

# How to Echo: Knowing Things Well in a Polarized World

Robby Bishop

As disorienting as politics has been in the United States recently, I find myself equally confused by how people talk about these developments. Among the recurring warnings about the perils of partisanship, I hear a new word with ever-increasing frequency: *polarization*. I've heard it used by friends, teachers, journalists, and politicians—sometimes referring to the distance between the platforms of political parties, sometimes to hostility between citizens, sometimes to the development of extreme beliefs. Sometimes they evoke all these things and more. Each time someone uses the term, it is their earnestness that catches my attention. In *The Atlantic*, for example, Yascha Mounk suggests that the United States is caught in a “doom spiral of pernicious polarization” that might lead to civil war.<sup>1</sup> In a country with a long history of intense divisions and a long history of talking about those divisions, what makes the word *polarization* appropriate for our present moment?

In my view, the concept's value has less to do with how it conceptualizes division and more to do with how it directs attention to epistemic issues affecting democracies today. At the heart of many contemporary concerns about increasing partisanship, divisiveness, and animosity is increasing reflexivity about the effects of how knowledge is acquired, developed, and disseminated. “Getting affirmation instead of information has definitely exacerbated polarization,” Katie Couric says in a documentary about the 2020 presidential election.<sup>2</sup> Exemplifying this trend, she criticizes the “millions of bubbles that people live in, where they seek out or are fed information algorithmically, that reinforce their beliefs.” The term *polarization* is rarely used in isolation. As philosopher Robert Talisse points out,

<sup>1</sup> Mounk, “The Doom Spiral.”

<sup>2</sup> *Split Screen*.

“Lamentations over our political divides are commonly accompanied by related warnings concerning political ‘bubbles,’ ‘silos,’ and ‘echo chambers’; these are said to produce ‘intellectual closure,’ ‘groupthink,’ ‘spin,’ ‘derp,’ ‘post-truth,’ and forms of ‘derangement.’”<sup>3</sup> These concepts are purported causes of polarization. They suggest that *where, how, and with whom* we acquire knowledge has social and political effects. They suggest that civic responsibility has epistemic dimensions. Within the confusing, catastrophizing, and sometimes contradictory discourse about polarization, this point is the one that I hope to clarify. What does it mean to know things well—as a citizen, in a democracy, today?

In answering this question, I hope to counter a prevailing trend. Theories which outline contemporary epistemic problems tend to express an overwhelmingly negative view of community, especially like-minded community. They inherit an individualist bias, common in Western philosophy and liberal political theory, which implies that solidarity and objectivity are opposed. As Richard Rorty has argued, knowing things well too often means “detach[ing] oneself from any particular community and look[ing] down on it from a more universal standpoint.”<sup>4</sup> This point is emphasized by feminist epistemologists, such as Naomi Scheman and Lorraine Code, who critique the prevalent “paranoia” about being influenced by others.<sup>5</sup> In discussions about polarization, the ever-expanding vocabulary for describing enclosed epistemic spaces is evidence of such paranoia. Bubbles, chambers, silos, and enclaves are spaces to avoid or to escape—communities to “detach” from.<sup>6</sup> In opposition to views that promote skepticism about solidarity, I will argue for the social and political benefits of like-minded communities and describe the various roles that we can play within them. We do depend on others for knowing things well. To act as we if do not is a delusion. The theory of civic responsibility presented here builds from that recognition.

<sup>3</sup> Talisse, *Overdoing Democracy*, 95.

<sup>4</sup> Rorty, “Solidarity or Objectivity?,” 30.

<sup>5</sup> Scheman, “Though This Be Method”; Code, *Epistemic Responsibility*, 166–72.

<sup>6</sup> While these terms and theories are not the same, the differences—in my view—are minor. Because the critiques are motivated by an individualistic approach to epistemology, they tend to be indiscriminate when evaluating the effects of solidarity and like-minded support. Moreover, the various terms are more often used for lazy finger-pointing than they are to meaningfully discuss civic and epistemic responsibility. I lump them together for this reason. *Filter bubble* does raise a distinct concern about algorithmic filtering, but as Axel Bruns argues in *Are Filter Bubbles Real?*, the evidence supporting the concept is lacking. See also Karpf, “The Internet and Engaged Citizenship,” 10–14. When I go on to make use of the term *echo chamber*, it is not because I think the concept itself is especially insightful or prescient. Rather, I see the metaphor of echoing as a productive starting point for conceptualizing *interdependent* epistemic relations—a way to bring the insights of feminist epistemologists to discussions of democracy.

*ROBBY BISHOP is project coordinator for the Wyoming Institute for Humanities Research. His previous experience as an English educator motivates his research on the individual, institutional, and cultural tendencies that prevent people from viewing others as credible and capable knowers and as equal citizens within a democracy.*

Although theories of polarization tend to be skeptical of solidarity, they nevertheless present important insights for understanding the relationship between individual knowers, the communities they inhabit, and the wider public sphere. To draw on such insights, I will begin by analyzing the theory developed by Robert Talisse in his book *Overdoing Democracy: Why We Must Put Politics in its Place*. While not every theory of polarization is the same as his, most bear some resemblance. His stance is representative of those that I believe to have potential for articulating a revitalized sense of civic responsibility but which I find limited by their overwhelmingly negative view of like-minded community. After analyzing these limitations, I will set forth an alternative view, drawing on one of the “paranoid” terms I introduced above: *echo chamber*. While frustrated with its pejorative connotation, I think there are intriguing possibilities for reformulating the concept. Communication scholar Amit Pinchevski sees a productive “bivalence” in the term—an ambiguity that is more evident if you focus on the first half of the compound noun. An *echo* might be destructive by reinforcing an exclusionary ideology, but it might also be supportive and nurturing.<sup>7</sup> As prosocial affirmation, echoing can lead people to believe in themselves and to cultivate ideas they share with others. *Good* echo chamber doesn’t have to be an oxymoron. By building on the constructive echoing suggested by Pinchevski, I hope to promote a more balanced view of like-minded community.

