

Transcript of “Muggle Magic:

What the Mirror of Erised and the Two-Way Mirror Teach Us about Social Media”

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I want you to take a second and reflect on your social media use. What platforms do you frequent? When was the last time you checked them? What was the last post you read? What did it say? Did it bring you and those dear to you closer together? Who was the last person you friended? Followed? Subscribed to? How much do you have in common with that person? Did you friend them because you care about them? Or because it would benefit you? There are no “right” answers to these questions, only true ones. So take a second and answer them honestly to yourself. Write the answers down if you want, I’ll wait.

--(15 sec pause)--

The smartphone has become a ubiquitous magic mirror. It and what it brings into our lives affects all aspects of how we live, including our psychology and social interactions. Because of this, many are discussing echo chambers, which are often blamed for the increasing political, social, and personal divides in our society. This presentation uses the Mirror of Erised, the Two-Way Mirror, phenomenology, and analysis of key scenes within the *Harry Potter* books to describe the physical, mental, social, and magical orientations of these mirrors and their users and compares those orientations to how we use social media and how social media uses us. To achieve this I am applying Sarah Ahmed’s phenomenology of orientation to Harry’s and Ron’s experiences of Erised as a way to explore aspects of echo chambers in social media feeds. I also

use the Two-Way Mirror to examine how the other significant aspect of social media—its attempt to build connections regardless of distance—creates the potential for homophilic communities, which amplify echo chambers. Comparing the magical mechanics of these mirrors to how social media provides content gives a better understanding of echo chambers, what they do, and how we can avoid constructing and amplifying our own. Studying how characters within *Harry Potter* interact with these mirrors equips us to interact with the ones we carry in our pockets and purses, helping us not to become someone who wastes away, “entranced by what they have seen...not knowing if what they have seen is real, or even possible”.

The link between echoes and mirrors stretches back to Ovid’s *Metamorphosis* and the myth of Narcissus and Echo. This myth irrevocably links the two phenomena by casting Narcissus as Echo’s unrequited love. One reason the two concepts have become linked is that echoes, like mirrors, have what Willard McCarty calls an “irreconcilable polarity” between the real and the repeated sound or image creating a “paradoxical relationship of correspondence and opposition between beholder and external.” In short, mirrors and echoes both distort and clarify information. In the case of Echo and Narcissus, his desire to be loved is revealed in his inability to look away from his own reflection, while doing so causes him to lose his only chance at getting what he most desires, love.

While with physical echoes and mirrors the distortion can be minimized, it can never be completely eliminated. Mirrors will always invert an image, echos will always fade. When this principle is applied to concepts, repeated ideas create a metaphorical house of mirrors, an echo chamber, or what McCarty calls a “catoptric labyrinth,” which can confuse the listener’s orientation toward the information, resulting in misunderstandings at best and purposeful deception at worst.

Examining the mirrors in Harry Potter shows the duality in social media. Both Erised and the Two-Way Mirror provide access to information that the user would otherwise be unable to see. The Mirror of Erised reveals “not your face but your heart's desire," and the Two-Way Mirror works as a closed circuit facetime call, where the holder of each mirror can see what would be reflected in the other. Each of these mirrors reflects aspects of social media, the ability to call up visions of desires instantly and the ability to communicate instantly via visual and verbal methods regardless of the distance between two people.

Furthermore, these magical mirrors, just like actual, mundane mirrors, have a rigorous orientation for use. A person who wants to use a mirror must face the mirror, or the reflected light will not reach their eyes. Conversely, mirrors have only one surface which reflects light. When light reflects off the mirrored surface and provides an otherwise inaccessible vision to the viewer, the mirror becomes active, reflecting and revealing. A mundane example of this is when a performer or presenter uses a mirror to gauge how they will look to an audience.

These levels of orientation are quite similar to the orientations required for a person to use social media. A screen, whether on a computer, tablet, or smartphone has only one surface that emits light and the user must face that screen to see what it shows. Furthermore, social media must be accessed via websites or apps, and content must then be situated among other user’s accounts in some way that allows for interplay between users. These orientations place the social media user in particular positions regarding physical, social, and cyber spaces, not least of which is with the developers of social media and their business goals and ideological models.

Users of social media who construct echo chambers must also have a particular orientation toward information, directed exclusively toward self agreement. This orientation, known as homophily—the tendency to surround ourselves with others who share our

perspectives and opinions about the world—is common enough it can almost be considered a human universal, more on this later.

