Bruns Axel, *Are filter bubble real?,* Polity Press, 2019.

Echo chambers and filter bubbles are exceptionally attractive concepts; they offer a simple, technological explanation for problems that many emerging and established democracies face. However, the closer one looks and the more one attempts to detect them in observable reality, the more outlandish and unrealistic they appear. The images of ‘chambers’ and ‘bubbles’ conjure up hermetically sealed spaces where only politically like - minded participants connect and only ideologically orthodox information circulates, but this seems highly improbable; Meineck therefore goes as far as calling filter bubbles ‘the dumbest metaphor of the Internet’ (2018: n.p.; my translation).

The research we have encountered shows simply no empirical evidence for these information cocoons in their absolute definitions, especially in a complex, multi - platform environment. As Dubois and Blank summarise it,

whatever may be happening on any single social media platform, when we look at the entire media environment, there is little apparent echo chamber. People regularly encounter things that they disagree with. People check multiple sources. People try to confirm information using search. Possibly most important, people discover things that change their political opinions. Looking at the entire multi - media environment, we find little evidence of an echo chamber. (2018a: 740)

Yes, selective exposure and homophily do exist; there would be no political parties, activist movements, interest communities, fan groups, sports clubs, or other social institutions without them. But contrary to the dark visions of Sunstein, Pariser, and others who see echo chambers and filter bubbles as engines of social, political and societal fragmentation, a preference for particular ideas, values, and beliefs does not inevitably lead to the exclusion of anybody who holds different views, or the disconnection from information sources that present those views: we cluster, but we do not segregate.

Mainly, the debate about these concepts and their apparent impacts on society and democracy constitutes a moral panic. Social commentators have always been quick to jump to conclusions about new media technologies and to compare the technologically remediated present to a mythical golden era when political and societal participation seemed simpler simpler and more direct. This obsession with ideal types of political engagement obscures the question of whether the actual uses people make of online and social media today have a net positive or net negative effect on political processes, or whether indeed the positives and negatives that different groups experience cancel each other out in the end (Fletcher and Nielsen 2018: 2453).

Only a small substrate of political extremists seem so committed to their cause that they diverge notably from the societal mainstream; hardcore supporters of the neo - fascist AfD party in Germany are one example, and their disconnect from and hatred for the mainstream and its political and journalistic institutions should certainly concern us. However, to attack it more effectively, even they must monitor what they hate: they are hyperpartisan and polarised, but do not live in hermetically sealed information cocoons. Maintaining ideological segregation is difficult and time - consuming, and partisans must be exceptionally motivated to do so. Consequently, ‘Sunstein’s prediction that people will take any opportunity to screen out other perspectives seems unnecessarily grave’ (Garrett 2009b: 694), even for fringe groups.

Ironically, echo chamber and filter bubble concepts may have become so popular with some journalists, media critics, and politicians because members of these professional classes are genuinely more likely to inhabit an information cocoon of sorts. High - profile journalists do tend to remain in a ‘journalism - centered bubble’ (Nuernbergk 2016: 877); theirs is an intensely selective, high - pressure workplace that takes them away from everyday social interactions and sequesters them inside parliamentary press corps which often lack socioeconomic, ethnic, and even gender diversity. (The same applies to politicians and their staff, at least at the national level.)

But a disenchantment with the ‘inside the beltway’ journalism of horse - race politics and political point - scoring is now widespread precisely because ordinary citizens do not inhabit the professional cocoons that enclose the political classes: this form of journalism and politics fails to address their own lived experiences. Such disenchantment results not only in populist calls to ‘drain the swamp’ and replace one form of political myopia with another, more extreme one; in mainstream society, it also creates an unfulfilled demand to reform political systems so that they focus less on fighting symbolic ideological battles and more on finding consensus on the right policies to improve citizens’ lives. These demands, too, are expressed through social media, where they are directed at the journalists and politicians themselves. Although the political classes have long had a tendency to talk predominantly amongst themselves, they are therefore now also exposed to considerably more, and considerably more public , criticism than ever before – if they choose to pay attention. Social media make politics ‘a conversation that can be joined by outsiders’ (Ausserhofer and Maireder 2013: 306).

Overall, then, generic social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter break down more barriers than they erect – they are important engines of context collapse, rather than enablers of ideological segregation. They help (or force) us to maintain at least a passive, ambient awareness (Hermida 2010) of how ‘the other side’ thinks; we might even actively seek out such information – not necessarily to be persuaded by it, but perhaps to inoculate ourselves against its rhetoric. This is true even (and perhaps especially) for people with fringe views: even visitors to extreme white supremacist sites visit mainstream outlets such as the New York Times , and indeed do so more often than mainstream users (Gentzkow and Shapiro 2011: 1823). They might read established media only to better counter mainstream coverage by presenting ‘alternative facts’ of their own – but they do read them.