Abstract:

How can one escape from an echo chamber? In “Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles,” C. T. Nguyen argues that the members of an echo chamber radically distrust all non-members, and will thus dismiss any arguments or evidence they present to challenge the deeply held beliefs within the chamber. He recognizes that any escape from an echo chamber will almost certainly involve someone from outside of the echo chamber gaining the trust of someone stuck within one, although he admits that it’s unclear as to how someone from the outside could gain that trust. The purpose of this paper is to build on Nguyen’s work: I will suggest a number of ways in which a person from the outside could plausibly gain the trust of someone within an echo chamber and use that discussion to develop a plausible institutional solution for social media sites to address the echo chamber problem.

Beginning of Paper:

How can one escape from an echo chamber? In “Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles,” C. T. Nguyen argues that most of the philosophical and empirical work on echo chambers fails to make an important distinction between epistemic bubbles and echo chambers. Nguyen argues that while there are fairly straightforward ways of escaping/dissolving epistemic bubbles, there do not seem to be any straightforward ways to get someone out of an echo chamber. He recognizes that any escape from an echo chamber will almost certainly involve someone from outside of the echo chamber
gaining the trust of someone stuck within one, although he admits that it’s unclear as to how someone from the outside could gain that trust.

The purpose of this paper is to build on Nguyen’s work: I will suggest a number of ways in which a person from the outside could plausibly gain the trust of someone within an echo chamber and use that discussion to develop a plausible institutional solution for social media sites to address the echo chamber problem.¹

Section 1: Epistemic Bubbles and Echo Chambers

Nguyen defines an epistemic bubble as “a social epistemic structure which has inadequate coverage through a process of exclusion by omission.”² While epistemic bubbles can be problematic for epistemic reasons, Nguyen admits that they are “relatively fragile.” He claims that “it is possible to pop an epistemic bubble by exposing a member to relevant information or arguments that they have missed.”³

Echo chambers, on the other hand, are not so easy to dissolve. Nguyen defines an echo chamber as the following:

I use “echo chamber” to mean an epistemic community which creates a significant disparity in trust between members and non-members. This disparity is created by excluding non-members through epistemic discrediting, while simultaneously amplifying members’ epistemic credentials. Finally, echo chambers are such that general agreement with some core set of beliefs is a

¹ Nearly everyone (at least in the academic sphere) agrees that the existence of echo chambers is a bad thing. The reasons why people think echo chambers are bad range from worries about intellectual and moral complacency, blatantly false beliefs being held with firm conviction despite the existence of damning evidence against them, the increase of political polarization and the lack of productive political deliberation that’s necessary for democracy to function well, and the complete dismissal of highly reliable sources of information (like, say, the scientific community).


prerequisite for membership, where those core beliefs include beliefs that support that disparity in trust.\(^4\)

So, simply exposing members of an echo chamber to opposing evidence and arguments won’t dissolve the echo chamber, for the members will have been predisposed, through a radical form of distrust, to dismiss any and all opposing voices as unreliable and any evidence as faulty.\(^5\) A worrying feature of echo chambers is that the members may not be acting individually epistemically irrational by holding onto their erroneous beliefs. As Nguyen argues, we rely heavily on trusting practices to “navigate the hyperspecialized world,” and echo chambers can turn these reasonable practices against us:

Echo chambers function parasitically on these [trusting] practices by applying discredits without regard for the actual epistemic worth of the discredited institutions or individuals. The discredit is instead applied strategically and defensively, towards all outsiders solely on the basis of their being outsiders.\(^6\)

Is there a way to escape an echo chamber? Nguyen believes that a kind of epistemic rebooting process\(^7\) could be triggered by an outsider gaining the trust of a member of the echo chamber. He uses Derek Black, a reformed white nationalist, as an example to motivate this claim:


\(^5\) Further, the beliefs held in the chamber can become even further entrenched through “disagreement-reinforcement mechanisms.” As Nguyen describes them, “members can be brought to hold a set of beliefs such that the existence and expression of contrary beliefs reinforces the original set of beliefs and the discrediting story.” See Nguyen (2018): 7.


