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The Digital Age: Our Feminist Echo Chamber

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With the development of highly cultivated apps dictating a user's personal feed, or the content presented to them, often falls in line with their own interests thanks to sophisticated algorithms. Though social media apps may be useful aids to expose users to new content and ways of thinking, app algorithms can quickly become dangerous echo chambers for the user's own interests. In fact, these algorithms can limit potential advancements in social justice issues and other progressive movements, such as feminism. Although the modern-day rise of feminism can certainly be attributed, to a certain extent, to algorithms circulating feminist content, social media algorithms can entrench its users in echo chambers that stagnate progress, rather than facilitate it, and feminism is no exception.

We can take TikTok, an app that recently shot to popularity, as a case study. The ForYou Page is curated based on a user's likes, dislikes, time spent watching a TikTok, and many other factors of engagement. We are constantly interacting with the content we are interested in and care for. I, myself, have the TikTok app. When I open it up, I know today's endless scroll of TikToks will bring me content discussing a critique of toxic masculinity or a rejection of a patriarchal ideology because the application's algorithm is carefully attuned to my own personal interests. The algorithm's attentiveness results in a selection of niche content aligning with an individual's interests, and for myself, that includes feminist thought and discourse.

But really, what's so bad about that? Feminist thought is gaining traction on a popular app, meaning more people are seeing, engaging, and understanding it; there are an abundant number of examples of movements finding success on TikTok, or other new media platforms, due to their algorithms, like the #MeToo movement or #BLM. Yet, social media predecessors like Facebook and YouTube have been widely scrutinized, particularly due to their negative sociopolitical outcomes stemming from their algorithms. The Guardian cites that "Facebook's own internal research...found that 64% of all extremist group joins are due to [their] recommendation tools" (Wong). YouTube was criticized for promoting "a ...disturbing network of extremists" (Newton). TikTok is no exception: TikTok moderators were encouraged to "suppress videos from users" they deemed "too ugly, poor or disabled" (Hern). Governments have addressed concerns about TikTok's circulation of malicious content, calling it "a magnet for...violence and extremism" (Weimann). Although I personally have not encountered this type of content, people *are* consuming it, and perhaps, may even be consuming it in unprecedented quantities -- and more likely than not, their interests align with this disturbing content. As users and consumers of media, we are receiving what the platform caters to us. I can control what I prefer to see and what I prefer not to see. But the algorithm itself is selecting the content I see outside of my choices. While I may be consuming a host of TikToks encouraging feminism, there may be another person right next to me watching TikToks dismissing it.

Our social media feeds themselves can be thought of as an echo chamber, broadly defined as "a mechanism to reinforce an existing opinion in a group" (Cinnelli). Is this not also occurring within our own feminist social media? My TikTok is cultivated *for me*, and my interests are rooted in feminist thought, issues, and theories. Is it no surprise the content I consume on social media has been tailoring itself to my own interests? Have we really been existing in our own echo chamber, the very critique we have leveled at so many of our opposition? Seeing the same content promotes stagnation rather than essential discourse, and can promote limited points of view, like white feminism, or unintentionally exclude marginalized groups. #MeToo was critiqued because it largely benefited upper class and celebrity women, while the

#BLM movement mostly highlighted men of color, resulting in the need for another movement, #sayhername, to shed light on Black women and BIPOC transgender people. These largely successful movements still had their faults in their exclusions. We must be careful to ensure our feminist work is progressive, meaningful, and does not become flattened to a trendy buzzword on apps such as TikTok.

If we are to develop purposeful change from social media, we must recognize our own echo chambers. If we are ever to change the minds of our opposition, we must break away from the entrapment of algorithms. Engage with our opposition, whether this is on an individual or community level, by encouraging them to learn beyond their personalized social media feeds. And not only this, but we must also find a way to minimize the incredibly invasive algorithms seeking to find every interest we have. We ought to dedicate more of our efforts to prevent algorithms from promoting harmful content, whether this is through policymaking at a national level or within companies to ensure ethical decision-making in Silicon Valley. Perhaps, through these endeavors, we can pave the way to a safer digital future.

Growing up in the digital age provided me a head start in my feminist journey, lighting a passion within me. I had just begun high school when feminist ideas and principles were first introduced to me by my own social media feed. The exposure to various feminist principles encouraged me to think critically while offering an opportunity to progress in my feminist growth, and I attribute much of this early engagement to my continued pursuit of learning feminist thought and theories throughout my undergraduate career. And an algorithm, itself, is most likely the culprit of the presence of feminist content on my feed many years ago. I cannot deny the fact that social media, and more specifically, its algorithms, presented feminism to me. Certainly, I hope it is doing the same for young teens now, and persists in connecting us across the globe to write our own feminist movements. But if we do not recognize our own contradictions as we continue on this digital path, then we cannot begin to unravel the tight grip our feminist echo chamber has on us. The growth, exposure, and progress feminism has garnered throughout the digital age may very quickly be inhibited due to the limitations imposed by our personal echo chambers. And most frightening of all, these feminist echo chambers may end up unintentionally hurting and excluding the very marginalized communities we are striving to advocate for.

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