Lackey (2021) offer a broader perspective on echo chambers, usually combining exclusion by omission and discrediting. This could be problematic as it does not clearly distinguish between when information is left out and when information is discredited, which have different implications.

In earlier writing, Lackey (2018) defines echo chambers through two components: a common opinion is repeated and reinforced, and this occurs in an enclosed system or chamber that allows the opinion to echo. This helps to convey the general idea of what Lackey wishes to capture with echo chambers. In a later paper, Lackey (2021, 207) expands this into three statements, as drawn from Jon Robson (2014, 2520):

1. "Accepted views of the group (and particularly its opinion leaders) is frequently repeated and reinforced, while dissenting views, if they are present, are drowned out or ignored,
2. Echo chambers are in some respect- be it geographical, cultural or otherwise- enclosed spaces
3. The judgments of opinion leaders are not merely transmitted, but also amplified" (Jon Robson 2014, 2520).

This definition can be interpreted as including both discrediting and omission, as in the first point views can be absent, or if present, are ignored or drowned out. However, unlike Nguyen's analysis, Lackey (2021) argues that echo chamber structures are not necessarily problematic, as there are circumstances in which it is beneficial not to engage with other sources of information. Lackey (2021, 209-216) focuses on how one can rationally filter out views and explains how the increased confidence within echo chambers can be justified.

However, this approach addresses mostly the point on epistemic bubbles, where information is omitted, and not the trust disparities where information is preemptively discredited. Nguyen's analysis highlights the importance of recognizing how credibility judgments influence the formation of echo chambers, making it essential to distinguish between the two phenomena to understand their implications fully.

Lackey's analysis is useful for arguing the potential benefits of echo chambers against common critiques. However, it seems to clash with Nguyen's analysis, which distinguishes echo chambers from epistemic bubbles. I would argue for emphasizing this difference, even in a broader definition of echo chambers. For this, I turn to Elzinga's (2020) definition, which attempts to encapsulate both Lackey's and Nguyen's analyses.

## 2.4 Elzinga broader definition for echo chambers

Considering a broader definition might capture Nguyen's distinction while maintaining important points from Lackey's analysis but it also faces some problems from being too broad if not considering echo chambers as bounded spaces. Benjamin Elzinga (2020, 374) argues that "An echo chamber is a social network where beliefs are robustly and routinely reinforced through the echoing of consonant belief expressions throughout the network." In making this definition, Elzinga particularly wishes to show that Nguyen's distinction of filters of omission and discrediting is important but not wholly constitutive of echo chambers. This definition emphasizes staying close to the metaphor of echo chambers, where they are a social environment that echoes back your own viewpoint (Elzinga 2020, 373)

To explain this, Elzinga (2020, 375) states that we can think of echo chambers as social networks, where groups, individuals, or institutions act as nodes within the network, linked through connections of telling or testimony. They are considered epistemic agents within their community, as they have the capability of expressing beliefs and seeking out confirmation for those beliefs. In describing echo chambers this way, Elzinga emphasizes that echo chambers are networks of information flow, which echo back information when those flows reinforce shared perspectives and consonant beliefs, similar to Nguyen's discussion of epistemic communities.

Thus, we can distinguish echo chambers according to clusters of similar beliefs. For example, liberal echo chambers might encapsulate overlapping left-leaning beliefs, and vice versa for conservative echo chambers. These networks become echo chambers when they reinforce their initial beliefs. With this broader definition, echo chambers and epistemic bubbles, as discussed by Nguyen, could be described as causal mechanisms for the broader sense of echo chambers rather than discrediting and trust disparity being constitutive of the entire phenomenon.

In this view, epistemic bubbles of omission and echo chambers of discrediting are filters on the flows of information within a certain network, causing reinforcement of views (Elzinga 2020, 376). However, this implies that everyone is in an echo chamber of some form, as Elzinga argues (2020, 382-383), which might broaden the definition too much. An epistemically diverse society will have a variety of echo chambers that use different filters, benefiting from the support of like-minded individuals for our beliefs (Elzinga 2020, 383). Elzinga (2020, 383) argues this does not imply that everyone is doing something wrong, as it is an inevitable reliance on the testimonies of others and not necessarily reinforcing false beliefs. The definition of echo chambers does not describe one's relationship to the truth but rather describes “one’s relationship to other agents” (Elzinga 2020 383).

