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Echo Chambers

A Further Dystopia of Media Generated Fragmentation

Abstract: With his reflections on echo chambers, American legal scholar Cass R. Sunstein provided one of the most prominent buzzwords for pessimistic views on online communication. Although it refers to the latest changes of the media environment, the idea of echo chambers replicates past worries regarding fragmentation of public discourse. Statements about internet users and their selective exposure form the cornerstone of the echo chambers argumentation. Against this background, the chapter analyzes the concept of echo chambers in a historical perspective on media use. It provides a history of ideas and discourses on audiences as well as a social history of media use and its relations to the public sphere. Research shows that the concept of echo chambers and earlier depictions of fragmentation are based on rather simplistic assumptions regarding media use.

Keywords: public sphere, media use, fragmentation, polarization, history of ideas, social history

Digital media "have generated another wave of great expectations and concerns about the place of the media in a public sphere" (Butsch 2011, 162). Cyber-optimists have, sometimes in revolutionary rhetoric, emphasized "the democracy-enhancing potential of the online public sphere" (Trenz 2016, 10). While until around 2010 such great expectations prevailed, since then critical voices have become louder. The "cyber-pessimists" have worried about the "fate of the public" (Splichal 2012). One of their concerns has been that "a further fragmentation of user communities [. . .] might promote monologues in segregated blogospheres but no dialogue in an integrated public sphere" (Trenz 2016, 10). The concern of emerging echo chambers as fragmented communication spaces reinforcing views among certain groups has been heavily influenced by Cass Sunstein. His book *Republic.com* and its two successors have become one of (Sunstein 2001; 2007; 2017) if not the most visible contribution to this pessimistic view (Gripsrud et al. 2010, xv; McLeod and Lee 2012, 203).

Despite the drastically changed media environment, a lot of the echo chambers concern echoed past worries. Like earlier authors, Sunstein and the ensuing empirical research identified the fragmentation of audiences and media users' behavior to be the cause for the dissociation of the public sphere. Unlike

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earlier authors, Sunstein excluded the other main cause for this danger, the monopolization of media companies and communicators (Averbeck 2000; Gripsrud et al. 2010, xxii–xxiii). The US-American scholar explicitly focused on the "consumers of information," not on the side of "producers" such as large internet companies (Sunstein 2001, 17). Like earlier authors being concerned with the relation of people to the public sphere, he had to draw on a concept of media audiences (Butsch 2000, 2). Statements about internet users and their selective exposure form the cornerstone of the echo chambers argumentation. Therefore, we approach our historical investigation into echo chambers from the perspective of media users in their relation to the public sphere. We do so in a twofold way: firstly, as a history of ideas and discourses about audiences (Butsch 2000; Mihelj 2015) and secondly as a social history of audiences (Eichner et al. 2020).

Section 1 sets the assumptions of Sunstein's book in the "continual flow of worries about social disorders arising from audiences" (Butsch 2000, 2). Section 2 raises several questions in this regard. Which similarities and differences exist between Sunstein's echo chambers as well as his user construction and earlier problem definitions of political audiences' relations to mass media and the public sphere? Which causes were identified? This section will show that Sunstein's contribution echoed past discourses regarding

- media determinism and overarching interest in media effects (on the individual and on society),
- a psychological perspective on media users (and not a sociological one),
- a normative, dichotomous description of media users ("citizens" versus "consumers") (Butsch 2000, 1–19).

Section 3 searches for the history of some of the phenomena which Sunstein subsumed under "echo chambers." It focuses on Germany in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. What is known about media usage in communication spaces focused on politics back then? Which relation did exist between a politicized press and societal polarization and fragmentation?