Having linked mirrors, social media, and orientation, it is time to examine the scene when Harry first finds the Mirror of Erised. First, Harry did not intend to find Erised. He wanted to examine the library's Restricted Section, researching a lead in his quest to protect the Sorcerer's Stone. However, due to the need to not get caught doing so, he had to flee from unfriendly staff who would misunderstand his purpose. Only by slipping into an unused classroom can Harry free himself from pursuit. This situation places everything in this room into a mental space of secrecy and rule-breaking. If Harry had found this room in another manner, the objects within it would take on a different, perhaps less potent, significance.

Second, the physical space around the Mirror is a familiar one for Harry. Hogwarts is full of such rooms. So Erised's surroundings are mundane. Classrooms are “near to hand,” and as such, they become what Sarah Ahmed calls a “field of background intuition”. As such, the room, the desks, chairs, and other ordinary classroom objects require no description beyond being “dark shapes...piled against the walls” and a wastebasket being “upturned”. These items, and indeed the room, itself is “half-glimpsed” and serve only as “background features of a landscape” in which the Mirror of Erised is firmly in the fore. Erised is “propped against the wall...as if someone had just put it there to keep it out of the way”. It does not belong in this space. This orientation is, in part, why Harry is, to use Ahmed's words, “turned towards the object”. Despite the circumstances of his entering the room and the darkness that surrounds him, Harry can see Erised clearly and has the time to examine it closely. In this way, not only do the immediate physical surroundings of the mirror fade into the background but so too does Harry's social and temporal situation.

Another aspect of Erised's orientation becomes apparent when Harry revisits the mirror, this time with Ron. Both boys look forward to seeing the Mirror, and each is excited to see what the mirror shows the other. When Ron and Harry first use the Mirror together, Harry is the subject of the reflection. However, when Harry stands before the mirror, Ron cannot see Harry's vision, only his reflection. Similarly, Ron must describe to Harry what the mirror shows when he "look[s] in it properly". The fact that the visions shown within the Mirror of Erised are invisible to others mirrors social media design. Although social media differs from Erised in that if two people face the same screen simultaneously, they can see the same content, the orientation of seeing your own social media and someone else's differs dramatically. The inherent monogamy of a social media feed and its user is an integral part of the social media business model.

This is partially because when the user faces the mirror, the mirror must also orient itself to the user, reaching into their mind and sorting through all their desires to determine which is the deepest.

However, where Erised's success is oriented toward showing desire for its own sake, social media is designed to keep users looking at their screens, so they see more ads and the companies make more money. Social media developers feed into user's confirmation bias by creating and employing recommended content algorithms, which suggest new content based on the user's interests—as determined by their viewing history, demographic information, and other factors—and the content's popularity. On the one hand, this is good business. The content providers' business model is to keep users engaged with the screen. They make decisions by asking the questions, "How much time can we get you to spend [on our content]? How much of your life can we get you to give to us?" Content that aligns with the user's interest is more likely to achieve these goals. As more people view content, it is also more likely to be suggested to

other users. This positive feedback loop takes any opinion a viewer wants to explore and provides near-infinite related content, most of which takes one side of the issue to one extreme while showing very few, if any, dissenting perspectives. In this way, RCAs make it easy for viewers to indoctrinate themselves as they see article after post after video showing only one side of complicated issues.

Just as users of social media are constantly pulled back by information they want to see about people and things they are interested in, users of the Mirror of Erised are drawn back to the visions it provides. When Harry is obsessing over it the next day, Ron asks him not to go back, but Harry, like many social media users, feels he must look again. He feels drawn to the information he wants to see, what he wants to be true.

So far this presentation has focused on the “media” aspect of social media. A turn toward the “social” aspect points to the other magical mirror discussed in this presentation, the Two-Way Mirror. Just as the orientations of the user with the Mirror of Erised parallels social media users and their feeds, the Two-Way Mirror parallels the orientations of video calls and conferences as well as other forms of computer-mediated communication (CMC).

The physical orientations of the Two-Way Mirror align with those of mundane mirrors discussed previously and so I will not discuss it further. However, just as the Mirror of Erised had further orientations based on its magic, the Two-Way Mirror also expands on and complicates the orientations of mundane mirrors. The primary purpose of these mirrors is to orient two people toward each other, therefore for this artifact to be used to its full potential, two separate users must be facing their mirrors far enough from each other that communicating otherwise would be impractical. The mirrors then use a magical connection to complete the chain

of communication. Synchronous CMC in social media works in much the same way, projecting video and audio versions of other users and their thoughts onto our screens and vice-versa.

The dual orientation between synchronous CMC and the Two-Way Mirror creates an interesting psychological effect. They cannot create the connections that interacting face-to-face does. Research suggests that this is partly due to the link between CMC and a dearth of affiliation cues. These non-conscious behaviors create a feeling of attachment between participants and—although video-based CMC creates more potential for these cues than other forms of CMC—the framing of the computer or phone screen limits these cues, and therefore shapes the orientation of the users toward each other.

