

Separating Echo Chambers from Epistemic Bubbles Within Populist Discourse

Ellen C. Byrne, BA in Politics and Philosophy (UCC)
Graduate Student of Political Science, Central European University (CEU), Vienna,
ellencarriebyrne@gmail.com

Introduction

It is not unusual to hear the terms “populism” and “echo chamber” uttered in the same breath. The core of populist ideology is scepticism of elite groups, which includes mainstream media. There are cases of populist movements which select their sources of information to support their worldview, thereby resigning themselves to “echo-chambers”; for example, the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) generally rejects media coverage except for the tabloid newspaper *Kronen Zeitung* (Rovira Kaltwasser and Mudde, 2017: 12). However, it is unfeasible to assume that all (or even many) populists continuously decide to exclude relevant information from their consumption, rather than avoid relevant information as a result of epistemic malpractice or lack of exposure.

It is on the basis of willfulness that C. Thi Nguyen distinguishes between two epistemic phenomena in his homonymic 2018 article, *Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles*. The former being actively exclusionary, while the latter better described as inadvertent epistemic failures. This article is an attempt to employ Nguyen’s analysis to examine the propensity for forming echo chambers within populist discourse. However, the question of whether this problem is specific to populism is not one that will be delved into here. In short, echo chambers and epistemic bubbles are not populist-specific epistemic failures, but these phenomena occur frequently within populist ideology which impacts populist discourse. With this in mind, it is important to note the distinction between populist discourse and far-right discourse, as the two are often conflated.

The choice of populism as the focus of this article is due to the link between populism and echo chambers/epistemic bubbles can be viewed from two angles: the propensity for echo chambers and epistemic bubbles within populist discourse, amongst populists; and the prevalence of epistemic bubbles and echo chambers in the mainstream discussion surrounding populism.

The first section of this article will clarify the terms “populism”, “echo chamber” and “epistemic bubble”, briefly analyze each phenomenon with particular emphasis on distinguishing echo chambers from epistemic bubbles. Secondly, it will be argued that such analysis should be applied to populist discourse. The third section of this article will consider the limitations of this applicability;

particularly in terms of the areas of ambiguity surrounding the definitions of echo chambers and epistemic bubbles. The article will conclude with a final statement on the importance of distinguishing between echo chambers and epistemic phenomena and applying this analysis to populist discourse, so that epistemic practices surrounding populism may be understood with greater accuracy and clarity.

Populism

Populism in principle often differs from populism in practice. As argued by Acemoğlu et al. (2012), populist systems tend to form as a rejection of the ruling elite and political corruption, but often the new populist governments which used “redistributive rhetoric” in their campaigns ultimately adopt policies in line with elite interests; as was the case with the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) in Mexico, Fujimori in Peru, and Menem in Argentina (Acemoğlu, Egorov, and Sonin, 2012: 773).

As mentioned, echo chambers and epistemic bubbles are not populist-specific epistemic failures, but they frequently occur within populist discourse. Populism, in this article, is understood in terms of the ideational approach, as outlined by Cas Mudde (2004: 543):

Populism is a thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people.

The Manichean nature of this outlook implies both scepticism and selectiveness, which is what allows either echo chambers or epistemic bubbles to form.

Echo Chambers

Echo chambers are social epistemic structures which actively exclude other relevant points of view (Nguyen, 2018: 141). Nguyen considers such structures to be a sort of “community” (2008: 146) within which members are hostile to voices and perspectives which are critical of the views held by the group and are systematically organized to exclude and undermine voices and perspectives which challenge their views. Unlike members of epistemic bubbles who exclude relevant perspectives unintentionally, members of echo chambers are conscious of their exclusion. In this sense, echo chambers are constructed.

Unlike members of epistemic bubbles who exclude relevant perspectives unintentionally, members of echo chambers are conscious of their exclusion

Epistemic Bubbles

Epistemic bubbles are social epistemic structures which neglect to consider other voices and perspectives which are relevant to their view (Nguyen, 2018: 141); unlike echo chambers, they omit rather than reject knowledge. Epistemic bubbles can be caused by various epistemic “bad habits” such as selective exposure: the tendency to rely on like-minded sources (Nelson and Webster, 2017); and bootstrapped corroboration: the over-inflation of epistemic confidence when one’s views appear to be widely corroborated, but actually appear so as a result of omitting relevant information (Nguyen, 2018: 144). In this instance, these corroborative accounts merely echo the same view, rather than build upon it. Nguyen argues corroboration ought to be discounted if it is amongst an epistemic network of (even unconsciously) selected members. (Nguyen, 2018: 144).