While this definition shows potential ways in which echo chambers are more common than usually thought, it may go too far in missing how echo chambers tend to be described as bounded or enclosed spaces—the “chamber” of echo chambers. Any echo chamber, I would argue, would have some exclusion or filtering out of other views, and a definition of echo chambers should reflect this. It also limits the term from becoming too amorphous, to the point that it could apply to any exchange of information in a social group.

## 2.5 Using a broader definition.

I argue for an adjusted version of Elzinga's definition to describe echo chambers as enclosed environments where consonant beliefs are reinforced while external views are filtered out through omission and discrediting. This captures some benefits of a broader definition, makes explicit the mechanisms that create echo chambers as in Nguyen's analysis, and still emphasizes that they are enclosed spaces to avoid broadening the term too much. This has several benefits for the evaluation and discussion of echo chambers.

For the evaluation of echo chambers and whether they have inherently problematic features, a broader and more normatively neutral definition seems better suited. Nguyen's definition, while important in distinguishing two mechanisms causing echo chambers, is also normatively charged in his analysis. Epistemic bubbles are described as arising from an impaired informational topology (Nguyen 2020, 3). Conversely, echo chambers, while perhaps more neutrally defined, are discussed mostly in relation to their most negative forms by Nguyen (2020, 11), comparing them with cult indoctrination and as a form of trust manipulation, stating that normally good epistemic processes go wrong in an echo chamber. This is one advantage of a definition like Elzinga's, where the discussion of echo chambers is left open to be potentially neutral. This helps avoid circularity in defining echo chambers negatively while attempting to evaluate them.

Another benefit of this broader definition is that Nguyen's definition may be too narrow. While it makes a substantive distinction, it misses that exclusion by omission in epistemic bubbles still captures the metaphor of what an echo chamber does: reinforcing consonant beliefs by echoing your view back at you, as discussed by Lackey (2021) and Elzinga (2020, 378). Therefore, while the phenomenon that Nguyen wishes to capture with his narrow definition of echo chambers—namely, resistance to counter-evidence—is important, it may not

be wholly constitutive of what echo chambers are. It could be considered a particular filter mechanism that causes echo chambers to reinforce beliefs.

Thus, defining echo chambers as enclosed environments where consonant beliefs are reinforced while external views are filtered out through omission and discrediting could capture both the important points of analysis made by Lackey in her evaluation of echo chambers and maintain Nguyen's distinction more explicitly to discuss the causal mechanisms of echo chambers and whether this has inherently negative features or not.

### 3. Potential Epistemic harms of an echo chamber

From the above discussion, echo chambers are defined as enclosed environments where consonant beliefs are reinforced while external views are filtered out through omission and discrediting mechanisms. From this, there are two typical problematic features of entering an echo chamber:

1. Lack of Independence: Multiple sources to justify a belief may actually come from or depend on the same source or have been chosen in a way that guarantees confirmation of a belief. This encourages a type of confirmation bias or circularity in justifying prior beliefs.
2. Lack of Diverse Views: They lack diverse counterarguments from opposing beliefs, which could provide additional justification or valid falsification of beliefs within the echo chamber, drawing on Mill's (1859) reasons for why one should engage with counterviews.

For the lack of independence, I discuss counterarguments by Lackey (2020) and Begby (2022) which indicate that increasing confidence with corroboration from like-minded peers could be rationally justified, suggesting that entering a truth-conducive echo chamber is

possible and thus not inherently problematic for echo chambers. Additionally, for the lack of diverse views, I examine Lackey's counterarguments to Mill, where they argue that one does not gain from engagement with counterviews if one occupies a truth-conducive echo chamber. However, I argue this can create a dilemma from an internalist point of view for agents within an echo chamber, as they may lack knowledge of the truth-conduciveness of the echo chamber when within it. Thus requiring engagement with diverse opposing views to exit and gain this knowledge.

