

It Used to Be Just the Pub

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6 min read · June 2026

On algorithms, echo chambers, and what happens when the whole world can hear you.

There's a man in every pub. You know the one. He's got opinions on everything, no filter, and an audience of whoever happens to be sitting nearby. A hundred years ago, fifty years ago, even twenty years ago — that was the limit of his reach. A few people, a few pints, an evening. By morning, most of what he'd said had dissolved.

That man still exists. But now he has a phone.

And the physics of what he says have changed entirely.

What we say online travels in ways that speech never could. Six degrees of separation — the idea that any two people on earth are connected through just six social links — used to feel like an interesting curiosity. Now it's the architecture of how information moves. A thought posted at midnight can reach someone on the other side of the world before morning.

The reach has expanded enormously. What hasn't kept pace is our awareness of that reach — or our sense of responsibility to it.

When you're talking to friends over a pint, there's context. There's tone. There's the person next to you who knows you, who can say "he doesn't really mean it like that." That person doesn't travel with your post. The sentence does. The conversation doesn't.

One line, stripped of everything around it, lands somewhere else — read through a different lens, a different mood, a different set of existing beliefs. It can be taken as advice. As validation. As the thing someone needed to hear to feel justified in what they were already thinking. Agreement becomes tacit support. Support becomes something harder to unpick.

And does timing matter? Absolutely. There is a difference between pouring oil on a fire and being the one who lit it. Online, it's increasingly hard to tell which you're doing.

The Party Being Managed

Terry Pratchett understood this dynamic better than most, and he wrote about it decades before social media existed.

In *Night Watch*, he describes a party being quietly managed by a powerful figure's supporters. The room is full of allies, opposition, and the undecided. The undecided are gently passed from ally group to ally group. Any conversation between members of the opposition alone is quietly broken up. By the end of the evening, the room has shifted — without anyone quite feeling like they were pushed.

Re-read that thinking about your social media feed.

The algorithm is the party planner. It watches what you engage with and introduces you to more of the same — slightly more intense, slightly more certain, slightly more extreme. It never quite lets you sit with someone who disagrees. The undecided you started as get deeper into one camp over time. And eventually, you probably forget the other side exists at all.

We call these echo chambers. Pratchett described them more precisely than most academic papers I've come across on the subject.

Why the Algorithm Works This Way

Social media started differently. Platforms attracted audiences through useful or entertaining content, then sold access to those audiences to advertisers. The incentive was broadly aligned with quality: give people something they value, they keep coming back.

That model has shifted. Now the money comes directly from engagement — clicks, views, comments, shares. The more interaction a piece of content generates, the more the platform earns. Which means the incentive is no longer to give people something valuable. It's to give them something they can't scroll past. Something that provokes. Something that enrages, or thrills, or confirms what they were already half-thinking.

Posting deliberately false or misleading content isn't a glitch in this system. For the platforms, it's practically a feature. Outrage performs. Nuance doesn't.

The man in the pub hasn't changed. The pub has.

What This Means for the People We Work With

I work with young people who have grown up entirely inside this system. For them, the filtered feed isn't a new development — it's just how information works. They have never known a world where what they see online isn't being actively shaped by what they already believe.

That concerns me more than most things I encounter in my work. Not because young people aren't sharp — they often are. But because sitting with a genuinely different view, staying in a conversation long enough to understand rather than dismiss it, is a skill. It requires practice in environments that actually support it. The environment most young people spend the most time in is doing the opposite.

Outdoor experiences, at their best, offer something the algorithm can't replicate: situations you can't curate. A tentmate who thinks differently. Weather that doesn't share your values. A problem that doesn't care what you think the solution should be. You have to deal with what's actually there.

It's a small counterweight to an enormous force. But it's not nothing.

I don't have clean answers here. I'm not sure anyone does — which is itself part of the problem. Society's ability to regulate technology has consistently lagged behind technology's ability to reshape society. We are still collectively working out the norms for a world where the man in the pub can reach a million people before closing time.

But awareness matters. Knowing the algorithm isn't neutral. Knowing that outrage is a business model, not just human nature. Knowing that the room is being managed.

Practical Takeaways

- Notice the pull.** If a post makes you feel immediate outrage or validation, that's the design working as intended — pause before you react or share.
- Seek out the room you're not in.** Deliberately read or follow people who see things differently. The algorithm won't do this for you.
- Separate the message from its source.** A single sentence online carries none of the context, tone, or relationship that shaped it. Read accordingly.
- Build environments that resist curation.** Time away from screens — outdoors, in unscripted situations — restores the skill of sitting with disagreement.
- Talk to young people about the architecture, not just the content.** Understanding that the feed is built to provoke is more useful than any single piece of advice about what to post.

Knowing the party is being managed is the beginning of deciding how you want to move through the room.

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