Nguyen does not heavily criticize members of epistemic bubbles per se, as he acknowledges that the filtering of information is not inherently pernicious; in an era where one has an abundance of information

Byrne, Separating Echo Chambers from Epistemic Bubbles

available to them, it is important to be able to separate relevant and reliable information from nonsense. However, individuals can filter information in an unreliable way, and thereby exclude relevant perspectives. When this occurs, an epistemic bubble is created. For example, if one wishes to become well-versed in economic theory but exclusively reads Keynesian theory and neglects to consider other schools of thought, then they are placing themselves inside an epistemic bubble.

An individual can be epistemically virtuous and still become a member of, and participate in, an epistemic bubble. Nguyen regards such an error as “an epistemic flaw of epistemic systems and networks, not of individuals” (Nguyen, 2018: 143). Fortunately, according to Nguyen, epistemic bubbles are easily ‘shattered’. Members of epistemic bubbles are members due to lack of exposure to relevant information, but if they were to be exposed to this information, their epistemic virtue would be restored.

While epistemic bubbles may form inadvertently, that does mean that those placed inside are blameless. As W. K. Clifford argues, we have a duty to believe that which we have evidence for, but this evidence must be gathered reliably. As Clifford’s Principle states in his essay *The Ethics of Belief*, “It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone to ignore evidence that is relevant to his beliefs, or to dismiss relevant evidence in a facile way” (Chignell, 2018); everyone has a duty to only believe that which we have sufficient evidence to believe. If we fail to source our information reliably, then we have placed ourselves in an epistemic bubble of our own making.

The Role of Media

The role of media in political polarization is a contentious subject. A major challenge which has arisen from the rise of social media is algorithmic personal filtering, as outlined by Pariser (2011); the process by which a user’s experience of a social media platform, website, or search engine becomes curated to reflect their engagement with the site. Twitter, for example, has been linked to the political polarization (Bastos, Travitzki, and Puschmann, 2012) as it tailors news information to users based on the accounts that they follow.

Such effects are often referred to as echo chambers, but this is inaccurate; rather, the result is an epistemic bubble. As outlined, echo chambers are conscious constructs in which information is rejected, while

The role of media in political polarization is a contentious subject

epistemic bubbles are products of omission. If a person with populist views, as a result of personal algorithmic filtering, is continuously exposed to media and news sources that corroborate with their (in this example, populist) views, then they will find themselves inside an epistemic bubble unless they make the effort to seek out external reliable sources of information.

The difficulty here is, as Nguyen argues, is that it creates an epistemic bubble in which members may be completely oblivious to their pattern of selectivity. As previously stated, echo chambers and epistemic bubbles surrounding populism are not necessarily within the discourse amongst populists themselves; the mainstream media can also create echo chambers and epistemic bubbles on the subject of populist politics. Brown and Mondon (2021) trace this phenomenon to the issues of “priming” and “framing”, using *The Guardian* as their case study. Priming involves emphasizing certain factors or issues over others, such as emphasizing a group’s populist ideology rather than their far-left ideology. Brown and Mondon priming as focusing on one element “at the expense of others” (Brown and Mondon, 2021: 283). Framing, on the other hand, is a product of editorial decisions to center their reader or viewer’s focus on the aspect of interest (in this case, populism).

To escape an epistemic bubble requires an active effort to “shatter” this bubble by seeking out other sources when the ones that we are being continuously exposed to become too narrow, placing the responsibility entirely on the individual. Regina Rini, however, in her article, *Fake News and Partisan Epistemology* (2017) argues that it is more important to focus on the effect of institutions (Rini, 2017: 55-58), and that

an approach which gravitates around individual virtue is insufficient for avoiding “fake news”. Rather than finding solutions to these structures we should prevent them from forming in the first place by addressing the issue at a systemic level.