### 3.1 Lack of independence from corroborated sources

Echo chambers may lack independence in the sources that corroborate an agent's beliefs if countervailing views are filtered out via discrediting or omission. As discussed by Lackey (2021, 209), "The opinions of others have epistemic force only to the extent they are independent of one another." One can have multiple sources of testimony from multiple agents corroborating a belief within an echo chamber. The problem of their independence can be understood that usually, having multiple sources is beneficial, as it provides more weight of evidence for a particular view. However, if all those sources are reflections of the same source or pre-selected to guarantee agreement it undermines their epistemic weight in support of a claim. They lack independence from each other in verifying a claim or belief, as they are derived from a similar pool of sources or were selected because they already agree with a similar set of prior beliefs.

To illustrate, take an example from Wittgenstein as highlighted by Lackey (2021, 6). Imagine finding a newspaper that supports a particular belief P. This counts as one source in favour of P. Now imagine finding more copies of the same newspaper that also support P. This would not count as further corroborating the belief, as they are only reflecting the same evidence for P encountered before. This relates to Nguyen's (2020b, 7) discussion of bootstrapped corroboration. One might worry that encountering multiple sources of agreement



in the echo chamber is due to the echo chamber filtering out other sources, leaving only like-minded copies to corroborate a particular belief.

Secondly, on the subject of biased group selection, if you select a group of peers over time based on their shared values of liking the Paleo Diet, these peers would not be as reliable in corroborating the quality of the Paleo Diet as another group formed on a different basis. The subject you wish to corroborate is already biased by the group selection (Nguyen, 2020b, 8). Even if the group members come to their beliefs on their own, their selection might distort the corroboration of the particular belief.

These examples show that if echo chamber members are like-minded individuals who provide similar beliefs and arguments for a particular view, it undermines the rationality of entering an echo chamber. This is because one is not finding additional support for one's view in an epistemically sound way, corroborating sources for prior beliefs would be guaranteed by how the echo chamber filters out other views. However, this need not necessarily be the case, as is argued by Lackey (2021).

### 3.2 Rational corroboration in echo chambers

If the above is a problematic feature of echo chambers, then being in an echo chamber would be unjustified, as it would distort the perceived amount of corroboration for a source and lead to unwarranted reinforcement of prior beliefs, as the it is coming from more like-minded agents. However, as is argued by Lackey (2021, 209) there would seem to be cases within an echo chamber where you can have justification for multiple like-minded individuals corroborating a belief, and despite them drawing from the source. Further than this, Begby argues that it is individually rational to have to choose like-minded peers to corroborate beliefs to make judgements of what is reliable, and what could be unreliable sources, even if this leads to echo chamber formation. This could indicate then that one can rationally and justifiably enter an echo chamber, that is truth conducive.

For instance, Lackey (2021, 213) gives the example of Annie and Abby, who both read The Guardian with respect to a view on Brexit. Both make assertions based on that reading, but Annie is not good at checking the reliability of news sources generally, while Abby has chosen The Guardian with evidence of its reliability. Despite both being like-minded regarding Brexit and deriving that view from copies of the same source, Lackey (2021, 214) contends that Abby's testimony on Brexit after reading The Guardian has better evidential reasons than Annie's. The reason being that Abby is adding her expertise on evaluating the reliability of the Guardian when she retells its views, while Annie would have given the same telling, whether the Guardian was reliable or not.

This is what Lackey (2021, 209-210) describes as acting with autonomous dependence. I summarise the three main characteristics of autonomous dependence below as:

1. Possessing Beliefs About Reliability: Agents should have beliefs about the reliability and trustworthiness of the testimonial source, either specifically or generally, and possess background beliefs to monitor this.
2. Monitoring for Defeaters: Agents should monitor incoming testimony for defeaters, such as information indicating that current beliefs are false, unreliably sustained, or should be different.
3. Bearing Responsibility: Agents should bear responsibility for expressing the view in question, ensuring they are certain of the truth of the testimony. They would not for instance support information based on a guess (Lackey 2021, 209-210).