\(^7\) He calls this process the “social epistemic reboot,” which involves “re Considering all testimonial sources with presumptive equanimity, without deploying their previous credentialing beliefs.” See Nguyen (2018): 17.
Black went to college and was shunned by almost everyone in his college community. But then Matthew Stevenson, a Jewish fellow undergraduate, began to invite Black to his Shabbat dinners. Stevenson was unfailingly kind, open, and generous, and he slowly earned Black’s trust. This eventually led to a massive upheaval for Black — a slow dawning realization of the depths to which he had been systematically misled.\(^8\)

Thus, Nguyen believes that the best bet to escape an echo chamber is for an outsider to gain the trust of a member of that echo chamber.\(^9\) He admits, however, that it’s unclear “how that trust could be reliably cultivated.” In the following section, I want to suggest some possible avenues for gaining the trust of someone within an echo chamber.

**Section 2: Building Trust**

Let’s imagine that Brie is stuck inside of an echo chamber. As a result of being inside of the echo chamber, Brie believes some politically relevant claim X, and automatically dismisses, based on radical distrust, any source of information that argues against X.\(^10\) Imagine that Carly is outside of the echo chamber, and has strong evidence that X is false. How can Carly convince Brie that she is trustworthy with respect to X?

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\(^9\) Since an echo chamber requires the radical distrust of all outsiders, if an outsider is able to gain the trust of a member, that member will be forced to reconsider their entire trust network. If this outsider can be trusted, who else has that member erroneously distrusted?

\(^10\) We can even go further, and imagine that someone named ‘Xander’ is the source of this echo chamber, and Xander has made clear to Brie that anyone that doesn’t think that X cannot be trusted.
There are several obstacles to Carly gaining Brie’s trust. First, trust is sensitive to *context and subject matter*. Carly may get Brie to trust her with regards to *certain things*, like giving accurate directions to some location, but it’s unclear how she could get Brie to trust her with regards to political claims like X.

The most straightforward way to gain the trust of someone in a particular context is to present a *reliable track record*. However, this option doesn’t seem available to Carly. Even if Carly has a reliable track record with regards to information concerning X, Brie will dismiss this track record at the start. To Brie, this seems like a highly *unreliable* track record, for the things that Carly accepts are in conflict with X being true!

Before we identify the ways in which Carly *can* gain Brie’s trust with regards to X, we first need to discuss what it means to be *trustworthy*. In the epistemic trust literature, most philosophers agree that trustworthiness is a function of *honesty* and *competency*.

To gain Brie’s trust, Carly will have to demonstrate that she is honest and competent

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11 For instance, I may trust a mechanic to accurately tell me what’s wrong with my car, but I won’t trust a mechanic to give me accurate step-by-step instructions to successfully perform heart surgery. Similarly, I may trust a used car sales person to give me directions to the local cinema, but not to tell me the truth about the functionality of a car she’s selling.


13 For instance, a used car salesperson could gain my trust by demonstrating that she has reliably told the truth about cars that she’s sold to other people. She could do this by appealing to customer reviews, etc.

14 Further, Xander may have set up a *disagreement reinforcement mechanism*. That is, Xander may have warned Brie that the *evil outsiders* will try to discredit the source and beliefs of the echo chamber with fabricated evidence and faulty arguments. Carly could try to get Brie out of the echo chamber by presenting arguments and evidence against X, yet, because of the reinforcement mechanism already in place, this will only serve to further solidify Brie’s belief in X.

15 If we think about echo chambers, we can see these two factors at work. We can imagine Xander telling Brie that anyone that doesn’t agree that X is true is either *dishonest*, trying to trick or manipulate Brie, or *incompetent*, just blindly believing what some liars have told them.
with respect to X, yet she must do so without being able to appeal to her own track record with regards to political claims like X.\textsuperscript{16} From Brie’s point of view, the fact that Carly claims to not believe that X is reason to suspect that she’s either trying to trick Brie or she is foolish enough to believe some lie.

3.1: Relationship Based on Mutual Goodwill and Respect

While it's possible to gain my trust via the demonstration of a reliable track record, it's possible that I can trust someone in that context even if I don't have access to a track record. I may, instead, trust someone because of my \textit{personal relationship} with her.\textsuperscript{17} If I have a relationship with a person such that I can be confident that this person would be honest with me, I don’t necessarily need any other evidence to trust.\textsuperscript{18}

Even though trust is sensitive to the context and the subject matter of the claim, we often deem someone as honest merely based on our relationship with that person. Why is this the case? First, a relationship based on mutual \textit{goodwill} means that the


\textsuperscript{17} Many philosophers have investigated the link between friendship and trust. See Kornblith (forthcoming): 7-8, Holton (1994): 6-11, and Flores and Solomon (1998): 213.