I also hope to suggest more nuanced ways of reflecting on what it means to inhabit such a space. Whether echoing is constructive or destructive depends, in large part, on social location. Due to race, class, gender, sexuality, and other factors, some people find their views affirmed more commonly than others. The powerful are echoed prominently and persistently, others much less so. This dynamic affects how people develop and contribute knowledge. Politically, it affects how people participate. In my view, constructive echoing corrects for this inequality. I will elaborate on this possibility by drawing on the work of Gaile Pohlhaus, José Medina, and other philosophers. For Pohlhaus and Medina, echoing is a metaphor which captures the complex act of knowing *together* with others. More specifically, it represents how we support each other in developing and contributing knowledge. I will focus on how such engagement can have socially beneficial effects, emphasizing the interactions that take place between people who have similar experiences (what I will call *survival echoing*) and between those who have different experiences but similar commitments (what I will call *resistance echoing*).

Throughout this essay, I will focus on the epistemic dimensions that I think are a key part of a revitalized conception of civic responsibility. I will not, however, neglect the concern about political divisions. By arguing for the ways that knowing together is supportive of democracy, I also hope to suggest when it’s not. Looking beyond the divisions framed by electoral politics might make the *bad* echo chambers more evident. If polarization is

<sup>7</sup> Pinchevski, *Echo*, 111.

occurring in democratic and anti-democratic directions, rather than only in liberal and conservative ones, we need to think more critically about how we respond. Bipartisanship isn't the obvious answer. When responding to an earlier era of epistemic and political crisis, Richard Rorty argued for being a partisan of solidarity.<sup>8</sup> What about being a partisan of democracy? Might the civic responsibility we need today include such impassioned stance-taking? I will answer in the affirmative, arguing for a *democratic echoing* that amplifies faith in democracy.

## The Polarization Story

When someone uses the word *polarization*, they are telling a story about our current political problems. According to C. Thi Nguyen, the basic contours of this story include the following details: “Our once-peaceful society has been riven into polarized camps. Extremism and political separation are the core problems, and the fix is something like reconnection, intermingling, and friendship across party lines.”<sup>9</sup> In *Overdoing Democracy*, Robert Talisse adds depth and clarity to this story by distinguishing between competing uses of the concept. In particular, he distinguishes between *belief polarization* and *political polarization*. The first term describes an epistemic phenomenon, while the second characterizes the state of a divided populace.<sup>10</sup> In Talisse’s story, belief polarization causes political polarization; as it becomes more common, the political divides widen.

Since I am interested in the epistemic issues framed by this discourse, I will focus on belief polarization. The theory explains what goes on in the many enclosed spaces—bubbles, chambers, enclaves, and silos—shaping popular imagination. Talisse builds off an intuition that there’s a link between corroboration, confidence, and extremism:

Corroboration from others with whom we identify makes us feel good about what we believe. When we feel good about what we believe, we experience a significant boost to our commitment to our overall perspective, we become a more fervent devotee to our point of view, whether it be feminist, conservative, environmentalist, egalitarian, or what have you. In turn, when that intensification happens, we are emboldened in various ways that drive us to shift to more extreme belief contents that we adopt with amplified degrees of confidence. Belief polarization can transform us into something similar to amped-up fans in the wake of a thrilling victory (or a crushing defeat).<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Rorty, “Solidarity or Objectivity?,” 24, 29, 33.

<sup>9</sup> Nguyen, “Polarization or Propaganda?”; See also his journal article, “Was It Polarization?”

<sup>10</sup> Talisse, *Overdoing Democracy*, 96–98; Nguyen, “Was It Polarization?,” 10.

<sup>11</sup> Talisse, *Overdoing Democracy*, 114–15; See also Sunstein, *#Republic*, 74.

While becoming an “amped-up” fan might be an exciting experience, it does have social repercussions. Fans don’t like the fans of other teams. Along with the excitement comes an “intensification of negative assessments of opposing groups, their members, and their beliefs.”<sup>12</sup> What starts off as a good feeling among people who hold similar views suddenly becomes a bad attitude towards those who hold different ones. What starts off as confidence within communities suddenly becomes division between them.

Confidence creates division. I summarize the argument too simply, perhaps, to highlight its distinctiveness. Most theories of polarization focus on extremism; Talisse argues for its multiplicity. There are extreme beliefs and extreme behaviors, but there is also an extremism in “degree of belief”—your level of commitment to your perspective.<sup>13</sup> Belief polarization is the process by which this confidence intensifies. Extremism, in this case, is an arrogance that leads to the rejection of different views and to hostility toward those who hold them. Confidence is an ordinary phenomenon. We all know what it means to have it, and what it means to not. But when it comes to extreme confidence, do we have the same ability to assess ourselves?

Talisse argues that we do not, pointing out that when we talk about epistemic issues, “we are usually referring to dysfunction that has beset others.”<sup>14</sup> Just as we blame the opposing party for political problems, we point out cognitive errors in those we disagree with: “We normally do not regard ourselves as in the grip of the polarization dynamic, and we don’t see our political allies as having transformed into more extreme versions of themselves, either. The polarization dynamic appears to us as something that affects other people. We ordinarily cannot recognize it in our own case.” This failure of recognition, in Talisse’s view, is a failure to take responsibility. How we know affects how we relate. If I want to understand how I impact the public sphere (and the divisions forming within it), I must understand my vulnerability to belief polarization. I must understand how my community shapes my convictions. When we ignore the webs of affirmation we’re enmeshed in, it becomes all too easy to criticize others. Talisse argues that belief polarization affects us all, suggesting a collective responsibility for the health of the public sphere.

I agree with this move in principle but not in practice. The theory is limited by the narrative in which it’s set. The story of polarization, Nguyen points out, is a “symmetrical story”—a both-sides phenomenon.<sup>15</sup> Because it’s an argument about a problem happening on both sides of a political divide, Talisse does not distinguish between views a society should hope to develop, maintain, and spread and those it should hope to resist. When he summarizes the research supporting his theory, he cites studies showing that both racists and

<sup>12</sup> Talisse, *Overdoing Democracy*, 118.

<sup>13</sup> Talisse, 106–7.

<sup>14</sup> Talisse, 158–59.

<sup>15</sup> Nguyen, “Polarization or Propaganda?”

anti-racists become more committed to their views when they associate with like-minded people. He does the same for chauvinists and feminists.<sup>16</sup> What interests him is *not* the difference in quality between the views of these opposing sides—their very different takes on justice and injustice. Instead, he highlights the fact that “the ideological distance between the two groups expanded.” Because he is so committed to bridging political divides, he fails to distinguish between socially beneficial beliefs and socially harmful ones. The argument equates people struggling for equality with those struggling against it, implying that both sides need to relax their convictions in order to reduce political polarization.

There are a number of ethical and political reasons for rejecting this argument. Given the focus of this essay, however, I will describe the *epistemic* reasons outlined by Nguyen. First, the term *polarization* “conjures an image of a movement toward two (or more) poles of extreme belief,” ignoring the possibility of polarization in the center.<sup>17</sup> While Talisse argues that belief polarization affects everyone, he does not consider the tendency for extreme confidence among those expressing centrist positions. Why, we might ask, are some people so certain that bridge-building and bipartisanship are the solutions to the most pressing political problems? Even more important is the need to call out “toxic centrism,” a term coined by trans YouTuber Natalie Wynn to describe a position that is “distrustful of any strong moral positions,” valuing “dispassionate intellectualism above all else.”<sup>18</sup> She criticizes people who wonder, both to themselves and aloud, “Why are marginalized people so unwilling to have calm, philosophical debates about whether they should have rights?” With better awareness of centrist polarization, we might cut short such questions and encourage more critical ones.

Second, when the shared confidence of a group leads to uniformity in belief, it does not follow that they are behaving irrationally, as a matter of course. Their uniformity might also be “the convergence of clear-sighted people on the truth.”<sup>19</sup> In that case, an increase in confidence is warranted for both the group and the individual knowers. When evaluating extremism, it’s important not to neglect *belief content*. As astronomer David Weinberg has remarked, “the problem with an extraterrestrial conspiracy mailing list isn’t that it’s an echo chamber: it’s that it thinks that there’s a conspiracy by extraterrestrials.”<sup>20</sup> Belief polarization is more likely to have negative effects when shared beliefs are out of touch with reality and not supported by evidence. Negative effects are also more likely when shared beliefs are undemocratic, exclusionary, and contemptuous. For social and political phenomena, it may not be obvious what “convergence on the truth” looks like. That challenge, however, does

<sup>16</sup> Talisse, *Overdoing Democracy*, 103.

<sup>17</sup> Nguyen, “Polarization or Propaganda?”

<sup>18</sup> Wynn, “The Witch Trials.” See the discussion around 57:00-59:00.

<sup>19</sup> Nguyen, “Polarization or Propaganda?”

<sup>20</sup> Weinberger, “Is There an Echo?” Quoted in Bruns, *Are Filter Bubbles Real?*, 105.

not mean it's *unclear* when groups promote socially regressive ideals and when they fight for progressive ones. Recognizing our vulnerability to belief polarization doesn't prevent us from making careful, intentional judgments about the types of beliefs supporting democracy.

Finally, not every confident boost leads to arrogance. When a community helps us feel good about what we believe, it might help us discover confidence that we lacked. "The blanket condemnation of like-minded enclaves," Nguyen argues, "arises from a background assumption about appropriate confidence. It imagines that people already have, for the most part, the right level of confidence *before* gathering together in supportive groups, and that the emotional support can only bloat their confidence beyond rationality."<sup>21</sup> In my view, it is this point that most complicates the symmetrical story of polarization—its "bothsidesism." If people enter like-minded communities with varying levels of confidence, the effects of belief polarization will vary. Some people will become arrogant and contemptuous of others. Others will learn to believe in themselves like never before. Theories of polarization express a negative view of community because they focus on the first effect. In contrast, my theory of civic responsibility will express a positive view of community by focusing on the second.

The shift in focus has further implications. Talisse calls for thinking about epistemic issues in the "first-person"—reflecting on ourselves rather than always pointing to irrationality and extremism in others.<sup>22</sup> I think that cultivating such reflexivity is important. Becoming too attached to our own ideas does affect how we interact with people with different perspectives. We *should* avoid becoming entrenched in our beliefs. But is all that we need to do to act responsibly? Just care about the state of our own minds? By taking a different view of the "confidence boost," I will argue for the need to support each other. If we depend on each other for knowing things well, "we need to do more than simply engage in rational belief formation," Hanna Kiri Gunn argues. "We must also invest in and care for the epistemic agency of others"—that is, their ability to achieve appropriate levels of confidence and their ability to express ideas that matter.<sup>23</sup> Through the metaphor of echoing, I will describe how we can show such care and support. How people are echoed affects how they develop and contribute knowledge. Politically, it affects how they participate. The need for echoing arises because not everyone receives the support they need. In the next section, I elaborate on the implications of *differential* epistemic support, an inequity that responsible citizens can strive to address.

<sup>21</sup> Nguyen, "Polarization or Propaganda?" Emphasis added.

<sup>22</sup> Talisse, *Overdoing Democracy*, 158–59.

<sup>23</sup> Gunn, "How Should We Build," 572.

## Asymmetries in Echoing

The problem with the story of polarization is that it universalizes a problem. Because not everyone starts with the same level of confidence in their beliefs, the risk of extreme confidence is not the same. We all have responsibility for how our convictions impact social relations, but the responsibilities are dissimilar. They differ because of an “asymmetry in echoing.”<sup>24</sup> Gaile Pohlhaus employs the metaphor of echoing to discuss the varying degrees of support that people find for their beliefs. The support varies according to social position:

Within a stratified society, one in which some groups are empowered in relation to others who are disempowered, *not all claims echo equally* throughout the social imagination and in public discourse. Nondominantly situated knowers are often under epistemic pressure to recognize, acknowledge, and take seriously dominantly situated knowers’ experiences and the sorts of beliefs that arise from those experiences. However, the reverse is not true.<sup>25</sup>

This view of echoing is different than saying that some voices are “louder” than others (though that is certainly true as well). What is at stake is the ability to achieve solidity in one’s beliefs—to sustain them, to think further with them, and to share them meaningfully with others.

For those in dominant positions, support comes along with an absence of pressure. “Part of what it means to have power in relation to others,” Pohlhaus argues, “is to be able to press upon another without that other being able to press back with equal (or sometimes any) force.”<sup>26</sup> Because of the asymmetry, overconfidence can go unchecked and potentially become extreme, just as Talisse and other theorists of polarization worry. The risk is not the same for those whose views are echoed infrequently. Lack of support comes along with the presence of pressure. They are more likely to be questioned and criticized. To capture this dynamic, Pohlhaus opposes echoing and gaslighting. Some knowers are more likely to be echoed and less likely to be gaslit. Others are more likely to be gaslight and less likely to be echoed.

Because of these asymmetries, some people will be more successful than others at developing knowledge that makes an impact in the world—not because of their intelligence but because of inequities in epistemic environments. Just as unlevel playing fields shape social, economic, and political environments, “unlevel knowing fields” shape epistemic ones.<sup>27</sup> According to Pohlhaus, the unequal distribution of pressure and support arises

<sup>24</sup> Pohlhaus, “Gaslighting and Echoing,” 682.

<sup>25</sup> Pohlhaus, 681. Emphasis added.

<sup>26</sup> Pohlhaus, 682.

<sup>27</sup> Bailey, “The Unlevel Knowing Field,” 62; “On Gaslighting,” 667.

because of a “dialectical relationship between situatedness and interdependence.”<sup>28</sup> We develop knowledge interdependently, but our shared epistemic resources (concepts, theories, stories, etc.) are not always useful for everyone. We also have unique experiences. Because of factors like race, class, gender, and sexuality, we can experience a tension between our lived experience and the shared epistemic resources that shape its meaning. When we experience such tension, we desire to improve the deficient resources and understandings. The problem for nondominant and marginalized knowers is that knowledge is often calibrated to dominant social positions. The experience of tension will be more common, and the task of updating shared understandings will be more difficult. The need for change will be ignored or resisted or repeatedly gaslit, for the very reason that these epistemic resources are useful for those in dominant positions. They can’t spot the deficiencies.

Understanding that a lack of support for one’s beliefs often comes along with unwarranted criticism raises the stakes of epistemic inequities. Gaslighting, Pohlhaus argues, often leads to “epistemic breakdown.”<sup>29</sup> It can “put out of circulation a particular way of understanding the world, one that centers the experience of the one who is gaslit. Specifically, in raising doubts about speakers’ reliability, epistemic gaslighting is oriented at getting knowers to change their beliefs, to stop noticing or testifying to something, with the risk of being deemed incompetent should they refuse to do so.” The political implication should be clear: Gaslighting, whether intentional or unintentional, might convince someone to stop speaking of an injustice or expressing a valuable political goal. We cannot assume that good ideas will stand on their own without support from others. That’s simply not the case if an idea is repeatedly and unwarrantedly criticized.

The problem of unlevel knowing fields ultimately leads to questions about political voice: whether people can meaningfully call attention to issues they find important and whether those efforts can impact society more broadly for the better. The tension between situatedness and interdependence is not just a problem for individuals. When interdependent resources prove insufficient, certain experiences are overlooked or ignored, and knowledge about our social world suffers. When epistemic interactions are structured inequitably, clear understanding is not the norm. Ignorance is maintained when dominant forms of knowing are imposed on everyone and the attempt to make changes is resisted. Inequitable epistemic environments can have a “smothering” effect, preventing good ideas from being shared by undermining the epistemic agency of those who want to share them.<sup>30</sup> When that happens, our social and political ideals will be distorted, lacking the crucial insights of those who understand their deficiencies.

<sup>28</sup> Pohlhaus, “Relational Knowing,” 716, 719–22.

<sup>29</sup> Pohlhaus, “Gaslighting and Echoing” 677.

<sup>30</sup> Dotson, “Tracking Epistemic Violence,” 244.

In contrast, a supportive community can facilitate the development of ideas and foster the epistemic agency of knowers, making it more likely that they will share their insights. A like-minded community can counteract consistent pressure to doubt oneself. “Affirmation is the basis for the creation of counterpublics,” Pinchevski argues when describing the significance of constructive echoing.<sup>31</sup> In the next two sections, I will describe a process that leads to social and political insights being shared more broadly, distinguishing between two forms of constructive echoing: *survival echoing*, which takes place between people who have similar experiences, and *resistance echoing*, which takes place among people who have different experiences but similar commitments. Both concepts offer insights for reimaging civic responsibility and for understanding what it means to know things well in a polarized world.

## Survival Echoing

When someone experiences unwarranted pressure on their ideas, echoing them can have a powerful effect. Gaile Pohlhaus develops the concept *survival echoing* to describe the support that helps people achieve warranted self-trust in the face of consistent pressure to doubt themselves.<sup>32</sup> To highlight the significance of the concept, it’s helpful to focus on the emotional dynamics associated with gaslighting. When a person is gaslit, it is not just a person’s beliefs that are called into question but also—and perhaps even more frequently—their emotional responses. These emotions might be inchoate, not yet connected with specific cognitive content that one would articulate as a solid belief or claim. A good example is anger: It tends to point towards injustice, but when first experienced, it might just be a felt sense that something is wrong, without a clear understanding of exactly what. In this situation, the anger can be easily dismissed; the person experiencing it might be told that they are upset about nothing.

For this reason, María Lugones argues that the anger experienced by marginalized groups is often a second-order anger: a deep frustration with the dominant world of sense in which justified anger about injustice or oppression appears meaningless.<sup>33</sup> For her, supports comes in the form of “emotional echoing,” an attunement with someone else that provides an intimation that there is something worth working to understand.<sup>34</sup> José Medina builds on Lugones’s ideas, arguing that the echoing of difficult emotions “calls upon us to recognize the failures of intelligibility within existing worlds of sense and to engage in the collaborative construction of new worlds of sense.”<sup>35</sup> Such collaboration occurs when people can

<sup>31</sup> Pinchevski, *Echo*, 126.

<sup>32</sup> Pohlhaus, “Gaslighting and Echoing” 682.

<sup>33</sup> Lugones, “Hard-to-Handle Anger,” 104-5, 110-15.

<sup>34</sup> Lugones, 111-12, 115-17.

<sup>35</sup> Medina, “Complex Communication,” 234.

direct their attention away from those in dominant positions who question their views, *toward* those who have had similar experiences and who can affirm them. The direction of this attention is horizontal rather than vertical, according to Pohlhaus. It focuses “one’s epistemic energy toward and in connection with other non-dominantly situated subjects. It rests impediments to agency by withdrawing one’s epistemic energies from those who are dominantly situated and enlisting those energies to enable agencies elsewhere.”<sup>36</sup> Energy can thus be devoted to interpreting an experience, rather than defending its existence or value.

By gathering with similarly-situated others, a person’s experience is more likely to be echoed, allowing an inchoate understanding to be further developed. The confidence boost experienced in like-minded community serves as an invitation to explore new ideas. As Naomi Scheman says of the effect of consciousness-raising groups, it can alter how people set the “parameters of intelligibility” for each other, allowing them to sharpen their perception of what they experience in common.<sup>37</sup> An experience that was previously marked by diffuse emotion or directionless frustration can acquire new meaning with the help of others. Scheman calls this a “political redescription.”<sup>38</sup> People learn to engage with dominant understandings, changing them so that they accord with their own experience. They respond to the previous failures of intelligibility, and by doing so, they also gain insight into how epistemic agency is affected by relations of power.

Through *survival echoing*, people can realize that what doesn’t make sense in one context can make sense in another. It can help them realize that they are simply “speaking from elsewhere.” This phrase from Medina captures both the difficulty and the possibility contained in the struggle of a marginalized knower: “Speaking from elsewhere can be negatively characterized as speaking from a not-yet recognized discursive context and with a not-yet recognizable voice. But it implicitly involves a struggle for recognition; and it can be positively characterized as contributing to the creation of new discursive contexts and opening up spaces for new voices that have not yet been heard yet.”<sup>39</sup> Through this lens, like-minded communities have an important democratic function. As spaces of *survival echoing*, they create contexts where people acquire confidence in their voices, making it more likely that that they use them to spark positive social change.

By offering ways of understanding the epistemic and political value of like-minded community, the concept of *survival echoing* contests individualist assumptions about how people learn to know things well. It also offers an alternative to certain ways of thinking about the public sphere. In her influential essay “Rethinking the Public Sphere,” Nancy Fraser

<sup>36</sup> Pohlhaus, “Epistemic Agency Under Oppression,” 245.

<sup>37</sup> Scheman, “Feeling Our Way,” 102.

<sup>38</sup> Scheman, “Anger,” 25.

<sup>39</sup> Medina, *Speaking from Elsewhere*, 179.

critiques the idea that “a single, overarching public sphere is a positive and desirable state of affairs, whereas the proliferation of a multiplicity of publics represents a departure from, rather than an advance toward, democracy.”<sup>40</sup> This “bourgeois masculinist” way of thinking is common to theorists who worry about enclaves, echo chambers, and ideological silos. They depict like-minded communities as a dangerous withdraw from dominant understandings, ignoring the ways that their ideas are already echoed and their voices facilitated. Furthermore, they neglect the political importance of escaping discursive limitations. A new voice is not just one with a distinctive style; it also has a distinctive content. A view from elsewhere offers a unique take on our social and political practices, offering insights not readily apparent to those who find themselves comfortable within these practices. When the creation of a new discursive space leads to new understandings, it can offer a powerful vision of how to reform our political practices to make them more equitable and just.

When describing the role of counterpublics, Fraser offers a powerful vision for understanding the political significance of *survival echoing*: “Assumptions that were previously exempt from contestation will now have to be publicly argued out. In general, the proliferation of [publics] means a widening of discursive contestation, and that is a good thing in stratified societies.”<sup>41</sup> As an example of an important counterpublic, she highlights 20<sup>th</sup> century feminist movements that “invented new terms for describing social reality, including ‘sexism,’ ‘the double shift,’ sexual harassment,’ and ‘marital, date, and acquaintance rape.’” It shouldn’t be difficult to think of more recent movements, such as #MeToo, #NoDAPL, and Black Lives Matter, that have had a similarly powerful effect on how dominant publics think about social and political realities. That impact should not be underestimated, but I want to offer two caveats to this way of thinking about like-minded community. First, it’s important not to overlook the difficulty of changing dominant understandings. Just because a community of knowers develops invaluable insights does not mean those ideas will get the uptake they deserve. The act of challenging dominant publics is better captured by the concept of *resistance echoing* that I will develop in the next section.

Second, justification for the epistemic value of like-minded community should not be dependent on public impact. The expansion of discursive space is valuable in itself. While *survival echoing* makes it more likely that ideas will be shared publicly, the concept is important because it highlights the positive impact on the knowers within a like-minded community, rather than focusing on the influence it has on those outside it. If a person feels they lack confidence in their beliefs because they are in a nondominant position, they have a responsibility to find people who share their experiences so that they can engage in practices of mutual and reciprocal support. For dominant knowers and those with different experiences, they have a responsibility to respect the discursive space of others—to not feel

<sup>40</sup> Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere,” 63, 66.

<sup>41</sup> Fraser, 67.

threatened because they are not involved. Knowing things well, in this case, refers to all knowers acquiring appropriate levels of confidence in their beliefs, especially about their unique experiences of the world.

When new ideas are valued because they help those who are unaware of the issues affecting marginalized knowers, attention is vertically-directed—focused on the relations between differently-situated knowers rather than on the relationships between similarly-situated ones.<sup>42</sup> In boosting confidence and strengthening epistemic agency, *survival echoing* focuses on the transformations that occur, horizontally, among people who share experiences. They may desire to share their ideas with a broader public, but the value of the relationships they form is *not* dependent on taking such action. If they do desire to go public, however, the form of the like-minded community will need to broaden, involving those with different experiences but who share commitments to democracy and to social justice. This type of community is the focus of the next section.

## Resistance Echoing

Through the concept of *survival echoing*, we can see how a like-minded community can help individual knowers thrive. The effects of such support, however, can easily spread beyond the individuals within a group. Pohlhaus suggests an emerging collective power:

When knowers are able to sustain their attention to parts of the experienced world that are under threat of being disregarded through epistemic gaslighting, this collective sustained attention may help to bring that part of the experienced world to others' attention in a way that might not have been possible for an individual alone to do. Moreover, when a group of knowers is able to make sense to one another concerning those parts of the world that structural gaslighting directs them to ignore, then beliefs and claims that arise from those ignored parts of the world can reverberate more widely.<sup>43</sup>

The wider reverberation is what she calls *resistance echoing*. As ideas are echoed by a broader population, they acquire potential to inspire positive social change. More and more people will be talking about them and responding to them. In the move from *survival* to *resistance* echoing, a community makes the argument that its ideas should matter to more people. Fraser calls this process “democratic publicity,” or the effort “to convince others that what in the past was not public in the sense of being a matter of common concern should

<sup>42</sup> Pohlhaus, “Epistemic Agency Under Oppression,” 248.

<sup>43</sup> Pohlhaus, “Gaslighting and Echoing,” 683.

now become so.”<sup>44</sup> The problem is that newly articulated or newly reformulated “matters of common concern” will be echoed by others in highly divergent ways.

Once valuable and potentially liberating ideas leave a space of *survival echoing*, they need support, advocacy, and activism to help keep their meaning alive. A new like-minded community must form, extending beyond that created by *survival echoing*: a coalition of people from diverse standpoints, including allies from dominant ones, working together so that transformative ideas can get the uptake they deserve. *Resistance echoing* is what I call such collaboration. Whereas *survival echoing* is a response to discursive limitations, *resistance echoing* is a response to discursive instability. When Medina discusses echoing, he does so to describe a responsibility for how meanings are carried into new contexts—careful to point out that we can never have full control over our voices.<sup>45</sup> The meaning of what we say is taken out of our hands as soon as we have spoken. Because of this instability, some people will echo others in ways that honor what was said, while others will distort, block, or silence the meaning.<sup>46</sup> Some will use ideas and other epistemic resources for democratic ends, expanding who can participate in discussions of mutual concern, while others will attempt to restrict such participation and seek to maintain epistemic and political inequities.

The political significance of such discursive instability is highlighted by Danielle Allen in *Our Declaration*. In a chapter titled “An Echo,” she discusses how language from the first sentence of the Declaration of Independence was echoed in segregationist laws and policies: “An honest phrase meant to liberate and to establish a principle of equality as entailing freedom from domination (‘separate *and* equal’) was reborn as a deceitful phrase (‘separate *but* equal’) used to subjugate and dominate across generations.”<sup>47</sup> Because of this “vicious little twist,” Allen concludes that the Declaration “provided tools for liberating some and dominating others.” The tools created by communities today are open to the same divergent responses. If an anti-democratic echoing has happened with one of the most well-respected political documents in the United States, it should be easy to imagine that the response to uncoded epistemic resources can be much more powerful and damaging.

Another way to conceptualize this problem is to think of the various forms of ignorance that make people unresponsive, or hostile, to attempts to improve shared social understandings. Resistance is necessary because the ignorance is often willful—a deliberate refusal of the ideas and epistemic resources of others. Kristie Dotson argues that such ignorance leads

<sup>44</sup> Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere,” 71.

<sup>45</sup> Medina, *Speaking from Elsewhere*, 129–144. See also *The Epistemology of Protest*, 120–125.

<sup>46</sup> In his recent work, Medina has outlined the silencing tactics faced by activists. See *The Epistemology of Protest*, 109–20, and “Protest, Silencing, and Epistemic Activism,” a presentation available on YouTube.

<sup>47</sup> Allen, *Our Declaration*, 123–25.

to “contributory injustice.”<sup>48</sup> It occurs when knowers refuse to acquire the knowledge and skills for understanding parts of the world they do not experience, thus blocking the contributions of others. This injustice is inherently a democratic injustice. When epistemic agency is impacted, so too is the political agency to spark positive social change by shifting how debates are framed or directing attention to important issues. Opportunities for democratic publicity are not equal. *Resistance echoing* involves confronting that fact. When a like-minded community grows to include people who share democratic commitments, solidarity can function to ensure that social and political insights get the uptake they deserve, fighting back against silencing, distortion, gaslighting, and other tactics of willful ignorance. The work of changing minds involves more than sharing information, since the problem is more than a lack of awareness.<sup>49</sup>

The challenge involved in confronting people who *refuse to know* demands collaboration. It is important to note, however, that working together is often not enough. Successful resistance to social ignorance can also depend on a careful reorganization of power. Marginalized knowers tend to have better knowledge of deficiencies in dominant understandings and the problems they create, so they should take the lead in reforming them. The like-minded community engaged in *resistance echoing* should become what Kamili Posey calls an “evolving epistemic framework,” where

sympathetic dominant knowers temporarily renounce their epistemic privilege and/or use their privilege to amplify marginalized epistemic resources by way of selective silences or by redirecting dominant resources toward marginalized knowers. Sympathetic dominant knowers serve as epistemic allies by extending social power to marginalized knowers and, by extension, to marginalized epistemologies.<sup>50</sup>

She worries, however, that dominant knowers often limit themselves to acts of “charity,” merely extending credibility to those they might be biased against or occasionally acknowledging a contribution.<sup>51</sup> The solidarity described here is more extensive. Posey argues that

<sup>48</sup> Dotson, “A Cautionary Tale,” 31–32. Her analysis of epistemic oppression is further elaborated in “Conceptualizing Epistemic Oppression.” See also Alison Bailey’s response in “The Unlevel Knowing Field.”

<sup>49</sup> When discussing #MeToo, Pohlhaus points out the naivete involved in attempting to raise awareness about entrenched social issues: “The turn toward ‘raising awareness’ ignores the possibility that there are systems in place that perpetuate an ability to ignore. Painting those who do nothing to end sexual violence as simply unaware of a problem (one that they need others to bring to their attention), rather than as persons who are enabled by systems of oppression, is a way of mitigating guilt and responsibility for privileges afforded by relations of oppression.” See “Epistemic Agency Under Oppression,” 248–49.

<sup>50</sup> Posey, *Centering Epistemic Injustice*, xxi. See Chapters 4 and 5 for further elaboration of evolving epistemic frameworks.

<sup>51</sup> Posey, 97–99.

it involves “prioritizing the voices of the oppressed on our own terms, and, in an important sense, in our own epistemic language. It is simply not enough to decide when and where marginalized knowers will be heard and when and where we can contribute to the projects of dominant others.”<sup>52</sup> It is one thing to achieve equitable conditions temporarily, such as when diverse parties come to the table to pursue a project of mutual concern. It is another to strive for epistemic equity—and by extension, social justice—on a broader scale. The responsibility involved in *resistance echoing* requires ongoing effort.

While the tactics of *resistance echoing* will vary according to the goals of a social movement, the basic strategy involves exerting consistent pressure on dominant publics, working against their tendency to be too committed to their own perspective. Medina calls this pressure “epistemic friction.”<sup>53</sup> In order for a person’s worldview to be improved, he argues, they need to actively feel the difference between how they think and how someone from a different social position does. They need to actively sit with the discomfort such reflection can cause. Medina argues that the goal of engaging dominant knowers is to create beneficial epistemic friction, or pressure, that might lead to a transformative understanding of social and epistemic problems, as well as complicity in them.<sup>54</sup> A movement of *resistance echoing* can work to achieve this effect by creating intentionally-designed spaces of epistemic friction, where people of diverse standpoints can hear the insights of nondominant knowers. Various forms of art and media can play a role; so too can protest.<sup>55</sup> In each case, *resistance echoing* strives to create opportunities for democratic publicity, inviting people to contemplate unacknowledged and underappreciated matters of common concern. Knowing things well, in this case, happens when shared social understandings are thereby improved.

<sup>52</sup> Posey, 109.

<sup>53</sup> Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance*, 18, 48–55, 70–89.

<sup>54</sup> Medina, 220.

<sup>55</sup> The various efforts fall under Medina’s concept of *epistemic activism*: “Epistemic activism refers to the critical activities of denouncing, contesting, and resisting the cognitive-affective attitudes and sensibilities (or insensitivities) that facilitate oppression. Epistemic activism is aimed at breaking silences, giving voice to the victims of injustice, disrupting patterns of social invisibility, and waking people up from their epistemic and political slumbers, that is, from their social blindness, apathy, and insensitivity...A central part of epistemic activism consists in interventions in social perception and the social imagination designed to enable publics to overcome their active ignorance so that they can perceive certain social experiences as unjust suffering for the first time (experiences that were not legible or intelligible for them as *unjust suffering* before), and so that they can look in the eyes at certain subjects as victims of injustice (subjects who were not recognizable or legible to them as *victims* before),” *The Epistemology of Protest*, 62. See 360–4 for discussion of the multiple audiences addressed by such activism.

## Democratic Echoing

Through two different conceptions of echoing, I have argued for the benefits offered by like-minded communities. Among similarly situated knowers, a community can help people develop warranted self-trust, increasing confidence in their beliefs and facilitating the (potentially public) expression of their voices. Among differently situated but similarly committed knowers, a community can work to introduce much-needed social and political insights into the public sphere and have them spread more widely. It can also strive to transform inequitable epistemic environments, changing attitudes that make “survival” necessary in the first place. We depend on each other for knowing the world well, and I hoped to suggest methods for responding democratically to our dependence.

For the social epistemologists that I have drawn on throughout this essay, there is an inseparable relationship between our epistemic relations and our sociopolitical ones. Improving one improves the other. As Medina says, “Epistemic and sociopolitical melioration go hand in hand.”<sup>56</sup> Creating equality among knowers can lead to a better understanding of the problems within a society and a better understanding of how to address them. Without equality, there’s a lack of objectivity and a lack of justice. Along with arguing for civic responsibilities that involve responding to these deficits, I have hoped to strengthen belief in the importance of equitable relations. My argument for the epistemic value of like-minded community is motivated by a broader commitment to democracy and social justice—and by the awareness that not everyone shares that commitment. I conclude, now, by sketching out the need for *democratic echoing*, a responsibility to amplify belief in democracy. To complete my theory of civic responsibility, I return to the topic of political divisions to reflect on how the framing of these divisions can shape our thinking about democracy and democratic citizenship.

The United States has a long history of deep political divisions and a long history of discussing what they mean. Today, among the usual warnings about the perils of partisanship, I hear the word *polarization* used with ever-increasing frequency. It is a specific framing of the problem. Recall C. Thi Nguyen’s summary: “Our once-peaceful society has been riven into polarized camps. Extremism and political separation are the core problems, and the fix is something like reconnection, intermingling, and friendship across party lines.”<sup>57</sup> As a symmetrical story, *polarization* implies that both sides of a political division are contributing to the dynamic that separates them. After observing the Trump presidency, the January 6 attack on the Capitol, the rise in right-wing belligerence in Congress and state legislatures, and ongoing attempts at voter suppression, this characterization of present-day problems might seem inaccurate—or completely out of touch with reality. There are,

<sup>56</sup> Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance*, 301.

<sup>57</sup> Nguyen, “Polarization or Propaganda?”

however, other ways of telling the story, ones that point to a one-sided extremism fueling the increase in partisan animosity. For some scholars, the preferred terms for describing contemporary political problems are *propaganda*, *demagoguery*, and *fascism*.<sup>58</sup>

I am sympathetic to these alternative accounts because I worry that the story of polarization, despite its attention to important epistemic issues, directs attention away from pressing problems and limits what democracy and democratic citizenship can mean. In *Overdoing Democracy*, Robert Talisse is fond of referring to a Jane Addams' dictum—"The cure for the ills of Democracy is more Democracy"—in order to dismiss it.<sup>59</sup> In his view, "more democracy" quickly leads to an intensification of conviction and therefore of conflict. When people express their views too much, they come to care too much. They become too committed to their own perspective. Like many others, Talisse is concerned about the effects of ideological entrenchment, arguing that it "directly attacks our capacities to properly enact democratic citizenship, dissolving our abilities to treat our fellow citizens as our political equals."<sup>60</sup> I agree that this phenomenon is a serious problem, but as I have argued previously, Talisse overestimates the tendency for extreme confidence by arguing that everyone is equally complicit. Because the diagnosis is flawed, so too is the proposed solution, thus weakening the call for increased civic responsibility. He proposes a form of "civic friendship" that involves bracketing political views in order to have more meaningful and productive interactions across diverging perspectives.<sup>61</sup> This practice of bridge-building, he argues, is necessary because our private and public lives have become "politically saturated."<sup>62</sup> We talk about politics too much, and because we do so, we gradually increase the contentiousness of our interactions. Good citizens, he implies, practice good dinner table etiquette.

If we take the concern about "political saturation" to be about how frequently we discuss the issues that shape electoral politics, it is a legitimate (but perhaps superficial) concern. However, if it is about our discussions of relations of power, then I would argue that it is completely wrongheaded. As an alternative, I would suggest the view offered by Alison Bailey, when outlining the concept of unlevel knowing fields. For her, it is our epistemic relations that are politically saturated.<sup>63</sup> Relations of power, dominance, and oppression

<sup>58</sup> For a discussion of propaganda, see Benkler, Faris, and Roberts, *Network Propaganda*; for demagoguery, see Roberts-Miller, *Demagoguery and Democracy*; for fascism, see Connolly, *Aspirational Fascism*. For an asymmetrical account focused on epistemology, see Anderson, "Epistemic Bubbles and Authoritarian Politics."

<sup>59</sup> Talisse, *Overdoing Democracy*, 21, 68, 125–26, 133; for the original context, see Addams, *Democracy and Social Ethics*, 9.

<sup>60</sup> Talisse, 123.

<sup>61</sup> Talisse, 131–68.

<sup>62</sup> Talisse, 71–94, 117–27.

<sup>63</sup> Bailey, "The Unlevel Knowing Field," 62, 66.

affect what knowledge is valued and who gets respected as a knower. According to this view, some people may not respect you no matter how friendly you are. “If the other side already believes you to be supporting a cabal of Satan-worshipping pedophiles,” Nguyen says in response to Talisse’s argument for civic friendship, “then it doesn’t seem likely it will matter very much if our kids are in Little League together.”<sup>64</sup> If we work with Bailey’s conception of political saturation, we need to solve the problem by actually addressing it—by talking about it more, not less. We need to point out that blatant disrespect isn’t symmetrical. Nor is it confined to conspiracy theorists.

When people worry, like Talisse does, that polarization affects our ability to treat each other as equals, they ignore that many people have no commitment to equality or to democracy. The American Academy of Arts and Sciences reports that citizens lack faith in each other and are increasingly dissatisfied with how American democracy is working. Even more worrisome, many are open to other forms of government, “including rule by a strong leader or by groups of experts.” This tendency is more pronounced among young voters.<sup>65</sup> These developments, I think, should shift how we perceive the political landscape. Instead of being held captive by the diverging red and blue masses shown in many contemporary graphics and data visualizations,<sup>66</sup> we might need to shift our focus to polarization occurring in democratic and anti-democratic directions. Rather than worrying about whether both sides of a political divide have convictions that are too intense, we might wonder if those who holding anti-democratic views have stronger convictions than those holding democratic ones. Is the openness to other forms of government an effect of one side being more persuasive?

If we hope to live in a society in which everyone is committed to developing equitable relations free of domination, we should confront a political divide by asking how we can influence those who do not share that commitment. Some form of “civic friendship” might be one means of positively influencing others, but it is not the only method. In *Justice by Means of Democracy*, Danielle Allen argues that democratic citizenship involves a “multitasking lifestyle”—the ability to shift between different types of civic engagement and political action.<sup>67</sup> While she attaches great significance to the art of bridging differences, she highlights multiple modes of citizenship (deliberation, activism, and prophetic argument) necessary for promoting equitable relations and supporting democratic governance. The forms of echoing I have developed here outline another model of “multitasking,” ways of addressing epistemic challenges in a stratified society. If what we believe affects how we

<sup>64</sup> Nguyen, “Was It Polarization?,” 20–21.

<sup>65</sup> American Academy of Arts and Sciences, *Our Common Purpose*, 11, 18–19.

<sup>66</sup> For examples, do a Google image search on political polarization.

<sup>67</sup> Allen, *Justice by Means of Democracy*, 201–3, 219–25. For her discussion of bridging, see Chapter 4, 101–28.

relate and how well political processes work, we need to support each other in developing, sharing, and spreading the best ideas. We also need to increase our commitment to them.

Confidence does matter. We need to know when we have too much but also when we have too little. Because how we understand the world is shaped by our social relations—by the pressure and support we encounter—we can be both overconfident and underconfident in our beliefs. Echoing is a way to respond to these tendencies. *Survival echoing* boosts confidence in those who need it, while *resistance echoing* exerts pressure on those who need it. Both are attempts to support democracy by striving for equitable relations among knowers. But these efforts are not enough if people don't believe in democracy in the first place. The growing lack of confidence suggests the need to think carefully about epistemic, discursive, and rhetorical methods for "defending democracy." Even if it is limited by its present form, how can we convince more people that democracy is a goal to work toward, a principle to fight for? How can we echo that faith?<sup>68</sup>

American politics is often disorienting. So too is the way that people talk about it. In response to this confusion, I have argued for knowing things well—taking responsibility for how we support and inhibit each other and thereby engage in collective learning. In this conclusion, I have described an additional responsibility. Knowing things well also involves having a clear grasp of the value of democracy and the ability to articulate it persuasively to others. In addition to understanding the diverse needs of a society and working to address those needs, we are responsible for supporting political beliefs and sentiments. Among the beliefs that we can support is a conviction that democracy is a valuable normative framework and an invaluable political goal. I stand behind the idea that the cure for the problems of democracy is more democracy. That includes *more people* believing in it—confident in its possibilities and effects.

<sup>68</sup> On the importance of "democratic faith," see Dewey, "Creative Democracy," 226–29, and American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 60.

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