

ECHO CHAMBER .CLUB

A philosophical institute dedicated to understanding what makes information environments healthy and democratic in a digital age.

Research Agenda

This document outlines the research agenda of the Echo Chamber Club. We will circulate this to potential funders and collaborators so others can understand our purpose, and the impact we are looking to have.

Interested? Please contact **editor@echochamber.club**

The Echo Chamber Club will specialise as a *philosophical* institute

Why?

It's clear that the use and evolution of digital technologies has created a completely new existence for humans and animals. Like any evolution, some parts of our era are positive, and others are negative. Whereas entrepreneurs and businesses are keen to emphasise the benefits that technology brings, it is up to civil society actors to balance this enthusiasm with reflection, best-practice methodologies, frameworks and, of course, regulation.

Here are just a couple significant changes that this evolution has presented us with: **Algorithmic decision-making** which impacts human freedom and radically changes community power structures. Or **the speed and scale of new information**, which makes it difficult to understand the difference between conjecture, opinion, and credible research. Or **how tech giants have been allowed to consolidate power**, yet seem to lack the accountability to match that.

There are many institutions which aim to make sense of the role that technology plays in societies in the 21st century; for instance, social scientists will start with research questions and hypotheses which need to be tested. But where do we get these hypotheses from? They come from **theory and philosophy**.

However, at the moment, lots of the theories informing these questions are informed by popular stories in tech news (e.g. the idea that our jobs will soon be replaced with AI and automation). The Echo Chamber Club want to start with theories that are different to the ones that are in fashion -- which is why we need establishments that can justify innovative research questions within the social sciences, and diversify the ideas in this space.

It takes time to build a good theory, and those constructed by 'common sense' often fail to hold. Therefore, we need great philosophers to be part of this knowledge production environment; to drive the theory which inspires the research questions that make sense of the present day, and the world of tomorrow.

Democracy and human rights

Most knowledge production starts with axioms. In law, we believe in the legitimacy of eyewitness accounts, which means that we trust human senses to communicate some form of truth. Mathematics has core axioms from which complicated theories can be devised, from Pythagorus' theorem to the theory of relativity. The same is true for communities. Each community has a set of **social axioms** on which they base their politics and governance.

In the West, our social and moral axioms derive from theories of democracy and human rights. To truly understand the ways -- both good and bad -- in which technology is affecting society, then we need to have a strong theoretical basis of technology's relationship with democratic institutions and the democratic ideal.

In *Democracy and Its Critics*, by acclaimed political theorist Robert Dahl outlines the requirements in a democratic process:

1. *Effective participation*

This means that everyone should have adequate and equal opportunity to express their preferences as to what should be discussed in a political institution, and what their preference is to the final outcome of a vote following a discussion.

2. *Voting equality at the decisive stage*

Every citizen's vote will be judged as equal in weight to everyone else's vote.

3. *Enlightened understanding*

This has a particular meaning: "Each citizen ought to have adequate and equal opportunities for discovering and validating (within the time permitted by the need for a decision) the choice on the matter to be decided that would best serve the citizen's interests." So the citizen should be given time and information to ascertain what decision would be best for them.

4. *Control of the agenda*

Dahl has a specific understanding of agenda, which is the literal agenda for the political institution through a given period. The demos should be allowed to decide which matters should be discussed and voted on, and no elite can prohibit any item from being deliberated.

To realise these steps, we need an **information environment** which enables citizens to do the following:

- Learn about government institutions
- Share ideas with each other
- Learn more about ideal outcomes
- Communicate with government

There are also many clauses in the UN Declaration of Human Rights which relates to healthy information environments. From Article 1 which states that every person should be treated with dignity, because we have reason and a conscience, to Article 19 which states we have the right to freedom and self-expression, to Article 27 which states that everyone has the right to participate in the culture of their community.

For these reasons the Echo Chamber Club will specialise in *democratic information environments*.

Our role in civil society

The Echo Chamber Club will be a key actor in the civil society ecosystem to help other organisations and institutions working to improve information environments. We will do this by providing events and accessible research on philosophical theories. Our impact will be measured by the extent to which other civil society research projects which are based on new theories and ideas are funded.

Proposed thematic research agenda

This section will detail our proposed thematic research agenda. We would like our research to fall into five key themes. These have been chosen because we have experienced a lack of solid theoretical thinking in these five areas when it comes to technology and civil society.

1. Government, citizens, and information
2. Truth and communities
3. Agency and confidence
4. Justice and accountability
5. Culture and the political

Government, citizens, and information

This theme will explore the relationship that is desirable between government and citizens when it comes to the information that should flow between them. In this area, we can also explore how the Echo Chamber Club could operate as a lobbying organisation, to ensure that critical departments and thought is given to the construction of information environments in government.

