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Project Statement

Despite the widespread use of social media—an invention that supposedly connects internet users around the world—many are struggling to relate to and learn from one another amid increasing political tensions. They are trapped in what are called echo chambers—also known as filter bubbles—which are virtual spaces that prevent people from associating with others of different backgrounds or opinions (Boutyline and Willer 51-69). The most prominent websites collect large amounts of data from their users and utilize it to suggest content they prefer, a strategy meant to keep them engaged. However, it can also prevent them from meeting others who could be positive influences and from considering the most rational ideas (Garrett). It encourages people to feel attached to their existing ideas through confirmation bias and become hostile toward outside groups (Heshmat).

What's News is a web-based artwork featuring short films and altered photography. Its dramatic lighting and repetition convey the fear and isolation internet users often feel. The three-page website encourages user interaction. Its home page contains two buttons that, together, answer the same question of *What's News?*. Each word directs viewers to one of two more pages. The page called *What's*, accessible through the first button, contains a single video that compiles all footage and graphics found on the website, while the second shows a more creative layout that features a variety of overlapping shapes, images, and videos.

Unlike all others, the initial video does not have start and stop buttons, symbolizing the lack of control people have over their learning process while in echo chambers. However, there is still an opportunity to see the same content differently by accessing the button at the bottom of that page—or to return to the single video through another button on the *News* page.

I have expressed my content by filming my subject, a young woman, planting seeds into a flowerpot. She keeps it in her home but never waters it, so the seeds do not sprout. The video series begins with a sepia tint, featuring rotating pictures of the flowerpot shot from above and overlaid onto an image of the base of my mailbox; each time a new one appears, it is filled with more dirt to cover and nourish the seeds. When the overlay fades, the flowerpot becomes an item of confinement, initially trapping the subjects' world within its walls while she retrieves a newspaper. She walks indoors and drops it onto her counter, pushing it away several times and scrolling through her phone, where she is likely to find information that has been curated to aligns with her views.

The scene is filled with sound effects; viewers can hear the hum of electronic static before the creak of a closing door and impact of the paper. Next, a rainstorm appears both visually and audially. Several computer-generated voices mimic the first and last words of the woman's statement, "What's News?". The voices are spoken in several accents common in different parts of the world, representing the diverse range of people who can be reached outside of her isolation. She repeats her own statement due to her confusion and desire for sameness. Every time the woman turns, her head blurs to demonstrate how her refusal to learn from new information has made her thoughts unclear. The flowerpot remains indoors during a rainstorm to symbolize how people can prevent their personal growth by keeping themselves in safe, controlled environments. Eventually, the sun reappears in a vibrant sky and the storm ends.

The first set of altered photos between videos contains faucets against dark backgrounds, foreshadowing their future use. In the next video, my subject finally goes outside to leave her plant on the ledge. At first, the visuals are confusing and chaotic. There are many overlapping images and jump-cuts to scenes with very different levels of color, brightness, and contrast.

The woman also takes a moment to look at some flowers in the woods. Flowers have historically been given as a sign to show love and gratitude. Their widespread appeal has contributed to the floral industry that lacks regulation and not only causes environmental damage from pollution and unnecessary land use, but also offers unsafe, low-paying jobs that often utilize child labor (Denney 6-23). The giving of flowers strengthens some relationships while harming others.

The damage caused by floral companies and the echo chambers of news and social media companies are both a consequence of commercialization. Each type of business produces appealing products that appear to bring people together. However, their leaders may be blinded from the reality of their negative impact on society's progress because of their desire to maintain profitable businesses. Their customers may also ignore its impact because they want to maintain their comfort (Boutyline and Willer 51-69).

My subject disappears and splits into two parts while on a swing beneath overlaid clips of her sitting on a bench; the swing's full range of motion represents the variety of information often unseen by those within echo chambers. Additionally, the swing in my video shifts even at the slightest breeze, but the bench always stays in the same place, communicating the increasing stability of my subject's emotions. Although she is depicted alone, the scene contains audio of a crowded park and two versions of her figure appear on the bench. This additional juxtaposition

shows how people within echo chambers may feel connected to their preferred communities but lack connections to the general population.

Eventually, the subject notices her furniture has re-appeared outdoors. This shows how those who are very attached to their beliefs often fear they will lose their sense of identity when challenged. In reality, they will probably retain the most important parts of themselves while seeing from a variety of perspectives. Despite receiving this opportunity, the woman becomes frustrated after reading her newspaper at the table. She crumples it, throws it onto the ground, and walks home.

The woman walks past her porch ledge and fails to realize that the plant is still there. She then submerges several newspapers in water from her faucets in an attempt to destroy them as audio from the rainstorm plays a second time. Eventually, however, the flow reverses and one paper is restored. This suggests that, although controversial and unfamiliar news can be confusing, and even though changing one's mind often takes time, it is still possible. The concept was inspired by artists Shana and Robert ParkeHarrison; I attempt to emulate the absurdism and repetition in their photography along with their content of "loss, human struggle, and personal exploration" (Parkeharrison and Parkeharrison).

When the woman looks outdoors for the last time, she discovers that a plant has finally sprouted from her flowerpot. Two parts of the last image contain a subtle overlay from the trunk of a tree—the same plant used to make the paper—contributing to my connection between destruction and growth. Water had destroyed the paper, but it has also helped the flowers grow.

Writer Pamela Mittlefehldt has noted that water is often a "source of inspiration—an energy, a muse—moving [creatives] to words" (Mittlefehldt 138). It can take many changing forms, just like people can change their beliefs and attitudes, and is therefore a great metaphor

for the creative process. This has caused me to view openness to new ideas not as a difficult task, but as an adventure that often involves “playful engagement” (Mittlefehldt 140). Although my subject initially experiences chaos during rainfall and while she runs the faucets, this chaos transforms into an unexpected yet beautiful creation when she reads the restored paper and flowers bloom. In *What's News*, water symbolizes the dual purpose of online discussion: it can silence opposing voices, but also help them flourish. We as media consumers will decide how to use it.

Works Cited

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