\textsuperscript{18} We can get clearer on why that’s the case by focusing on a distinction made by Carrie Figdor between calculative and relational trust. Figdor defines calculative trust as “trust… based on actual past behaviour of the other or constraints on their future behaviour, such as by legal contract.” My trust in a sales person based on their track record of honesty would be considered, then, calculative trust. Relational trust, on the other hand, is “based on a close relationship between the trusting person and the other, and the role of intentions is paramount.” Further, “one relationally trusts the other to have good intentions towards one, with the expectation that these intentions will be borne out in future behaviour.” It’s clear, then, that my trust in the sales person based on our close relationship would be relational trust. See Figdor (2019): 75.
other person wants the best for me, and thus would not likely intentionally lead me astray.\textsuperscript{19} Second, a relationship based on mutual \textit{respect} means that the other person doesn’t see me as some rube to be fooled, but rather as a \textit{person} that deserves to be treated as such.\textsuperscript{20}

So, how can Carly convince Brie that she’s honest with respect to X? She can cultivate trust by building a relationship based on mutual goodwill and respect with Brie. There are two obvious ways she can go about doing this, and both can be made clear when we think about the case of Derek Black. First, recall that Black was invited to dinner by Matthew Stevenson \textit{after} Black was outed as a white nationalist. At the dinner, Stevenson didn’t force Black to defend himself, and didn’t allow others to verbally attack him. This was an act of \textit{kindness} that demonstrated to Black that Stevenson wanted the best for him \textit{despite} his horrifying views.\textsuperscript{21} Similarly, Carly could demonstrate goodwill towards Brie despite Brie’s faulty belief that X with acts of kindness and generosity.

Second, a number of the college students close to Black began asking him \textit{why} he had the beliefs that he had.\textsuperscript{22} By hearing Black out, these students showed great \textit{respect} towards Black, and this in turn led Black to eventually begin trusting these

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{19} See Smolkin (2008): 439-443.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{20} Notice something crucial here: a trusting relationship based on mutual goodwill and respect can be appealed to in a broader sense, rather than for a specific claim made in a specific context. While a track record can often only serve as evidence of honesty with respect to specific kinds of claims, relational trust can be appealed to for any context, as long as honesty is the primary factor.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{21} Saslow (2018): 79-80.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{22} That is, they showed a surprising level of consideration, and didn’t dismiss Black as some moral monster or incompetent fool out of hand.}
students despite the arguments and evidence they posed against his views. Similarly, Carly could demonstrate respect towards Brie by carefully listening to why Brie believes that X, even though she thinks X is a blatantly ridiculous claim. By hearing her out, Carly can help build a relationship with Brie based on respect.

By maintaining social contact with Brie and being considerate of her views, Carly can build a relationship with Brie based on mutual goodwill and respect. Notice that neither involves Carly presenting evidence that X is false, or criticizing Brie’s beliefs. Rather, she can slowly build this relationship with Brie in a way such that Brie will slowly stop doubting the honesty of Carly, even with respect to X.

3.2: Finding Common Ground

While cultivating the kind of relationship described above can help Carly convince Brie that she’s honest, it doesn’t seem to help with respect to competency. Brie may trust that Carly is telling her what she thinks is the case, but still worry that Carly is simply not in a good epistemic position with respect to X. Once again, Carly will have to convince Brie that she’s competent with respect to X without relying on a track record of success with respect to her beliefs about X.

Fortunately, there is a method available to Carly. Echo chambers often paint those outside of it as utterly incompetent, and often exaggerate their views to bolster distrust in them. While Carly cannot convince Brie by appealing to her evidence against

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23 They wanted to know the justification for his white nationalist beliefs, even though they felt the beliefs themselves were horrifying. See Saslow (2016): “The White Flight of Derek Black”

24 Staying in contact with someone, even via social media, can be a good stepping stone when it comes to gaining trust. See Friggeri, Adamic, Eckles, and Cheng (2014) for more on how social media users tend to trust their contacts.

X, what she can do is demonstrate her competence with respect to things like X by identifying shared beliefs with Brie that Brie would not have thought to attribute to an outsider. In the context of politics, one could identify shared values, or perhaps shared political beliefs that are not often attributed to the other side.\textsuperscript{26}

While Brie and Carly may still have profound disagreements, Brie can now recognize that they actually share some common goals and values. The more that Carly has in common with Brie, especially when it comes to beliefs related to X, the more she can demonstrate her competency.\textsuperscript{27} Of course, Brie may still believe that Carly is incompetent in some ways, but it will become harder to dismiss her out of hand when such common ground is identified.

