



Journal of HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

www.jhrm.eu • ISSN 2453-7683

Section: ESSAY

Echo chambers and confirmation bias

Peter Kalina

“The eye sees only what the mind is prepared to comprehend.”
Robertson Davies

In July 2017, Google fired a senior engineer based on an internal memo he wrote entitled, “Google’s Ideological Echo Chamber.” The manifesto criticized Google’s culture, describing it as an “ideological echo chamber where some ideas are too sacred to be honestly discussed” (Damore, 2017; Inside Google’s ideological echo chamber, 2017). The engineer says his good-faith effort to discuss Google’s diversity policies, gender diversity and the tech sector gender gap could not be tolerated. In part, the memo stated that while bias and discrimination exist, it is extreme to ascribe all disparities to oppression (Damore, 2017). CEO Sundar Pichai explained the firing, stating that the memo violated Google’s code of conduct and “crossed the line by advancing harmful gender stereotypes in our workplace” (Damore, 2017). He also acknowledged that as a result of the firing, employees now question whether they can safely express their views in the workplace, adding that they must feel free to express dissent and find ways to debate issues on which they disagree (Tobak, 2019).

An echo chamber is when we surround ourselves with like-minded people who share the same ideals and agree with our viewpoints. This may be conscious or unconscious. Important modern-day concerns regarding echo chambers include issues of prejudice, discrimination, and political partisanship. For example, rather than seeking diverse views to solve complex problems, political partisanship encourages people to seek information from within a group with the same views and beliefs.

Confirmation Bias is a common, often-unconscious, cognitive bias wherein people cling to and confirm preexisting beliefs and opinions with supporting evidence (Grohol, 2020). Confirmation bias creates a requirement for much stricter standards for evidence that compete with our existing beliefs. Even then, contradictory evidence that does not fit the narrative is often simply disregarded or rejected. Confirmation bias leads us to seek, interpret, favor, and remember information that confirms existing beliefs; while ignoring disconfirming evidence. People holding conflicting views may interpret the same information and arrive at opposite conclusions based on biased personal beliefs, allowing their prior conclusions to remain intact. Selective recall leads us to remember only information confirming and reinforcing existing beliefs and expectations. We are not good at evaluating situations and predicting outcomes based on facts alone, and do not always make decisions and formulate beliefs based on actual evidence (Tobak, 2019; Le Cunff, 2020).

Nobody wants to admit they are biased. We like to see ourselves as open-minded, objective thinkers. This common personality trait contributes to the difficulties that exist in avoiding confirmation bias. Beyond self-awareness, it requires us to regularly question ourselves when we read or hear something. Did I jump to a quick conclusion? Why did I believe this? Did I automatically agree? Automatically assume? Did it confirm my existing beliefs? How many of my friends share the same belief? Is this a trustworthy source? What percentage of my information comes from this source? What if the facts say I was wrong? (Le Cunff, 2020). Do not allow the voice in your head to agree with whatever you say, regardless of the facts. There is a crucial difference between the desire to be right, which is the thirst for truth, versus the desire to have been right, which is our pride standing in the way of seeing we were wrong (Van Orman Quine, 1978; Brown, 2018).

CONTACT INFORMATION:

Peter Kalina / Mayo Clinic / Rochester / USA / kalina.peter@mayo.edu

Our ubiquitous use of social media also makes it harder to combat echo chambers and confirmation bias. Social media allows us to tailor and filter what we see and who to “unfriend” when they do not echo us. Believing we already know every side of every argument narrows our curiosity, which blocks the progress of knowledge. Even when presented with contradictory facts, we cite, share and rehash like-minded talking points as evidence we are right, and everyone on the other side is wrong. Social media steers us to consume information already aligned with our personal convictions. This vicious cycle is reinforced by the silos created by social media (Le Cunff, 2020).