Limitations

Nguyen identifies echo chambers and epistemic bubbles as critically distinct. However, there are areas of ambiguity which blur the boundaries between these phenomena; thus, Nguyen’s definitions of echo chambers and epistemic bubbles ought to elaborate further to better distinguish both structures. Despite this, Nguyen’s analysis provides a useful framework for analyzing epistemic practices within populist discourse.

One area of ambiguity is the overlap between both concepts. “Belief polarization”, for example, as outlined by Thomas Kelly combines elements of both echo chambers and epistemic bubbles. Belief polarization is an individual’s tendency to reinforce their established beliefs, both by over-scrutinizing challenges to this belief and conversely neglecting to scrutinize endorsements of the belief (Kelly, 2008).

Epistemic bubbles, in particular, can be ambiguous, as Nguyen’s definition requires some exceptions. For example, sometimes one may fail to consider other points of view without committing any epistemic malpractice—the key is relevance. If one wishes to have a strong grasp of economic theory, then one must consider various opposing perspectives; but while this reasoning applies to many areas of knowledge, it is not universal. For example, if one wished to ask a question regarding dermatology, and only consulted dermatologists, then one is not committing any epistemic wrongdoing. In this instance, one is placing trust in an invisible system of trust in which experts with some knowledge of a subject (for example, local GPs) refer to other experts with more sophisticated knowledge (a particular dermatologist) who are qualified in a specific field.

For Nguyen, an epistemic bubble only exists until the point of exposure to the relevant, excluded information, at which point, the bubble “bursts” and members may either accept or reject the information that had previously eluded them. If they accept the information, their epistemic virtue is restored. As products of sheer ignorance, epistemic bubbles “can be fixed with simple exposure” (Nguyen, 2018: 147). Nguyen does not consider what would happen if members rejected the information, but based on his definition of echo chambers, it appears that he would argue that the epistemic bubble would transform into an echo chamber in this instance.

Implications

Echo chambers and epistemic bubbles may lead to harm. “Both [echo chambers and epistemic bubbles] are structures of exclusion” (Nguyen, 2018: 141) and therefore require remedy. In the case of epistemic bubbles, Nguyen suggests that members engage in a “social epistemic reboot” to determine whether they are in a bubble, and if so, to disengage from it. Nguyen defines a social epistemic reboot as an act of abandoning all beliefs and preconceptions that one possesses in order to view all arguments and testimonies on an equally viable basis (Nguyen, 2018: 157). This could be likened to a Lockean *tabula rasa*. Then one reaffirms the beliefs of which they are absolutely certain. (Nguyen, 2018: 157). This radical idea assumes that any individual has the capacity to set aside all their beliefs and preconceptions and start afresh, thereby becoming a “cognitive newborn” (Nguyen, 2018: 157).

Such a reboot is utterly unfeasible. Nguyen’s example of Derek Black, a man born into a neo-Nazi home but who ultimately (as an adult) rejected the neo-Nazi view as a result of exposure and kindness from

Echo chambers and epistemic bubbles may lead to harm

Byrne, Separating Echo Chambers from Epistemic Bubbles

his peers (Nguyen, 2018: 158). This example is employed by Nguyen as a buffer for what we might expect from anyone born into such strong beliefs who is later in life exposed to contrary perspectives. However, the Derek Black example should be viewed as exceptional, not as a rule, and certainly not as a likely buffer for how others would likely respond in the same situation.

Another problem that Nguyen's reboot theory may encounter is the misidentification of beliefs as neutral facts. Descartes, for example, was a firm Christian who almost certainly would not have suspended his belief in God as part of his epistemic reboot, as he took God's existence as granted. Such an incident is likely to occur with the treatment of moral facts, which some people take as hard truths, and some do not regard as facts at all. The scope of subjectivity that surrounds so many beliefs could easily lead to the misidentification of beliefs as facts, which would therefore not be suspended as beliefs as part of the social epistemic reboot.