The framing of the information displayed during video chats is mirrored when Harry contacts Aberforth in *Deathly Hallows*. Harry uses the Two-Way Mirror as a last-ditch effort to escape imprisonment by Death Eaters. However, he only has a shard of his mirror, so he cannot see all of Aberforth's face. While the mirrors themselves originally had physical frames, this shard of the mirror further limits what information Harry receives. All he sees is a familiar blue eye peering back at him, which he recognizes as “Dumbledore's”. Harry is right. The eye is Dumbledore's, but it is Aberforth's, not Albus's. Harry has seen Aberforth in Hogsmeade and various other places before, but they have never had a meaningful conversation or developed a direct relationship. They have none of the affiliations that Harry and Albus shared. This limits what inferences Harry can reach about who is on the other side of the mirror. Similarly, affiliation cues are often outside of the frame of the screen during video-based CMC.

When Harry uses the shard as a last-ditch effort to get help escaping from Voldemort's followers, the extreme circumstances forced Harry to orient himself toward whoever was on the other side of the Two-Way Mirror. In this exchange, Aberforth says nothing, and Harry only says

"Help us!" and gives their location. Harry makes assumptions that the person on the other end of the mirror is friendly to them because the eye is "Dumbledore's." This assumption happens to be correct, but because of the limited framing of information, including the unknown history of the other side of the mirror and the severe framing of the information visible in the mirror, Harry's assumption could just as easily have been wrong. In fact, Harry was partially wrong because he hoped and counted on the eye he saw to be Albus's.

Furthermore, this brief exchange did nothing to build trust between Harry and Aberforth. When the two characters meet, Aberforth is openly distrustful of Harry, his devotion to Albus's plan to defeat Voldemort, and Albus himself because of how Albus's plans had caused him pain in the past. Similarly to how Harry believes that he is somehow contacting Albus, with whom he has built affiliation through in-person communication but is contacting Aberforth with whom he has not, video chats and conferences can build a false sense of affiliation between users by leaving the information they need to build and recognize those connections just out of frame. For a real world example of this, we need only to think of all the stories from the last 18 months regarding people being in Zoom meetings dressed appropriately—but only from the waist up.

Framing, as nodded to previously, does not extend only to the physical framing of a user's view of the other user, it also applies to the information a person has in which they can frame new information—their frame of reference or experiential orientation. For the social media user, the frame of reference provided by RCAs can become internalized. Once internalized, the user's tendency toward homophily will amplify the potential of an echo chamber.

If the social media user does form an echo chamber, they will measure all new information against it as an attempt to prove—or disprove—veracity. Examining Harry's frame

of reference regarding the Two-Way Mirror shows how sources other than the information received through social media feeds and CMC help form a frame of reference.

When Sirius gave Harry the Two-Way mirror, he had previously proven himself to be an unreliable source of advice, so Harry—at the urging of Ron and Hermione—framed the mirror as another bad idea and orients himself against its use. However, after Sirius’s death, Harry quickly reframes his perspective on using the mirror, blaming himself, as using The Two-Way Mirror might have changed what had happened. Similarly, even where social media users have agency, social media is designed to limit that agency by—as mentioned before—limiting the new information to fit what will keep the user’s eyes on their feeds while also creating comment sections on posts that shape the frame of reference in which a social media user places the information from the post.

Just as Ron and Hermione’s comments about Sirius shaped Harry’s frame of reference regarding the Two-Way Mirror, a comment section can create a homophilic community. When this happens, information is reflected off a series of mirrors: first the rhetorical mirror of the post, then the affective mirror of how they feel about the person who posted it, then the mirrors of the people who commented on it, then their own frame of reference. Each of these mirrors is warped in particular ways and so any information gained via social media has become a reflection of a reflection, which is not dissimilar from how information gets distorted when children play a game of telephone.

Just as a physical mirror creates the opportunity for objective observation of the physical self, magical mirrors and social media allow for objective observation of the metaphysical self. Just like the Mirror of Erised, social media gives us the chance to see what we want while also revealing to us the intricacies of how we think, allowing us the opportunities to grow and expand

on our thoughts. Similarly, the Two-Way Mirror shows that building connections with others and allowing them to reflect sides of ourselves that we may not want to acknowledge is vital in breaking out of echo chambers.

I would like to finish my talk today by thanking the people involved in making this amazing conference a reality: our conference coordinators Karen Wendling & Patrick McCauley, my fellow presenters, and last but not least all of you.

--indicate audience--

Each of you is one of those few persons that this presentation, and indeed the conference itself, could not do without. Perhaps more than anyone else, it is the attendees that have kept the HPAC going for ten years. Thank you so much for coming.

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