Under such circumstances, even if it is an echo chamber, there would be reason to believe the corroboration does support prior belief, as the like-minded agents filtered the same sources through their various background beliefs in different ways. Supporting the truth of a particular claim in that echo chamber would then have some warranted epistemic weight in justifying

beliefs, as it also adds the individual judgments of the reliability of a statement. This helps to show how one can enter an echo chamber justifiably, as discussed by Begby (2022).

Begby (2022, 10) describes that it is rational for agents in imperfect informational conditions to designate which sources they find reliable and which they find unreliable, even if this leads to the formation of echo chambers. This is because individuals must make judgments based on the available evidence and testimonies at the time to decide whom to trust. Those designated peers, Begby (2022, 9-10) argues, are trusted because they agree with one's prior beliefs and evidence, as there is nothing else to judge them on. Therefore, it is rational for beliefs to become entrenched under these circumstances.

If others systematically disagree with those judgments and beliefs, they might not be considered peers at all, validating a type of epistemic discrediting, like what Nguyen describes as disagreement reinforcement (Begby 2022, 8-11). Under these circumstances, one can rationally enter an echo chamber as an inevitable by-product of rational individual behaviour in an imperfect information system. This does not guarantee that all beliefs within that echo chamber are true or that one cannot designate the wrong peers as authority figures. However, if one acts with autonomous dependence, such as to monitor a source's reliability and look for defeaters, it is more likely that the chosen peers can form a truth-conducive echo chamber.

### 3.3 Lack of a diversity of views

If one can enter an echo chamber rationally, then another epistemically harmful feature could be the lack of diverse views to offer defeaters for beliefs within the echo chamber. Thus, even if entering an echo chamber could be rational, it might be problematic to stay because one could insulate oneself from valid criticism, especially when voices are excluded by filters of omission or discrediting, and one depends on the wrong authoritative sources. John Stuart Mill (1859, 18) provides a classical argument against such exclusions, stating that if such opinions are correct, their exclusion would deprive someone of the opportunity to exchange error for

truth. Even if the opposing opinions are wrong, their exclusion would result in losing a clearer and livelier impression of truth (Mill 1859, 18). Mill develops this view with four arguments, outlined below.

Mill's first two arguments are of a similar nature. First, he argues that, "If any opinion is compelled to silence, that opinion may, for aught we can certainly know, be true. To deny this is to assume our own infallibility" (Mill 1859, 50). Second, even if the argument is false, there might still be some truth in it which can be gained through engagement and collision of varying opinions. Establishing an opinion based on available evidence or confidence in the reliability of others in your network does not guarantee freedom from potential faults. Mill (1859, 22) argues that allowing for a contradiction of opinions aids in correcting mistakes and gaining a fuller picture of a debate. This highlights a particular worry of echo chambers, as noted by Elzinga (2020, 388), regarding filters that discredit outside opinions. Echo chambers can display a type of collaborative resistance to counterevidence, where the echo chamber resists outside intervention collectively.

Collaborative resistance acts regardless of whether the echo chamber's beliefs are true. The echo chamber will still reinforce its members' opinions against counterarguments and evidence. Elzinga argues that intra-group feedback loops of members corroborating and boosting each other's confidence create a narrative within the echo chamber about who can be trusted. Outside voices opposing this narrative are met with resistance and questioning of their motives and evidence, while inside voices might face sanctions if they defect from the shared beliefs (Elzinga 2020, 386, 388). This can particularly be troublesome if one is in a non-truth conducive echo chamber, as it resists corrections from diverse counterarguments towards the established beliefs.