Often without realizing it, but sometimes by way of careful construction and design, we exist in ideological echo chambers, and are guilty of confirmation bias. We are much more likely to find arguments in favor of conclusions we want to believe than for arguments or conclusions we do not (Kunda, 1999). We look for evidence that supports our beliefs and opinions but exclude those that are contrary (Mohajer, 2015). The more strongly we feel about an issue, the more emotionally charged the topic, the more deeply ingrained the belief, the more we desire a specific outcome or believe in a specific principle; the more likely we are to search for confirming evidence (Grohol, 2020). This is the power of confirmation bias.

Echo chambers and confirmation bias can become significant human resources concerns for many organizations. For example, confirmation bias affects leaders involved in recruitment, manifesting when a candidate is being evaluated and the interviewer sees what they had expected to see. Performance reviews are another example. They are inherently subjective, and prone to the influences of unconscious biases, including confirmation bias. Different leaders often reach different conclusions and give different evaluations for the same individual. Feedback is fraught with subjectivity. Ulterior motives, personal vendettas, the evaluator's personal preferences, compatibility of styles, or some other affinity may overshadow objective performance metrics and benchmarks (Kalina, 2019). For leaders who do not like to be questioned, echo chambers and confirmation bias portend bad outcomes with regard to competitive business advantage, employee relationships and morale. All employees, and especially leaders must grow their ideology and adjust their thinking as new evidence becomes available.

To improve overall workplace diversity, we must be individually willing to diversify. Rather than simply attacking opposite-minded people, we should try to engage in debate with them. Reach out to those who have different perspectives from our own. Try to see it from their point of view. This is perspective taking (Birch, 2017). It is OK to ultimately disagree, but you may gain new insights along the way. Be open-minded, seeking out competing explanations and alternative viewpoints. Learn about people different from yourself. Celebrate the differences that make us unique. Openly engage in dialogue, ask the difficult questions, and actively listen to the responses. Stand together to foster a workplace where everyone can not only co-exist, but actually thrive.

Confronting echo chambers and confirmation bias is an incredibly challenging, but extremely worthwhile endeavor. If successfully mastered, one can avoid ideological stagnation, make better decisions, and better understand their colleagues. Striving to optimize workplace relationships will portend wide-reaching benefits and create a better environment for everyone.

REFERENCES

- Birch S., Li, V., Haddock, T., Ghrear, S., Brosseau-Liard, P., Baimel, A., & Whyte, M. (2017). Perspectives on perspective taking. *Advances in Child Development and Behavior*, 52, 185-226.
- Brown, B. (2018). *Dare to Lead*. New York: Penguin Random House.
- Damore, J. (2017). Why I was fired by Google. *Wall Street Journal*, August 11, 2017. Retrieved May 22, 2020, from <https://www.wsj.com/articles/why-i-was-fired-by-google-1502481290>
- Grohol, J. (2020). The Psychology of Confirmation Bias. *Psych Central*, February 10, 2020. Retrieved May 22, 2020, from <https://psychcentral.com/blog/the-psychology-of-confirmation-bias/>
- Inside Google's ideological echo chamber (2017). *BizPlus*, August 9, 2017. Retrieved May 22, 2020, from <https://biz-plus.ie/inside-googles-ideological-echo-chamber>
- Kalina, P. (2019). Performance reviews in healthcare. The good, the bad and the continuously improving. *Radiology Business Journal*, October 14, 2019.
- Kunda, Z. (1999). *Social Cognition: Making Sense of People*. Boston: MIT Press.
- Le Cunff, A. (2020). Confirmation bias: believing what you see, seeing what you believe. *Ness Labs*, May 28, 2020. Retrieved June 1, 2020, from <https://nesslabs.com/confirmation-bias>
- Mohajer, S. (2015). *The Little Book of Stupidity*. Seattle: Kindle Press.
- Tobak, S. (2019). Ideological echo chambers and the death of objectivity. Retrieved May 22, 2020, from <https://steve-tobak.com/2019/02/17/ideological-echo-chambers-death-of-objectivity>
- Van Orman Quine, W., & Ullian, J. (1978). *The Web of Belief*. New York: McGraw-Hill.