1 Echo Chambers: User-related Assumptions

The legal scholar Cass Sunstein identified problems in US-American democracy due to "individual choices." They are enabled by the "rise of endless communication options" (Sunstein 2007, xii) and personalization and cause a "large set of social difficulties" (Sunstein 2001, 5, 14–15). By means of the metaphor echo chambers he described his observation that people "sort themselves into

enclaves" in the internet, "in which their own views and commitments are constantly reaffirmed" (Sunstein 2007, xii).[1] They would either choose offers that fit their views or completely filter out political news in favor of entertainment. Captured in their echo chamber, people would not hear any alternative opinions and issues. Echo chambers – basically, the loss of a common public sphere[2] – threatened deliberative democracy. Fragmentation on the micro-level implied "serious dangers" for the macro-level (Sunstein 2001, 16): polarization ("which can breed extremism and even hatred and violence") (Sunstein 2007, 44), "hate groups" (Sunstein 2007, 57–60) and "cyber-cascades" ("social cascades," "in which information, whether true or false, spreads like wildfire") (Sunstein 2001, 14). With the rise of social media, he reinforced his gloomy diagnosis of the "power of echo chambers" (Sunstein 2017, 17). The 2017 version introduced a whole new chapter on "terrorism.com" and gave "polarization" and "cyber-cascades" more space than before. Sunstein called his work a "dark book" (Sunstein 2017, 263).

His view of internet usage and users is quite simplistic. Sunstein's restricted online usage to filtering. His argumentation is (implicitly) based on the theory of selective exposure. There is a belief in technology effects:[3] the "most striking power provided by emerging technologies" was "*the growing power of consumers to filter what they see* [emphasis in original]" (Sunstein 2001, 8). The assumption here is basically that people take technology the way it is given to them without considering social adoption, everyday life, motives, and needs apart from affirmative filtering. Neither personal conversation which exposes people with alternative views nor media repertoires (the idea that people use various media types to get information) were considered.[4]

Individuals were ascribed to make "choices" according to "preferences" (Sunstein 2001, 17). The main influences on preferences are the "number of options", the "market" and "one's own past choices". Sunstein (2017, 166) also mentioned "social influences." However, this term refers to peer groups only. Sunstein used examples from group behavior to show how groups may foster self-isolation, polarization, and hate. He also referred to behavioral science to

1 *Republic.com 2.0* introduced the term echo chambers, whereas in the first edition words such as "enclaves" and "self-insulated groups" appeared (Sunstein 2001, 75).

2 Sunstein did not use this concept in 2001. In *Republic.com 2.0* he then discussed Yochai Benkler's concept of the "networked public sphere" (Sunstein 2007, 114–17).

3 For this criticism see also Bruns 2019.

4 In the 2017 version of the book (p. 114), Sunstein asked "What do we actually know about the use of the Internet?" He answers without discussing corresponding studies: "Not nearly enough. But a picture is emerging."

explain his observation that internet users "voluntarily choose alternatives that sharply limit their own horizons" (Sunstein 2017, 17, 166). First, people tried to minimize efforts "to attend to topics and concerns" others than their own, and second, attention allocation was a habitual process, without much thinking. Users' behavior according to Sunstein is guided by cognitive biases, conflicts of interests and occasional lack of willpower (Farber 2001, 280). These dispositions were "built into our species" (Sunstein 2017, 18) and serve Sunstein as basis for the plea for "continuing education for adults" and regulation (Sunstein 2017, 167, 176).

In Sunstein's idealistic view, in the past, the mass media had educated individuals and turned them into "citizens" by providing them with a spectrum of issues and opinions, with "unplanned encounters," "irritations" and common experiences. The "consumer" (internet usage according to one's preferences, market driven) opposes the "citizen," the term for the desired user. The term user is not applied.

There are few historical hints here and there included to strengthen the overall argumentation, mostly without references to literature. There are "some historical notes" on the technical sides of the internet (Sunstein 2007, 157–160), as well as some reflections on past media regulatory attempts. However, mass media history and public sphere history are widely neglected. Mass media's performance is (consciously) idealized as non-ideological universe. Communication studies do not play a significant role. Critics have argued that empirical findings on newspaper and television exposure would trouble the "over-generalized conceptualization of internet use" in his work (Hardy, Jamieson, and Winneg 2010, 135). According to other voices, Sunstein provided "a good deal of theoretical speculation" on echo chambers (Brundidge and Rice 2010, 145).[5] Overall, the theory of selective exposure has received "only mixed support" (Brundidge and Rice 2010, 151).

Used as a metaphor without much reflection or criticism,[6] the term echo chambers has anchored in communication studies. It has been stimulating empirical research on selective exposure online and ideological segregation for several years. Both theoretical work and empirical evidence have remained weak. Usually, the theory of selective exposure is simply mapped onto the internet.[7] Echo chambers and related buzzwords such as Eli Pariser's filter bubbles (Pariser 2011) are only

5 Sunstein for instance speculated that mass media could generate effects such as polarization and fragmentation, however, "when they are working well [. . .] polarization is far less likely to occur" (Sunstein, 2007, 71–72).

6 See for instance the reviews by Calvert (2003), Webster (2008), Zhou (2017).

7 Jamieson and Cappella (2008) are an exception. They transferred the metaphor to traditional mass media in the US and reflected on how changes of media structure promoted echo chambers. They also discussed linkages to media effects theory.

poorly defined. Basically, while echo chambers are described as communication spaces connecting like-minded people and allowing them to reinforce their views, filter bubbles are said to isolate such groups from contrary perspectives. Apart from single platform studies, these interwoven theoretical speculations lack empirical support (Dubois and Blank 2018; Jungherr, Rivero, and Gayo-Avello 2020). Historically, the long tradition of research on selective exposure to mass media is probably also due to article lengths, rather mentioned than discussed. The same applies to the large number of variables moderating the role of dissonance and consonance (Donsbach 2009, 141; Jungherr, Rivero, and Gayo-Avello 2020). Scarce references to past media environments date back to cable TV, roughly two decades in the past.

2 Historical Discourses on Audiences and their Relation to Public Sphere

We contextualize Sunstein's echo chambers ideas in three historical lines of thought. The first one is democracy and public sphere theory. The second one is the broader historical discourse on audiences and the third one is mass communication research.

Sunstein referred to British and US-American political philosophy to substantiate his ideas on freedom, deliberative democracy and the idea to meet people dissimilar to oneself. John Stuart Mill and John Dewey stand out among the authors he cites (Sunstein 2001, 15, 217; 2007, 212; 2017, x–xi, 252–253). With these sources he cannot be considered a public sphere theorist in a narrower sense. Habermas' *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, being one of the most influential works in this field, also in the US, does not play a role.[8] Consequently, the term public sphere does not appear in his book. Instead, Sunstein used the word public. With past thinkers of democracy such as Mill he shares the idea that a public[9] is essential "since without common attention, common issues and some kind of synthesizing of dispersed opinions there can be no well-functioning public rule" (Gripsrud et al. 2010, xv). By referring to Dewey, Sunstein was able to emphasize the public, the collective of citizens

8 He critically discussed Habermas' speech ideals in *Between Facts and Norms* regarding the "blogosphere" (Sunstein 2007, 144–145). The legal scholar, moreover, was (like John Rawls and unlike Habermas) convinced that the supreme court of a democracy incarnates the "public reason" (Gripsrud et al. 2010, xix).

9 For a definition of this concept see Gripsrud et al., xiv.

who are responsible for public debate. Moreover, with Dewey's thoughts he could base his (voluntary, self-)regulatory proposals in order to avoid echo chambers on the idea that democracy needs "the improvement of the methods and condition of debate" (Gripsrud et al. 2010, xviii).

From the rise of the commercial press in the nineteenth century throughout the twentieth century, causing first vast mediatisation effects, pessimists of public sphere have regarded newly emerging, privately owned media "as platforms for populist deviations from Reason," as channels for propaganda or "filled with trivia and sensations that deflect attention away from pressing political issues" (Gripsrud et al. 2010, xvi). Sunstein shared these negative descriptions of (private) interests steering public communication. New (social) media are potential tools for manipulation and persuasion.[10] Regarding causal attribution, his analysis differed from earlier pessimist thinkers. Commercialization has been seen to be a central cause for fragmentation and dissociation of public sphere. German social theorists for instance identified the monopolization of press business as a main reason for the disaggregation of public sphere (Averbeck 2000, 97). Sunstein was far away from analyzing the capitalist organization of media (Sunstein 2001, 17; 2017, 28), pursuing a quite technical understanding of media ("communications system," "new technologies"). He was skeptical of "consumer sovereignty" (Sunstein 2007, 38). People are not treated as "citizens," instead "we act as if the purpose of a system of communications is to ensure that people can see exactly what they 'want'" (Sunstein 2007, 40).

The next step shows how Sunstein's gloomy thinking about democracy and internet users can be contextualized in the broader historical discourse about audiences. These discourses were largely led by elites (Bourdon 2015, 15).[11] Audiences have been worrisome for elites probably since there were media or public forums, in which opinions other than the ones controlled by power holders could be articulated. Research indicates that worries have increased since relatively autonomous, diversified mass media started spreading into everyday life from the end of the nineteenth century on and throughout the twentieth century in the US

10 "Polarization entrepreneurs," "hashtag entrepreneurs," "hate groups" and "extremist groups" would try to employ these tools creating "cyber-cascades" (Sunstein 2001, 14; 2007, 74; 2017, 79).

11 Reviewers of Sunstein's books have explained his view also by his social position. The Harvard professor has "as elite an education as the US can offer" (Webster 2008, 95). His idealistic view on traditional media reflected the interests of the "dominant members of society" whose interests, unlike those of minority groups, were covered by mass media. The positive communication potentials of the internet for the underrepresented were excluded due to these interests (Chander 2002, 1484).

and Europe. Although the media environment changed, as well as political, social, and economic circumstances, the underlying issues of these debates have always been power and social order (Butsch 2000, 2). In Sunstein's case it was power and social order in US democracy. The historical discourses – led by different institutions such as science, law, policy, economy, pop culture – have usually focused "on the nature of the medium and the psychology of audience members" (Butsch 2011, 164).

Audiences have been described by means of dichotomies (for instance activity/passivity, citizens/consumers, rational/irrational), varying in the assessment to be good or bad (Bourdon 2015, 8). These dichotomies can be found in Sunstein's book, too. In the nineteenth century, "activity" of an individual regarding political participation tended to be evaluated as bad, later on in the twentieth century as positive. "The masses" or "the crowds" in the nineteenth century were feared to violently rise against the order. Would the new industrial and urban workers fulfil their role in a "public" (engaged in reasoned, public discussion on issues of the state)? While crowd psychology regarded the "crowd" to be irrational, easy to be manipulated and impulsive, "publics" represented the positive counterpart. Crowd was replaced with negative media audience terms such as consumer, a term pushed forward by episodes of media commercialization. But "each new term continued to emphasize the emotionality and suggestibility of the audience" (Butsch 2011, 154). Sunstein has conserved elements of this conception as we will describe below. Moreover, the negativity of his users' conception is visible in 1) the exclusion of the citizen empowering sides of the internet as a pool of diverse information and opinion and a tool for civil society's mobilization and protests, and in 2) highlighting internet activities of "hate groups", "extremists" and "terrorists" (Sunstein 2017, 9, 70, 236). In contrast, the media users with an ideal behavior in public sphere were called citizens in the twentieth century: "educated, informed, cultivated and civic-minded [. . .] capable and committed to their duty as citizens." Their negative counterpart, consumers, "sought entertainment and self-indulgence, acted on emotion and impulse" (Butsch 2011, 153–154). Societal, political, and media changes have revived concerns about media audiences and their relation to the public sphere. Whereas the rise of fascism in Europe and the spread of broadcasting generated worries about the manipulation of people between the 1930s until the 1950s, since the 1980s in Western parts of the world, a media expansion and differentiation, the end of Cold War, globalization and digitalization (just to name some major trends) revived concerns about audience fragmentation and disaggregation of the public sphere (Butsch 2011, 149).

Sunstein shared with earlier thinkers a skepticism regarding (political) niches being not under control of established institutions and regarding communication spaces where information and opinions can be searched and exchanged uncontained by traditional mass media. Similar to elitist conceptions of democracy theory, there is a paternalistic undertone to Sunstein's user assessment (Sunstein 2001, 67). And

finally, the idea of echo chambers can be seen as part of discourses that are limited and selective in their understanding of the social context and sustenance of publics in a mediated world (Butsch 2011, 164). This aspect directs us to the selective exposure research, which will be the third historical track to contextualize Sunstein.

Sunstein's postulate – that citizens "avoid engaging with opinions that contradict their own's" – has been debated by mass communication scholars in the US and Europe for decades (Hayat and Samuel-Azran 2017, 294). The effects of radio, television, newspapers, and the internet as well as the effects of mixed media environments have been measured again and again. Leon Festinger's cognitive dissonance theory, including the assumption of selective exposure to information (Festinger 1957), is one of the classical studies in this field, although Festinger's book originally did not deal with mass media. Two main strands of behavioristic research traditions on media selection, dissonance, and information reception since the 1970s can be distinguished. On the one hand, there was an approach that tended towards the paradigm of "passive" recipients, assuming irrational behavior in line with dissonance theory (Donsbach 2009, 144). On the other hand, a behavioristic approach followed the idea of an "active" audience. Both research traditions are – to different degrees – "media deterministic," ultimately sharing an understanding of selection as reaction to media messages (Schenk 2009, 652–657).[12] The issue of how "narrowed domains of political discourse" emerge due to media selection has become a central field of political communication studies (Brundidge and Rice 2010, 150).

Sunstein's work shares several characteristics with behavioristic information exposure research, without, however, quoting much of it (Sunstein 2017, 280–281). First, he drew on media determinism and the belief in media and communication technology effects. Even if intervening variables and a range of factors have been considered, the basic assumption is maintained: effects on attitudes and behavior are ultimately explained by features of present or new media and information technologies. In Sunstein's case, echo chambers are attributed to the explosion of communication options and their algorithmic personalization. He differentiates his argument but nevertheless dramatizes present technology.[13] Second, Sunstein shared modern behaviorism which takes into account that individuals are embedded in some

12 German communication scholar Michael Schenk has written that although certain frameworks of selective exposure and information reception consistency attributed "activity" to the audience, "activity" was not introduced as an independent variable but as a mediating "disturbance variable" in the effects process (Schenk 2009, 651).

13 Whereas Sunstein (2017, 66) admitted that newspapers and magazines also "often cater to people with definite interests in certain points of view," he relativized this "balkanization" by emphasizing the "dramatic increase in options" due to the internet and "a greater power to customize."

kind of social relations and that they are capable of rational choice but often decide either irrationally, not "reasonably", or following dispositions. This kind of behavior is seen to potentially produce negative consequences for society. The psychological approach excludes information selection as interpretive social action embedded in a subject's everyday life. Societal explanations for narrowed domains of political discourse (e.g., media monopolies, political discourse, media discourse) are mostly disregarded. These exclusions, finally, can be seen to be functional for the ultimate interest: how can people's opinions and behavior be influenced. Mass communication studies for a long time have called this interest mass persuasion. Being a leading Harvard scholar and earlier Administrator of the White House in the Obama administration, Cass Sunstein's interest was how human behavior can be effectively shaped by law (Farber 2001).

3 Social History of Political Media Usage

The final section explains that the first episode of mediatisation, the spread of mass press in society, had already expanded the choice of information. Information usage in politically focused communication spaces was not only driven by affirmation of one's world view but by a spectrum of motives. This finding produces awareness of the fact that the spectrum of motives of media exposure is broader than the echo chamber thesis assumes. Communication history also helps to discuss Cass Sunstein's assumption regarding the effects of media and communication technology on the political system via political information behavior. Historical research suggests that polarization and fragmentation were not simply triggered by an increase of choice due to new communication technologies or types of media. Social, cultural, economic, and political cleavages are important to understand why social groups confirmed, reproduced and fought for their political opinion. These cleavages are also important to understand, why they dissociated themselves from other groups by means of media and which role media usage played.

We choose a limited focus for the purpose of this section. We focus on the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in Germany.[14] There are several

14 Research about this time period has widely reflected on the problem of sources in the time before surveys of media users came up. Rudolf Stöber (1998) and Frank Bösch (2004) for instance have used police and authorities' material, Erik Koenen (2012) an early empirical study in social sciences, Kutsch and Wagner (2014) housekeeping bills. For the spectrum of sources that can be used for audience history research in general, see Jérôme Bourdon (2015) who is also one author of this book (see his chapter on telepresence).

reasons for this decision with respect to geography and time. Unlike the press market in the United Kingdom or France for instance, the German one was highly fragmented around 1900 due to its federalism and decentral Empire structure (Hung et al. 2020, 119). There was a higher number of (local) newspaper titles in the German Empire than in Great Britain (with much lower circulation numbers on average). Moreover, unlike the street sale model in the UK, in Germany subscription dominated, tying readers more strongly to their newspaper (Geppert 2007, 45–46). Choice for readers and close ties to (partisan) newspapers make Germany a good example to discuss assumptions related to echo chambers. The time frame chosen is useful because, at the end of the nineteenth century, a high-choice media environment developed, at first in urban centers. There was a strong quantitative expansion and differentiation of the newspaper and magazine market, as well as of the book and pamphlet market. The amount of news items grew and the number of resorts, articles and topics within one newspaper increased. Readers now could select what to read within a newspaper (Stöber 1998, 269). Other new media such as film and photography started to attract broad audiences. Public libraries offered affordable or free access to all. Mass media became highly significant in everyday life, with differences between the classes. The working class could not yet undertake the expenditures that the middle class regularly made for media offers nor had the workers its temporal means (Kutsch and Wagner 2014). Despite these limitations, reading the newspapers was an important element of workers' habitual leisure activity.

It is well known that, throughout the nineteenth century and far into the twentieth century, societal groups formed by religious, cultural, and political orientation created their own communication spaces and media. Historical research, however, suggests that members of such groups probably did not simply filter news according to their particular world view. This applies at least to the German urban working class around 1900, which we take as an example. A study about the role of the press in everyday bar conversations found a spectrum of motives of newspaper usage during scandals and an exposure to other than reaffirming social democratic papers.[15] Newspaper content was important for bar conversations. It was read for entertainment, emotions, playful use of politics or provided the chance to get social attention. It applies until today's high-choice media environment that journalistic content provides the reader with commonly known issues that more easily than private topics fill conversations in public spaces. While the social democratic press received particular attention, and its arguments were mostly adopted, the (male) pub goer also took note of other partisan newspapers, including mass press (Requate 2006, 128).