An example of this is the online discrediting of Welch in the Pizzagate conspiracy. Pizzagate was an online conspiracy theory that led Edgar Welch to enter a pizza restaurant with

an assault rifle, believing it was a child trafficking ring (Kang and Goldman 2016). Despite verifying for himself that there was no trafficking ring and turning himself in to the police, Welch was later discredited by online followers of the conspiracy. They claimed he was a planted actor by the mainstream media to discredit the conspiracy (Kang and Goldman 2016). Welch provided evidence to the contrary but was shunned by the community as an outsider, and his claims were met with severe scepticism. This indicates that echo chambers relying on the heuristic of like-minded agreement for corroboration of prior beliefs might pre-emptively dismiss countervailing beliefs and evidence.

For the third argument, Mill (1859, 50) states that even if the initial beliefs in the echo chambers are wholly true, vigorous debate is needed to hold the belief beyond mere prejudice and to understand the rational grounds for that belief. Mill's (1859, 50) fourth argument similarly states that "the meaning of the doctrine itself will be in danger of being lost or enfeebled, and deprived of its vital effect on the character and conduct...", meaning that the belief may not strongly influence people's conduct. Mill argues that debating with contradicting opinions fosters a better understanding of the rational grounds and justifications for one's own view and helps ensure that the view is held with conviction. He goes as far as to state that even if you know reasons to support the view, an inability to refute objections indicates that one should suspend judgment, as you lack sufficient evidence or reasoning to have much confidence in the truth of the view (Mill 1859, 35).

Echo chamber with filters which either exclude contrary opinions through discrediting or omission, would then deprive its members from fully engaging with reasons of other echo chambers. Collaborative resistance acts to make the members pre-emptively dismissive of arguments from other views, as these counterarguments do not corroborate initial beliefs. This can make members more reliant on judgements from their initial beliefs, as these become a larger factor in one's judgement of other sources' reliability or unreliability. This is potentially

epistemically harmful if one is in a non-truth conducive echo chamber, as it deprives one from correcting mistakes and if in a truth conducive echo chamber, prevents from learning of more reasons for a view being right.

### 3.4 Criticism of the Millian View

In the previous section, it was established that a lack of engagement with diverse views can be problematic if one finds oneself in a non-truth-conducive echo chamber due to collaborative resistance to counterarguments. This can also be problematic even in a truth-conducive echo chamber because one misses out on understanding why one view is more reliable or less reliable than another without engaging with diverse opposing views.

However, Lackey (2021) argues that given one can enter a truth-conducive echo chamber with prior judgments of its reliability, there does not seem to be much point in engaging with counterarguments from sources deemed unreliable. Additionally, Lackey argues that analysing echo chambers as problematic due to a lack of exposure to counterarguments implies that both reliable and unreliable echo chambers are equally doing something wrong, which might be a false equivalence.

However, from an internalist perspective, where agents within an echo chamber may struggle to recognize whether their echo chamber is reliable or unreliable, it becomes less clear if one can recommend dismissing other views and counterarguments.

Lackey (2021, 215) argues that Mill might be too idealistic regarding how we engage with diverse views and gain knowledge. Lackey highlights that it is beneficial to cut out noise, restrict information to what we find reliable, and focus on matters we find important. Given the limited amount of information one can engage with, adding opposing sources without regard to their reliability, solely to avoid insulation, might not be beneficial. Lackey (2021, 216) states that one could end up out of an echo chamber but worse off as a knower, as engaging with unreliable sources could only mislead someone and not add much benefit.

Mill (1857, 22) could counter that this then prevents one from the ability to correct from mistakes and assumes a type of infallibility on the part of one that dismisses opposing views on basis that one's own is true. However, as Lackey (2021, 216) argues, considering echo chambers problematic due only to lack of exposure and not its true or false belief contents encourages viewing all echo chambers similarly. Lackey contends this is not the case, as there is a disanalogy in echo chambers with reliable versus unreliable sources. For instance, if a source is deemed reliable because it is fact-checked and blind-reviewed, while another source is known to be politically biased and thus unreliable, then there is enough reason to dismiss the latter and not add it as a source (Lackey 2021, 216). Here I argue that Lackey's analysis provides a good externalist account of echo chambers, showing a disanalogy between truth-conducive echo chambers and non-truth-conducive echo chambers. The latter would have more reason to be exposed to outside views, while the former, if it could be verified to be truth-conducive, can be entered and stayed in justifiably and be a good echo chamber.

However, Lackey also seems to miss potential ways in which collaborative resistance can distort an agent's reliability judgment within an echo chamber, internally. Individuals within both good and bad echo chambers will think their beliefs are reliable and others' beliefs are unreliable, as they have based their judgments on available prior beliefs. This is a problematic situation for echo chambers from an internalist perspective and, as Sheeks (2022, 695) highlights, it pertains particularly to the structure of the echo chamber rather than its belief contents. Even if there are truth-conducive echo chambers, one may not be able to identify one's own echo chamber as such.

Remaining in an echo chamber only because its sources are judged reliable based on prior beliefs can make one resistant to counterevidence without necessarily being in a truth-conducive echo chamber. For example, Nguyen (2020b, 27) highlights how someone who grew up in a non-truth-conducive echo chamber their entire life could act epistemically virtuously in

seeking truth, being engaged and earnest, but still end up in an echo chamber that holds false beliefs due to the epistemic system they were raised in.

To verify if one is in a truth-conducive echo chamber, I argue that some form of engagement with a diversity of views is necessary. This engagement allows for comparison of why one's echo chamber is reliable as opposed to dissenting views, thereby considering one's position from an outside perspective of that echo chamber (Sheeks 2022, 694). It could also require suspending judgement from prior beliefs to avoid pre-emptively dismissing the counterexamples one evaluates, what Nguyen (2020b, 32) describes as an epistemic reboot. Such engagement with diverse views could then showcase whether one is basing beliefs on justified reasons or merely corroborating prior beliefs.

Lackey's (2021, 216) own examples underscore this point. A politically biased news source is judged to be untrue and unreliable compared to a fact-checked, blind-reviewed source. For a person in a non-truth-conducive echo chamber, only a comparison of the two sources would help emphasize that one source has reasons to be considered reliable, whereas the politically biased source might only corroborate prior beliefs. Thus, engaging with diverse views helps identify the reliability of one's echo chamber and ensures that beliefs are based on justified reasons rather than just reinforcing prior convictions.

Therefore, I conclude that echo chambers could display potential harms due to lacking independence and a diversity of views. However, it is also possible to rationally enter an echo chamber, as one must make judgments about trusted and untrusted sources in an imperfect information system. Furthermore, if one occupies a truth-conducive echo chamber, there is little problem in excluding certain views deemed untrustworthy, either through discrediting or omission. However, internally, this can be problematic in identifying whether one is truly



occupying a truth-conducive echo chamber which could require engaging with opposing views to verify.

## 4. Short term benefits versus long term harms

From the last section, it is concluded that it is possible for there to be truth-conducive echo chambers that one can rationally enter. These echo chambers could have positive epistemic features in having true beliefs but would still lack engagement with diverse countervailing views, making it hard to verify from within whether they are truly truth conducive.

In this section, I argue that there are contexts in which this lack of engagement with countervailing views could still be beneficial in the short term, such as to avoid potentially true beliefs from being prematurely dismissed. However, in the long term, an echo chamber could still be harmful by not engaging with opposing views, as it lacks the verification needed to confirm that the echo chamber remains truth-conducive over time. Additionally, this lack of engagement might result in missing out on a greater pool of evidence that could further support or refine one's established beliefs.

### 4.1 Epistemic benefits of staying versus leaving.

Remaining in an echo chamber and having resistance to counterevidence could be beneficial in the short term. For instance, Fantl (2021) highlights that despite being in an echo chamber, it could be beneficial to resist prematurely dismissing established beliefs even if seemingly convincing counterarguments are provided, such as in contexts involving fake news or misleading arguments. Additionally, this resistance can be beneficial in protecting potentially controversial beliefs, as it could provide time and opportunity to develop better-reasoned arguments (Ypi and White 2016).

