

# Is Your Feed a Window or a Mirror?



Built from *Your Feed is Lying to You: The Psychology of the Social Media Echo Chamber* by Gawon Ryu, Psychology Editor

Grades 4–8 · About 45 minutes · ★ everyone · ★★ older readers

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

## 1. Before You Read

★ Have you ever watched one video about something, then noticed the app showing you lots more videos just like it? What happened?

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★ Have you ever been surprised to find out that someone disagreed with something you thought everybody agreed on? How did it feel?

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## 2. The Short Version

*Read this first. Older readers: read the full article too.*

People hoped social media would be like a big town square, where people from different places could share ideas and talk things over. Psychology editor Gawon Ryu says many feeds have become **echo chambers** instead: places where you mostly hear your own ideas repeated back to you.

Why? Social media companies earn money by showing ads, so they want you to stay on their apps as long as possible. Their computer programs, called algorithms, learn what keeps you scrolling. Strong feelings, especially anger, keep people watching, so feeds often fill up with emotional posts that pick sides.

This works on two habits that every brain has. The first is **confirmation bias**: we like to find and remember information that agrees with what we already believe. The algorithm learns what you believe and shows you more of it. The second is group polarization. When people who already agree only talk with each other, their views often grow more extreme. Over time, people on the other side can start to seem impossible to understand.

An echo chamber can also trick you into thinking almost everyone agrees with you. Then, when you meet someone who doesn't, it can feel shocking.

Gawon's advice is to look for different points of view and to question what your feed shows you. A feed, she says, is not a window onto the world. It is more like a mirror.

### 3. Word Bank

| Word        | What it means                                                                                      |
|-------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| engagement  | how much people watch, click, like, and comment on something                                       |
| algorithm   | a set of step-by-step instructions a computer follows; on an app, it decides what to show you next |
| consensus   | when almost everyone in a group agrees                                                             |
| perspective | a way of seeing something; a point of view                                                         |
| skepticism  | not believing something right away, and checking it first                                          |

★ Use **skepticism** in a sentence of your own.

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### 4. Check Your Understanding

★ 1. According to the article, what is the main goal of social media companies?

☐ to show you what is true   ☐ to keep you on the app as long as possible so they can show you more ads   ☐ to help you meet people who disagree with you

★ 2. Which kind of emotions does the article say keep people the most engaged? Name one.

★ 3. What is confirmation bias? Answer in one sentence.

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★ 4. What does Gawon mean by the "illusion of consensus"?

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★★ 5. Explain how the algorithm, confirmation bias, and group polarization work together to build an echo chamber. Use the article in your answer.

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## 5. Gawon's Mind Map

*Gawon takes a big problem, like people online drifting further and further apart, and breaks it into its psychological parts. She starts with what the companies want, then names the habits of the mind their apps use. Map the three big ideas from the article, then connect each one to something you have seen.*

| Idea from the article | What it means, in your own words | A time I saw it |
|-----------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------|
| Confirmation bias     | <hr/> <hr/>                      | <hr/> <hr/>     |
| Group polarization    | <hr/> <hr/>                      | <hr/> <hr/>     |
| Illusion of consensus | <hr/> <hr/>                      | <hr/> <hr/>     |

★ One thing in the article that surprised me:

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## 6. Think Deeper

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★ Gawon writes that our feeds are "not a window onto the world" but "a mirror." What do you think she means? What is one thing a person could do to make what they see online more like a window?

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★★ The article says algorithms are built to show us what keeps us scrolling, not what is true or important. Gawon says breaking free takes "a conscious and difficult effort" by each of us. Should fixing echo chambers be up to each person, or should the apps be built differently? Explain, using the article.

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## 7. Write Your Report

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Write a short report answering this question: **Do social media feeds show us what the world really thinks?**

- **My answer:**
- **Reason 1 (from the article):**
- **Reason 2 (from the article):**
- **One thing the other side would say:**
- **My conclusion:**



## For Teachers and Parents: Answer Key

**Word bank sentence:** Answers vary; check that the student uses skepticism to mean not believing something right away and checking it first.

1. To keep you on the app as long as possible so they can show you more ads.
2. Negative emotions, especially anger or outrage.
3. Confirmation bias is the habit of looking for, understanding, and remembering information in a way that agrees with what we already believe.
4. When everything in your feed agrees with you, you start to believe that almost everyone thinks the way you do, even though they don't.
5. The algorithm learns what you like and believe and keeps showing you content that agrees with it, which feeds your confirmation bias. Because you are always surrounded by people and posts that agree with you, it is like being in a nonstop discussion with like-minded people, and group polarization pushes your views further to the extreme. In the end, people who disagree can seem impossible to understand.

**Mind map (sample answers):** Confirmation bias: paying more attention to information that agrees with what you already think (e.g., only reading reviews that agree with your opinion of a movie). Group polarization: when people who agree only talk to each other, their opinions get stronger and more extreme (e.g., a group of fans who grow more and more sure their team is the best). Illusion of consensus: believing almost everyone agrees with you because everything you see agrees with you (e.g., being shocked that a classmate likes a show you thought everyone disliked). Surprise: answers vary; possible answers include that apps are built mainly to keep people watching rather than to inform them, that anger keeps people engaged, or that the feed learns what makes you angry.

**Think deeper:** Open answers. For the ★ question, strong answers explain that a mirror shows you yourself, so a feed mostly shows you your own beliefs instead of the whole world; ideas from the article include looking for different perspectives, following people you disagree with, and being skeptical of what the feed shows. For the ★★ question, strong answers take a side and use the article: the article says the business model is built to keep people scrolling, which could support changing the apps, but it also says each person must make a conscious effort to seek out other views.

**Report:** Look for a clear answer, two reasons taken from the article (for example, that algorithms show what keeps us scrolling, or that echo chambers create an illusion of consensus), a fair statement of the other side (for example, that a person can choose to follow people with different views), and a conclusion that matches the answer.