15 In the following we refer to Bösch 2004.

Workers knew about debates in Parliament with adversarial speakers. Speeches by (mostly famous) politicians with different political stances were picked up by them. Being widely informed promised attention and reputation in the bar, which was a space of particular political orientation. From time to time, conversations brought up the issue of trust in newspapers. This issue required the capability to distance from the "filter" chosen. The newspapers themselves nourished the skepticism by dealing at length with other papers. Here is a parallel to social media in which references to media reality constructions frequently occur (Swart, Peter, and Broersma 2018). Overall, this study suggests that workers searched for information not only to affirm their social democratic stance, but to get a range of social, emotional and cognitive gratifications. Another study about reading needs of workers in the early twentieth century confirms the broad spectrum of motives in media usage.[16] Moreover, to speak of an echo chamber would be undifferentiated also in another regard (Sunstein 2017, 166). Obviously, the well-known social conformity of the workers' milieu did not prevent critical comment on social democratic opinions and newspaper (Bösch 2004). Altogether, this knowledge casts doubt on the wide-reaching conclusions regarding echo chambers.

The division of German society and its media system along class and belief remained characteristically after the foundation of the Weimar Republic and has been identified as a reason for its fate in 1933. Therefore, Weimar provides a suitable example to study a further assumption of the echo chambers thesis: whether fragmentation and polarization of public discourse emerge above all due to narrowed news offers and narrowed ("personalized") news media usage. The outstanding circumstances of Weimar Republic as a particular communication era allow the shedding of light on the issue of political consequences of media usage. The Weimar Republic was shaped by the aftermaths of the First World War, by economic crises as well as the new democratic system and led finally, yet not inevitably, to the fascism of Nazi-Germany. Against this background, research has come to various results regarding the role of the press and press usage for fragmentation and polarization. Generally, communication historians consider the fragmentation of Weimar society to be manifested in a politically fragmented press that again reinforced radicalization (Wilke 2008, 355). The media system was not only characterized by a great extent of political parallelism between parties and the press but also by the influence of big industry's capital interests. National conservative industrialists such as Alfred Hugenberg gained control over various newspapers and contributed to an antidemocratic public opinion and a radicalization of the bourgeois right-wing towards Nazism

16 Koenen (2012, 45–49) also emphasized bars as communicative spaces of workers.

(Stöber 1998, 332–333; Wilke 2008, 350). Nevertheless, the conclusion that a politically fragmented press supply led to a fragmented public discourse in terms of partisan echo chambers has to assume very strong media effects and deny intervening factors of media use. Especially the discrepancy between election results of political parties and circulations of their respective newspapers contradicts the assumption of such strong and immediate effects of media use (Meyen 2008; Stöber 1998, 293–295). Against this background, German historian Bernhard Fulda argues that with a sensationalist but still highly politicized style, journalism indeed had an impact on political culture. Press campaigns, scandalization, and a personalized coverage with a focus on single politicians led to a polarization, brutalization, and rejection of parliamentarism in general. However, the immediate effects on readers were limited and depended rather on their general beliefs and milieus than on the newspapers' affiliation to particular parties. This might explain, for instance, why bourgeois right-wing newspapers were able to reinforce anti-communist fears, but their readers voted for Hitler and not for the national-conservative parties the journalists promoted (Fulda 2009).

Conclusion

From the perspective of a history of ideas and discourse, Cass Sunstein's metaphor of echo chambers perpetuates the long tradition of dystopic views and fears of fragmentation. These views and fears can be found in past public sphere theory, broader historical discourses and mass communication research. Media related dystopias of fragmentation have been underpinned by assumptions about media users and their relations to the public sphere and polity. Media users were described by means of simplistic dichotomies such as active/passive and citizens/consumers and usually ended up by negative assessments of media audiences. Like earlier contributions, *Republic.com* and its successor versions adapted the fragmentation narrative to the changing media environment. Sunstein shared with earlier contributions the distrust in communication spaces that emerge due to new media and are uncontained by established institutions.

Findings from social historical research on media audiences make awareness of social contexts of media usage neglected by the echo chambers' argumentation. Both the case of media use among the lower class in the late German Empire and the fragmentation of the public discourse in the Weimar Republic challenge simplistic assumptions of echo chambers and stress the importance of social structures. On the one hand, users did not just filter news that fit their beliefs. On the other hand, these world views tended to moderate media effects.

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