Fantl (2021, 646) argues that there is an inevitable tension between approaches to resist being misled by fake news and approaches to escape echo chambers through open-minded

engagement with opposing views. Fake news mimics the conventions of reliable media and reporting but is significantly false or misleading to its audience (Fantl 2021, 645). To resist potential fake news, one should hold confidence in the beliefs that fake news attempts to undermine, even if it is not immediately obvious what is wrong with the fake news. This is because we want to maintain belief in the truth of certain views despite encountering fake news (Fantl 2021, 652).

However, if one wants to verify whether one's sources are truth conducive in an echo chamber, one will have to engage open mindedly with those opposing views. Open-mindedly here is defined as the disposition to reduce confidence or even suspend judgment in response to counterarguments that undermine our established beliefs, when they are not obviously fake or misleading and we cannot expose a flaw (Fantl 2021, 648). The tension thus arises when you want certain beliefs to be resistant to being misled by fake news or misleading counterarguments, which contradicts the approach of engaging with opposing sources to exit an echo chamber. Therefore, there could be cases where it is beneficial to remain in the echo chamber to resist potential misleading evidence or counterarguments from fake news.

This resistance to counterarguments is not only beneficial against fake news but also potentially for the development of better-reasoned arguments within the echo chamber before encountering counterarguments. For instance, as Ypi and White (2016, 91) argue, partisan groups are likely to shape evidence to endorse the reliability of their own projects and beliefs, similar to echo chambers. To be a partisan, Ypi and White (2016, 76) state, is to stand in a certain relation to others who share similar views. Partisan groups take their own views more seriously, and activists may not take different views into account (Ypi and White 2016, 97). Thus, partisan groups can potentially form enclosed environments that reinforce their own views and exclude dissenting views, resembling echo chambers.

These exclusive environments can offer members educational platforms to develop confidence in competently arguing for their beliefs within the partisan groups. For example, trainee members in the Natal Indian Congress, as discussed in Gandhi's autobiography, voiced critique in organized closed assemblies, slowly allowing activists to gain experience in public speaking and competently represent their views in public forums (Ypi and White 2016, 92). Similarly, controversial and polarizing views, if first discussed with a like-minded group in such a way that interprets new evidence in relation to prior beliefs, can provide opportunities to develop alternative or critical narratives to dominant beliefs. Ypi and White (2016, 96) highlight that engagement with like-minded individuals can lead one to have more resistance to dismissing a beneficial belief or value if it is unpopular or heavily criticized at the time, allowing arguments in favour of it to be developed. For instance, it would not have been favourable if the universal suffrage and civil rights movements were dismissed when initially facing controversy and polarization (Ypi and White 2016, 96).

These arguments show that there are cases where remaining in an echo chamber can be epistemically good to resist prematurely revising beliefs. For instance, imagine that a person encounters a countervailing argument for a strongly held belief *P*, with this potentially being fake news or misleading evidence for not *P*. Remaining confident in the belief despite the counter-evidence would lead one to remain more strongly in an echo chamber while also resisting potential misleading arguments for not *P*.

However, this might only be a sensible justification in the short term. As Ypi and White's (2016) arguments indicate, this behaviour could be understandable if the opportunity is used to further learn and develop arguments or consult authority figures against such misleading arguments. However, after consulting with authorities and having time to develop rebuttals, if engagement with such views still does not fully undermine the reasoning of the other side, it would not be rational to resist reviewing one's beliefs and lowering confidence in

them somewhat. Otherwise, the mere fact that a counterargument disagrees with prior belief becomes the reason to avoid engagement, which could perpetuate potential misinformation if one's own echo chamber is not truth conducive. There could also be potential harms over the long term if truth-conducive echo chambers follow similar behaviour.

## 4.2 Long term harms of staying in an echo chamber.

There are benefits in the short term for truth-conducive echo chambers not to prematurely dismiss or suspend beliefs in response to counterarguments. However, I argue that there are long-term harms from this engagement as well. Over time, echo chambers, even if initially truth-conducive, could change to encapsulate false beliefs. Additionally, one would miss out on a wider pool of reasons to support and refine established beliefs if one were to engage with opposing views and find them lacking.