Echo chambers and epistemic bubbles can be further understood as a form of injustice, based on Miranda Fricker's theory of epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007), which outlines two types of injustice: testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice. Testimonial injustice, on the one hand, refers to level of credibility afforded to a speaker; if a speaker's credibility is undermined on the basis of a characteristic such as ethnicity or gender, a testimonial injustice has taken place. Hermeneutical injustice, on the other hand, refers to an injustice which is rooted in two types of ignorance: the ignorance of the speaker, who does not have the epistemic resources to conceptualize, and thereby describe, their experience; and the ignorance of the hearer, who does not understand or appreciate the speaker's account for the same reasons.

In terms of epistemic bubbles, both testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice may take place. By excluding certain voices and perspectives, members of epistemic bubbles afford a credibility deficit to agents outside of their bubble. Hermeneutical injustices can also take place in epistemic bubbles; if those excluded do not have a conception of the bubble, or the vocabulary to identify it, then they cannot play a role in dismantling it. Thus, agents outside of the epistemic bubble may lose confidence in their own epistemic capabilities. As Fricker (2007: 163) points out:

(...) [epistemic injustice] brings secondary epistemic disadvantages (...) [such as] the subject's loss of epistemic confidence [which] it is likely to stop one gaining certain important epistemic virtues, such as intellectual courage.

Epistemic bubbles can have repercussions on those whose voices and perspectives are excluded— even if they do not realize it. To be a member of an epistemic bubble is not unpleasant for those who are members of it, therefore members have no reason to assess whether they are in a bubble, and subsequently exit it.

One of the most glaring problems posed here is that one may act with epistemic virtue and still ultimately commit epistemic negligence. If one is indoctrinated into an epistemic bubble or echo chamber, one may believe that they are acting with epistemic virtue but actually fail to do so in practice. Informational landscapes are shaped and modified by external agents, not merely by our own actions (Nguyen, 2018: 144), therefore even if we act virtuously at an individual level, we are still susceptible to becoming members of an epistemic bubble as we are not addressing the effect of external agents on shaping our views.

Conclusion

This article has argued for the application of Nguyen's theory of echo chambers and epistemic bubbles to populist discourse in order to better distinguish between those who exclude information as part of their beliefs (constructing echo chambers) and those whose beliefs are perpetuated, at least in part, because of a lack of exposure to other relevant sources of information (epistemic bubbles). While this theory of echo chambers and epistemic bubbles is flawed, it is useful, and perhaps necessary to understand the nuances of political ideology more finely in the context of today's media culture.

References

- Acemoğlu, D., Egorov, G., and Sonin, K. (2012). A Political Theory of Populism. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 128(2), 771-805.
- Bastos, M. T., Travitzki, R., and Puschmann, C. (2012). What Sticks With Whom? Twitter Follower-Followee Networks and News Classification. Paper presented at the The Sixth International AAAI Conference on Weblogs and Social Media (ICWSM 12). Dublin: City, University of London Institutional Repository.
- Brown, K. and Mondon, A. (2021). Populism, the media, and the mainstreaming of the far-right: The Guardian's coverage of populism as a case study. *Politics*, 41(3), 279-295.
- Chignell, A. (2018). The Ethics of Belief. *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* 5 March. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-belief/>
- Fricker, M. (2007). *Epistemic Injustice: Power & the Ethics of Knowing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Jones, P. A. (2021). Demagogic populism and media system: A preliminary articulation. *European Journal of Communication*, 36(6), 593-609.
- Kelly, T. (2008). Disagreement, Dogmatism, and Belief Polarization. *The Journal of Philosophy*, 105(10), 611-633.
- Locke, J. (1892). *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. 27th ed. London: Thomas Davidson, Whitefriars.
- Mudde, C. (2004). The Populist Zeigeist. *Government and Opposition*, 39(4), 541-563.
- Nelson, J. L. and Webster, J. G. (2017). The Myth of Partisan Selective Exposure: A Portrait of the Online Political News Audience. *Social Media + Society*, 1-13.
- Nguyen, C. T. (2018). Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles. *Episteme*, 17(2), 141-161.
- Rini, R. (2017). Fake News and Partisan Epistemology. *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal*, 27(2), 43-64.
- Rovira Kaltwasser, C. and Mudde, C. (2017). *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.