3.3: Demonstrating Open-Mindedness and Epistemic Humility

While Carly can demonstrate some level of competency with respect to X by identifying common ground between herself and Brie, one may worry that that won’t be enough. It’s possible that Brie’s beliefs are such that the common ground she shares with Carly is minimal, and thus Carly can’t adequately demonstrate her competence in a way such that she can gain Brie’s trust. Fortunately, there’s another way for Carly to demonstrate her competency to Brie: she can show Brie that she has relevant intellectual capacities that are conducive to being in a strong epistemic position with respect to political claims like X.\textsuperscript{28}

\textsuperscript{26} For example, imagine that Brie thinks that all liberals believe that, morally speaking, abortions should be celebrated and the number of abortions should be maximized. Carly could tell Brie that, although she is pro-choice, she does not agree that abortions are something that should be celebrated, and in fact many liberal policies are aimed at reducing the number of abortions in society.

\textsuperscript{27} See Fricker (2012): 10 for how shared values underlie our trusting practices.

One character trait that many agree is a virtue in the political realm is *open-mindedness*, or, roughly, the ability to even-handedly weigh evidence and arguments for opposing views without being overly influenced by political bias or dogmatic thought. Not only do echo chambers encourage its members to *dismiss* opposing arguments and evidence without serious scrutiny, but the source of the echo chamber will often claim that outsiders are *blinded* by their own political biases. However, if an outsider can demonstrate that she isn’t blinded in this way, but is instead intellectually open-minded enough to properly weigh the evidence and arguments before her, it can serve as evidence of that person’s overall competency when it comes to political claims like X. So, if Carly can demonstrate to Brie that, generally speaking, she’s open-minded and intellectually curious enough to pursue the truth with minimal bias, Brie may grant Carly some level of competence with respect to X.

How can Carly demonstrate that she’s open-minded? There’s a few options available to her. First, she may *admit that there have been times when she’s been mistaken about politically relevant facts/claims in the past*. Doing so will show that Carly is capable of recognizing when she’s made a mistake, and will not stay entrenched with respect to a belief if there’s good enough reason to discard that belief. Carly could also *admit that there are aspects of her own political party/views that she’s unsure of or worried about*. Doing so demonstrates a certain level of epistemic humility that, most likely, would not be attributed to an outsider by the source of the echo chamber.²⁹ Finally, Carly could, during a discussion with Brie, *admit when Brie’s made an*

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²⁹ Carly can show that she hasn’t just changed her mind in the past, but is capable of recognizing when some of the claims that she currently espouses, or some of the policies endorsed by her political party, are on somewhat shaky ground.
interesting or novel point. Not only does this demonstrate respect towards Brie by taking what she says into consideration, but it shows that Carly has a desire to learn and further refine her political beliefs even when such revision is at odds with her current political affiliation. All three of these suggestions help demonstrate to Brie that Carly is open-minded and epistemically humble in ways that are conducive to forming justified political beliefs. Thus, Brie may eventually consider Carly as competent with respect to political claims in general, which of course includes the claim that X.

While I doubt that the above discussion outlines an exhaustive list of ways to gain the trust of someone in an echo chamber, I hope that it at least serves as a jumping off point for thinking about an institutional solution to the echo chamber problem.

Section Three: The Criteria and the Solution

The above discussion suggests the following criteria for an institutional solution to the problems posed by echo chambers:

(1) Encourage people to maintain goodwill/respect towards those in echo chambers.

(2) Encourage people to consider and listen carefully to the arguments/views of people in echo chambers.

30 Or perhaps more radically, admit when Brie has said something that’s made her change her mind.

31 I want to make the following clear: I am not arguing that Carly is obligated to help Brie escape an echo chamber. My claim is that if Carly wanted to help Brie escape an echo chamber by gaining her trust, then following these steps would be a way to do it.

32 I also doubt that these four things are sufficient for gaining trust in all circumstances. I can imagine someone in an echo chamber being so hard-headed that they refuse to give ANY credit to someone on the outside, even if they try to follow the above suggestions. If that’s the case, I have no idea how that person could get out of the echo chamber.
Motivate people to find common ground with those stuck in echo chambers.

Motive people to demonstrate open-mindedness and epistemic humility to those in echo chambers.