Research questions we'd like to examine include:

- What is the relationship between security and transparency in foreign policy? And how should matters of warfare, and information warfare, be communicated to the people?
- How should information flow from people to government? What structures should be created, and which institutions should be paid attention to?
- How should information flow from government to the people? What level of meta information is required? What kind of context is required?

And a lobbying agenda would include:

- How can we ensure that governments take responsibility in a digital era to ensure healthy information environments?
- How do we educate others on key democratic concepts? What kind of programmes can we develop which ensures that technologists understand their obligations in democracies?

What impact do we hope to see as a result of this work?

As a result of the work in this theme, we expect to see an increased prioritisation of the health of information environments in the private and public sectors. Through education and lobbying programmes, we expect to see literacy on this topic increase amongst the public, which will help to direct important democratic discussion about what information environments we want to experience.

Truth and communities

This research theme would look at the different ‘truths’ that are prioritised by different communities, and ask how different groups could understand each other. How can accountants understand artists? How can Brexiteers understand Remainers? And how can this empathy lead to action and a change in priorities in government departments?

Research questions we’d like to examine include:

- What is the difference between translation and persuasion in language?
- What are the most triggering words and phrases that lead to community conflict?
- How can we understand disinformation in light of differing community priorities?
- What would an agonist account of disinformation, misinformation and malinformation look like?
- How much positive conflict should we design for in democracies?

And technology we’d like to build includes:

- A browser plug-in which sheds light on certain words and phrases that are understood differently by various communities.

What impact do we hope to see as a result of this work?

Truth is often viewed as a binary, as opposed to a 3D spectrum. Consequently, much work around disinformation and content moderation does not come from a solid base. We would like to rectify this by answering research questions which can help other civil society actors position their work in a light which is more pertaining to a nuanced theory of truth.

Agency and confidence

In the philosophy of recognition, we understand that much of our relationship with others in society comes from our relationship with ourselves. There needs to be more theoretical research into this link between a lack of confidence, and

an anti-democratic sentiment. Equally, plenty needs to be done to understand what should be public and what should be private in a digital world. Previous thinking stemmed from a Habermasian ideal which relied on Aristotelian axioms. He stated that the private was anything that took place inside the home. Privacy in this form was anything to do with the body – which included child birth, sex, cleaning and eating. Private functions were taken on by women and slaves. Meanwhile, a public life was occupied by the mind. This was a higher practice and only wealthy men could participate. We believe this distinction could do with an update.

Research questions we'd like to examine include:

- What is an adequate demarcation between private and public in information environments?
- What is the relationship between transparency and employee privacy in institutions?
- How can the philosophy of recognition, in particular, the philosophy of confidence help to understand attitudes towards disinformation?
- What is the relationship between poor mental health and poor community life? What is the ideal normative claim in each of these realms?

What impact do we hope to see as a result of this work?

Far too often we describe information environments as the 'public sphere'. This terminology is outdated. By pursuing a better understanding of how our personal and community lives operate, we will be able to understand how we can design information environments which work for individuals and for societies.

Justice and accountability

The prioritisation of justice is guided by the information environment. The relationship between builders, tenants and property management services was not considered important for public debate until Grenfell tower burned down, taking 72 lives. Equally, there are many individual cases of injustice which are not treated properly without public attention. Included in this theme is the issue of accountability. How can we remain accountable to each other, and how can public and private institutions be accountable to individuals? Is there a point where accountability becomes authoritarian?

Research questions we'd like to examine include:

- Can we create a system of justice which is not led by outrage on social media? To what extent is this desirable?

- What is a desirable feedback system between the public, private institutions and government when it comes to accountability of algorithms?
- How do we make sure that people's private information is not compromised in transparency initiatives?
- In an era where PR goes hand-in-hand with ethics-washing, green-washing and white-washing, how can we truly understand what practices are like in institutions?

What impact do we hope to see as a result of this work?

We expect to give civil society actors a theoretical normative approach to what the relationship between the judiciary and the citizenship should be. We would like to outline all the available approaches, and in this way, we will be able to create better research and policy proposals for government.

Culture and the political

Our culture is an undeniable part of our social, political and democratic life. So much satire, drama and literature are based on behaviour and community issues which is important. These artistic endeavours shape how we understand the world around us. However, all too often it's importance in democracies is overlooked. We want to examine the relationship between the arts and politics in a digital age to ensure that this aspect of information is considered in democratic theory.

Research questions we'd like to examine include:

- What impact do digital cultures have on political outcomes?
- Can we differentiate between culture and politics in a digital age? What has changed compared with a pre-digital age?
- What responsibility do democracies have towards preserving and growing the culture in their countries?

What impact do we hope to see as a result of this work?

We would like to encourage a more holistic approach to information environments in the political and civil society sectors. We expect the results of this research to help to tie together the work of many of our other themes, and increase understanding into the complexity of the information environment.