

Is Twitter anything more than an online echo chamber?

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Columnists Suzanne Moore and Peter Hitchens rarely see eye-to-eye on anything, but they do seem to agree that Twitter tends towards a leftwing mob mentality



Twitter users tend to follow those they agree with, leading to a noticeable lack of debate.
Photograph: Jaubert Images/Alamy

Is there something inherently progressive and liberal about online communication sites such as Twitter? Or does it just seem that way?

On her Facebook page recently, Guardian columnist Suzanne Moore said she was tired of Twitter because people mostly just follow those they agree with. They're not interested in debate.

"You chose who to follow. There is a whole world of deep dark Twitter if you follow those who don't think like you. But people don't do that. I would not so much say it's leftwing as knee jerk. So outrage over a Daily Mail article happens every day, which is frankly daft. Sometimes it can be about a piece published ages ago but no one had noticed till Twitter went berserk. "Generally though it is the province of the liberal left and for me it has become more and more unthinking and less and less interesting," Moore told Guardian Technology.

Moore has a surprising ally. Peter Hitchens, columnist for the Mail on Sunday, has referred to Twitter as an electronic leftwing mob and says that's why he too rarely goes there. "Not just Twitter, but the internet generally is in favour of sex and drugs and rock'n'roll and I'm not. And there is certainly something about the web for which the natural default is of the left. Morally, culturally and socially, it's definitely leftwing. Morally and socially conservative-minded people aren't on there anyway or may even be unaware of it."

Hitchens knows he attracts a great deal of abuse on Twitter – even trending a few times, especially whenever he broadcasts his views on drugs. But this doesn't bother him. "I don't particularly want to be loved by complete strangers. Lots of people are afraid of being insulted and called rude names. I'm not particularly, but many don't like it and get upset."

This is one of the reasons he thinks Twitter tends towards mob mentality. Fine if your tweets reflect the prevailing, and assumed, political stance. Scary if you don't. It's a brave soul who tweets against the tide. Could Twitter and other parts of the net actually shut down debate?

For anecdotal evidence that Twitter tends to attract leftwingers, if you look beyond your timeline and read tweets on trending hashtags, it can give the impression of a leftwing consensus.

For example, when Radio 4's PM presenter Eddie Mair first hosted Newsnight in July, he received warm praise on Twitter under the Newsnight hashtag. But one of his guests, Mark Littlewood, director general of the rightwing Institute of Economic Affairs, had so much abuse heaped on him that one tweeter said he was more unpopular than John Terry, the former England football captain who was accused of racial abuse. (Terry was acquitted.)

Dr Rachel Gibson, professor of politics at Manchester University, has studied digital politics since 1999, with funding from the Economic and Social Research Council. She says there is evidence Twitter and other social networking sites tend towards the progressive.

"But this is because Twitter users are early adopters who have higher levels of education than the rest of the population, so tend to be more progressive and open. Also, Twitter is not a mass medium like television. It is still only used by a minority of the population."

Most of Gibson's studies have been around political blogs which she says are now a bit passé with Twitter taking over as the medium of choice. "Blogging tended to be adversarial and go against the government in question. So there were lots of rightwing blogs during the Clinton years in the US and during the Labour government here."

In fact, while there were left or left-leaning governments in the UK, US and Australia, there was a positive flourishing of rightwing blogs, with the left very slow to catch up. "It suits the right in some ways as the net is seen by them as the essence of the free market, uncontrolled by state. But it may also have just been because the left was in power."

There is hardly any linkage between left and right online. Rightwing bloggers link to others of the same persuasion and the left do the same, Gibson's studies have shown. "People don't tend to link to those they disagree with. This has led academics such as Cass Sunstein, who wrote Nudge and The Republic 2.0, to talk about the 'balkanisation of the net', where you only see views you agree with and lose accidental exposure to other views such as those you'd get in a news programme.

"The net actually makes it easier to avoid people you don't agree with or who may challenge your view."

However, all social networks tend to be homogenous. Why should the net be any different? "Some Twitter users do like to have adversarial friendships and enjoy debate. But it's far more usual to see groups forming with like-minded individuals. Much the same as happens offline," Gibson says.

With a Tory-led government, Twitter is more likely to attract leftwingers or those who just oppose the government, says Gibson. And according to Tweetminster there are slightly more Labour MPs on Twitter than Conservatives. It's a useful tool in opposition, and John Prescott, with more than 150,000 followers, is among senior Labour politicians who tweet a lot and use it to campaign.

Newspaper readers have always gravitated towards newspapers that endorse rather than challenge their views. But what net users need to be aware of is that the web now actively screens out views we disagree with, says Eli Pariser, author of The Filter Bubble: What the Internet Is Hiding from You.

In it he demonstrates how Google, Facebook, Yahoo and others use algorithms to personalise web searches and services. This is done for commercial reasons so that the experience you get matches your expressed (or inferred) interests more closely, which ought to make you stay with the service longer. It also means advertising can be better targeted.

But it's not a win-win: it's insidious, he says, because the filtering out of things we don't express active interest in means we don't know it's happening outside the bubble created by those filters – and turns what should be global broadcasting into personal narrowcasting.

Pariser, co-founder of Avaaz.org, has now set up Upworthy with the aim of offering a broader range of content.

Another academic who studies online behaviour is Dr Matthew Goodwin, associate professor at the School of Politics and International Relations at the University of Nottingham.

"I suppose those who argue that Twitter is leftwing would make the point that it is mainly populated by higher-educated and more socially mobile professionals, who we know tend to endorse more post-material and progressive values," he says.

"Having said that, however, I would also point to the way in which social media tools like Twitter have been embraced by social groups further down the social and economic ladder. I would point to, for example, the way that rioters from more deprived communities utilised Twitter to organise their action and, within my area of research, the way that rightwing extremists have adopted Twitter to communicate directly to potential and current supporters.

"We know both of these groups tend to attract citizens with lower-than-average levels of education and social mobility, so the picture I think is far from clear and I've yet to see comprehensive and reliable research on the socio-demographics and ideological views that underpin Twitter."

Clearly, more research is needed. As the net matures and attracts more users, academics and politicians will be keen to see how, if it all, it changes political discourse. Gibson's studies are ongoing as her department has had funding renewed to continue studying online behaviour. A paper summarising her recent research – Party Organisational Change and ICTs: The Growth of a Virtual Grassroots? – will appear next month in *New Media and Society*.

It's ironic, but if you genuinely want a broader discourse online than an echo chamber, you probably have to make more effort to use traditional media – which have always had an element of serendipity increasingly absent from everyday net use.

Fonte: The Guardian, 22 Aug. 2012. [Portal] Disponível em: <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2012/aug/22/twitter-online-echo-chamber-leftwing>>. Acesso em: 22 Aug. 2012.

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