

## The Daily Me

By Nikolas Kristof

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- 1 Some of the obituaries these days aren't in the newspapers but are for the newspapers. The Seattle Post-Intelligencer is the latest to pass away, save for a remnant that will exist only in cyberspace, and the public is increasingly seeking its news not from mainstream television networks or ink-on-dead-trees but from grazing online.
- 2 When we go online, each of us is our own editor, our own gatekeeper. We select the kind of news and opinions that we care most about.
- 3 Nicholas Negroponte of M.I.T. has called this emerging news product The Daily Me. And if that's the trend, God save us from ourselves.
- 4 That's because there's pretty good evidence that we generally don't truly want good information—but rather information that confirms our prejudices. We may believe intellectually in the clash of opinions, but in practice we like to embed ourselves in the reassuring womb of an echo chamber.
- 5 One classic study sent mailings to Republicans and Democrats, offering them various kinds of political research, ostensibly from a neutral source. Both groups were most eager to receive intelligent arguments that strongly corroborated their pre-existing views.
- 6 There was also modest interest in receiving manifestly silly arguments for the other party's views (we feel good when we can caricature the other guys as dunces). But there was little interest in encountering solid arguments that might undermine one's own position.
- 7 That general finding has been replicated repeatedly, as the essayist and author Farhad Manjoo noted in his terrific book last year: "True Enough: Learning to Live in a Post-Fact Society."
- 8 Let me get one thing out of the way: I'm sometimes guilty myself of selective truth-seeking on the Web. The blog I turn to for insight into Middle East news is often Professor Juan Cole's, because he's smart, well-informed and sensible—in other words, I often agree with his take. I'm less likely to peruse the blog of Daniel Pipes, another Middle East expert who is smart and well-informed—but who strikes me as less sensible, partly because I often disagree with him.
- 9 The effect of The Daily Me would be to insulate us further in our own hermetically sealed political chambers. One of last year's more fascinating books was Bill Bishop's "The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America is Tearing Us Apart." He argues that Americans increasingly are segregating themselves into communities, clubs and churches where they are surrounded by people who think the way they do.
- 10 Almost half of Americans now live in counties that vote in landslides either for Democrats or for Republicans, he said. In the 1960s and 1970s, in similarly competitive national elections, only about one-third lived in landslide counties.

- 11 “The nation grows more politically segregated—and the benefit that ought to come with having a variety of opinions is lost to the righteousness that is the special entitlement of homogeneous groups,” Mr. Bishop writes.
- 12 One 12-nation study found Americans the least likely to discuss politics with people of different views, and this was particularly true of the well educated. High school dropouts had the most diverse group of discussion-mates, while college graduates managed to shelter themselves from uncomfortable perspectives.
- 13 The result is polarization and intolerance. Cass Sunstein, a Harvard law professor now working for President Obama, has conducted research showing that when liberals or conservatives discuss issues such as affirmative action or climate change with like-minded people, their views quickly become more homogeneous and more extreme than before the discussion. For example, some liberals in one study initially worried that action on climate change might hurt the poor, while some conservatives were sympathetic to affirmative action. But after discussing the issue with like-minded people for only 15 minutes, liberals became more liberal and conservatives more conservative.
- 14 The decline of traditional news media will accelerate the rise of The Daily Me, and we’ll be irritated less by what we read and find our wisdom confirmed more often. The danger is that this self-selected “news” acts as a narcotic, lulling us into a self-confident stupor through which we will perceive in blacks and whites a world that typically unfolds in grays.
- 15 So what’s the solution? Tax breaks for liberals who watch Bill O’Reilly or conservatives who watch Keith Olbermann? No, until President Obama brings us universal health care, we can’t risk the surge in heart attacks.
- 16 So perhaps the only way forward is for each of us to struggle on our own to work out intellectually with sparring partners whose views we deplore. Think of it as a daily mental workout analogous to a trip to the gym; if you don’t work up a sweat, it doesn’t count.
- 17 Now excuse me while I go and read The Wall Street Journal’s editorial page.