One might enter an echo chamber with reasons regarding the truth of individual agents and sources trusted as being truth-conducive but still lack verification that, over the long term, it remains trustworthy and informed by reliable sources. Sheeks (2022, 694) argues this point, noting that even if a selection of sources is initially truth-conducive and reliable, it is not guaranteed to remain so over the long term. For instance, Sheeks (2022, 695) describes a scenario where one listens to the testimony of climate scientists on evidence and information on climate change, which is reliable due to their research, but later finds that this group has taken on a bias on unrelated views, such as that all people from South Appalachia are uneducated bigots. One would accept the previous reliable claims but would also later be misled by the same previously trusted testimony for developing additional biased claims. Thus, even if there is potential danger in exiting echo chambers, such as taking on false views or prematurely dismissing a belief, there is still a danger in remaining in an echo chamber without verifying that it remains truth-conducive.

Additionally, Ranali and Malcom (2023, 24) propose that the problematic feature of echo chambers is that they are reason-undermining structures. Echo chambers have a pre-emption against reasoning with other views, systematically stopping members from critically engaging with serious objections to their views, similar to the discussion of collaborative resistance above. This can happen either by filtering out relevant criticisms through omission or by discrediting them to the point that members do not critically engage with them. Within an echo chamber, one misses out, according to Ranali and Malcom (2023, 25), on the promotion of knowledge to strengthen one's own beliefs about new critical developments. This is similar to Mill's third argument for engaging opposing views, in that rebuttals to opposing views add evidence in favour of one's own established beliefs and keep them from becoming dogmatic. However, if one does not engage with other opposing views and remains in an echo chamber long-term, one misses out on this larger pool of evidence.

## 5. Conclusion

Echo chambers are enclosed environments where similar beliefs are reinforced while external views are filtered out through omission and discrediting. Although echo chambers might lack independence, this need not be harmful, as one can rationally enter an echo chamber by determining which sources of information are reliable based on prior established beliefs. However, echo chambers can be epistemically harmful due to collaborative resistance, which undermines and pre-empts the dismissal of countervailing arguments, thus lacking engagement with a diversity of opposing views.

Lackey (2021) argues that this lack of engagement is not necessarily problematic if one is in a truth-conducive echo chamber, as opposed to a non-truth-conducive one. However, while an externalist account shows how we might consider truth-conducive echo chambers differently, it does not provide advice for identifying a truth conducive echo chamber

internally. One might consider their own views reliable and opposing views unreliable, regardless of the echo chamber's truth conduciveness.

In this state of uncertainty, there are short-term benefits to not exiting an echo chamber, as it helps resist prematurely dismissing beliefs that could be truth-conducive when encountering misleading arguments or for developing the beliefs internally. However, long-term harms are still possible, even in a truth-conducive echo chamber. One can insulate oneself from criticism that could highlight developing mistakes in one's sources over time and miss out on gaining an expanded pool of evidence for a belief through rebutting counterarguments. This suggests an approach where one can periodically engage with outside opposing views to avoid insulating oneself from criticism and correct potential false beliefs while also gaining short-term benefits from remaining in an echo chamber, such as reviewing evidence and arguments for one's established beliefs and to fact check potential misleading arguments

Topics which further research can explore, is how to identify when a social network or individual insulates themselves too much from counterarguments and the difficulty of exiting an echo chamber to verify certain beliefs. Nguyen (2020b, 31) argues that exiting would require a systematic epistemic reboot of an agent's entire belief system, while Elzinga (2020, 390) suggests that it could lead to severing oneself from one's community or having actors within the echo chamber slowly reform it from within if it is found not to be truth-conducive or extremely resistant to other views.

Additionally, echo chambers within the political domain can be more ambiguous and challenging to identify whether reasons are well-supported and can withstand counterarguments, as evaluations may be based more on values themselves. Nguyen (2020a) refers to this phenomenon as cognitive islands, where identifying experts on moral and political issues is difficult without being an expert oneself, leading to the risk of picking out bad experts.

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