First, I'll present my suggested solution, and then I'll explain how it meets each of the criteria.33

I suggest that Facebook allow users to set up private political forums on the site. Similar to setting up an event, a user can set up a forum, set a number of rules and/or a topic of discussion, and invite users from their contact list to take part in the forum. I suggest that Facebook do more than just make this function available, though. I believe the site should motivate users to set up these forums by publicly congratulating users that set up and take part in them.34 Further, I believe the forums themselves should have some kind of publicly available score to reflect the quality of the political discourse and the level of trust-building behavior that took place during the deliberation.

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33 This suggestion is specifically aimed at Facebook, although I believe other social media sites could adopt something similar with minimal tweaking. There are two important challenges facing such a solution, however. First, we should notice that the way we currently engage in political discourse online does not encourage people to build trust by following any of the suggestions above. People often “unfriend” users they disagree with politically, and certainly don’t carefully listen to opposing arguments. This adversarial kind of political deliberation is obviously not conducive to building trust across the political aisle. However, any attempt by social media sites like Facebook to regulate political discussion on their sites could result in loss of popularity at best, and accusations of censorship at worst. So, social media sites will have to figure out a way to motivate trust-building political discussion without taking a heavy-handed approach to regulating the way people interact with one another. Another challenge is purely logistical: how can social media sites possibly keep track of all the political discussion happening on their site? It may be possible to encourage people to take part in trust-building discourse with some kind of digital reward, but that would require keeping track of every political debate that each user takes part in. So, social media sites have to figure out a way to motivate trust-building political discourse without having to keep track of every political discussion on their respective sites.

34 Perhaps in the form of some kind of digital reward.
The score should reflect a few things. First, the score should increase if a *variety of political perspectives are present in the forum.* as opposed to a group of users who all have similar political views. The score should also reflect trust-building behavior during the discourse, which can be understood as motivating the behavior laid out in the criteria.

However, we run into a challenge: how can Facebook possibly keep track of the discourse in each political forum? I suggest that the site, within the private political forums, *change the ‘reactions’ that are typically used on the site to reactions that are specifically aimed at fostering productive political discourse.* The ‘reactions’ the site now uses are “like,” “love,” “angry,” “laughing,” etc. While some of these ‘reactions’ can clearly be used during political discourse, they certainly aren’t conducive to trust-building discourse that is our aim here. Rather, the reactions should be replaced with clear claims like “I agree,” “I disagree but understand,” “I’ve never thought about it that way,” “You’ve changed my mind on this point,” etc. I’m still unsure exactly which ‘reactions’ should be used, and whether they should correspond with some kind of facial reaction or not. Yet, it’s clear what the upside could be to using these kinds of reactions in the political forums. Facebook can easily keep track of the use of these reactions, who used the reactions, and to whom they were reacting. The score of these forums, generally speaking, should increase as people from across the political aisle use these

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35 Facebook’s algorithms already keep track of users’ political affiliations, so it would be relatively easy to figure out, for each political forum, how many political perspectives are present.

36 “Like” and “love” can mean that one agrees with a particular point, “angry” means that they disagree, “laughing” means that they think the point is ridiculous, etc.
reactions during their discourse with one another in ways that are conducive to trust-
building.

Now, I don’t have the exact mechanism figured out yet, and there are many
specifics to be worked out, but we can see how these private political forums may
motivate people to behave in a way that fosters trust across political gulfs, and
hopefully, across echo chamber battle lines. First, Facebook users will be motivated to
remain in contact with those that don’t agree with them politically, because that will be
the only way to invite others to take part in the private political forums. Hopefully, users
will be motivated to run and take part in these forums because of reputational rewards.37
The new ‘reactions’ that are used in the forums encourage people to show respect,
humility, and consideration, while giving credit to one another even if they have
opposing political views.

This solution may, of course, have several shortcomings, and it's far from being
completely thought out.38 However, I believe it could serve as the first step of many
towards figuring out ways to limit the epistemic and political problems that arise from the
existence of echo chambers.

37 Other users can see that they ran/took part in a highly scored forum, and this can serve as a
signal that they are politically active and conscientious. There's good reason to think that
people care very much about their epistemic reputation online. See Margolin, Hannak, and

People may also be motivated to join these political forums because they want to present
themselves as morally and politically conscious people to their contacts. See Kalsnes and

38 Just to name a few possible shortcomings: users could 'spam' their way to highly scored
forums without actually engaging in trust-building discourse, the quality of the discourse may not
improve because of the user-set rules, and many users may still not be motivated to take part in
these forums.
References:


