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Tom Cavanagh
University of Central Florida

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The Echo Chamber Is Getting Louder

By Tom Cavanagh
UCF Forum columnist
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My ears are starting to hurt. Let me explain.

I enjoy social media. Like most people, thanks to online technology, I am able to reconnect and stay in touch with friends and family all across the world. Birthdays, weddings, graduations, joys, triumphs and even tragedies are shared as part of a genuine sense of community.

However, I dread social media during election seasons. I have friends who sit all across the spectrum of political ideology. The constant barrage of vitriolic online postings from both sides of the aisle is like being trapped inside a bass drum in a marching band. Pretty soon, all I want is to escape to a small quiet room and cover my head. My ears hurt.

At the conclusion of the 2012 presidential election, I felt compelled to post the following Facebook status: "Dear Facebook: Now that the election is over, I look forward to an end to the nasty, divisive political posts. No matter which 'side' you are on, it's now time to be 'Americans.' I welcome a return to posts about your kids' soccer games, check-ins at TGI Fridays, and, yes, even FarmVille status updates. Really. I do." I even missed videos of cats.

Unfortunately (for me), the barrage is no longer confined to elections. Every time there is a news story, a Supreme Court decision, religious event or any occasion where there might be two or more opinions, the drumbeat starts again, louder than ever. Sometimes the messages are even outright mean. But more often, the messages are simply posted

with the implicit assumption that everyone surely agrees with the poster's opinion. There is a kind of unintended arrogance in these messages and Facebook "shares." I don't think I have ever seen any quasi-political tweet, status update or comment that actually invited genuine debate.

This phenomenon is known as the "echo chamber," where people only say things so that their opinions can be validated by like-minded individuals. "So what?" you may ask. According to freelance writer Alan Martin in *Wired* magazine, "If you surround yourself with voices that echo similar opinions to those you're feeding out, they will be reinforced in your mind as mainstream, to the point that it can distort your perception of what is the general consensus."

I definitely see this happening online: My opinion is the proper one — see how all my friends agree? — and if anyone disagrees, they are stupid, bigoted, naïve or any number of other knee-jerk reactions.

There is no longer any room for candid conversation, for the possibility of changing your mind based on new information. Martin continues: "Highlighting a dissenting voice as 'trolling' is another possible example of the echo chamber...it's assumed that this voice is so outrageous that it can't be genuine, and the orthodoxy of the community continues unchallenged."

While it is pervasive online, the echo chamber isn't confined to the Internet. There has been a spate of recent news articles about college and university commencement speakers withdrawing because of loud protests by the campus community. Former U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice withdrew from a speech at Rutgers University and International Monetary Fund managing director Christine Lagarde withdrew from a scheduled appearance at Smith College after protests and petitions at the respective institutions. Former New York Police Department Commissioner Ray Kelly was shouted down by students during a speech at Brown University and the event had to be canceled.

Colleges and universities are supposed to be stalwart bastions of open discourse and the free exchange of competing ideas. Higher education cherishes the institution of tenure,

which was designed to protect faculty as they explored controversial and potentially unpopular lines of inquiry. How is it that institutions that hold such high ideals have become so intolerant of the expression of multiple opinions?

Agree with her politics or not, Rice is a highly accomplished African-American woman whose success might serve as an inspiration for many. She has served as provost of Stanford University, national security advisor and secretary of state. She is an expert concert pianist. I would think that even if a majority of the graduating Rutgers University audience disagreed with her politics or policies while she served in the Bush Administration, surely they could have gleaned something of value from her commencement remarks. But the echo chamber was too loud.

In her biography of Voltaire, writer Evelyn Beatrice Hall summed up the philosopher's beliefs with the statement, "I disapprove of what you say, but will defend to the death your right to say it." This sentiment seems to be fading away in the era of social media.

I certainly have my own opinions about a wide range of topics. However, I have resolved to never post these opinions online. Doing so will either simply contribute to the echo chamber of like-minded online friends or alienate those friends who subscribe to a different point of view. I value my friendships with those who may disagree with me, more than I need the shallow ego boost of counting "likes" or supportive comments from those who agree.

It's not that I espouse only sharing inane drivel online ("Look what I'm having for breakfast!"), it's just that unfortunately I find myself being driven further away from social media as a result of these echo chambers. As I said, they hurt my ears.

And, really, in our heart of hearts, who doesn't love a really good cat video?

Tom Cavanagh is the University of Central Florida's associate vice president of distributed learning. He can be reached at cavanagh@ucf.edu.