

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-katz-md/the-devil-in-the-disagree_b_5760016.html

THE BLOG (Huffington Post)

The Devil in The Disagreement: Lynching in Lieu of Listening

09/05/2014 10:16 am ET | **Updated** Nov 05, 2014

- [David Katz, M.D.](#) Founder, True Health Initiative



Paul Taylor via Getty Images

The bad news — for me, at least — is that quite a few people seem to hate me. The worse news — for us all, I think — is that none of them knows me. They've just read something I wrote with which they disagree.

This is about egos and echoes, and the erosion of our humanistic impulses. It's a sad and ominous development.

The danger of echo chambers was fully developed by Cass Sunstein in his book, [Going to Extremes](#). Just recently, [a piece in the New York Times](#) explored how cyberspace propagates the phenomenon.

The result is something akin to marauding cyber-lynch mobs. I imagine the opinions and missions of such mobs could pertain to anything. In my case, the encounters are occasionally about social policy — guns, or abortion, or health care reform, or something else controversial

— but mostly they are about diet. [Differing opinions about eating well seem a very strange reason to form lynch mobs](#), but something very much like that goes on all the time.

What allows for it is the phenomenon described by Sunstein. People with any given opinion assert that opinion in public, and guess who tunes in? Those who already agree.

Those who disagree may stop by, but if they comment, they encounter the collective disparagement of the group's consensus. They are, at best, discouraged from commenting further, and generally shooed away if not actively run out of town. They leave an empty space behind, and nature abhors those. So someone else who already owns the group opinion is apt to fill it. Yet another member of the choir enhances the group's conviction that they know all the best hymns.

Some of the mobs are small, some are large. But hardly any is very large, because they are bounded by the obvious constraint; one mob needs to end wherever another begins. The result is groups of at most moderate size in most cases that are very insular, cultivating the endless echoes of their established beliefs.

That is already a bit worrisome. But worse still is what happens when the mobs encounter, by accident or design, someone with whom they disagree. Since the mob position is already established as something next to gospel by virtue of the echoes, the naysayer can't possibly have any alternative scripture worth considering. Quite simply, that person — is a heretic. Possibly a lunatic, but certainly a heretic. And therefore, not a fully constituted person.

The result is both inevitable, and easily predictable. The mob dehumanizes its adversary. There is no consideration that this person may be a cherished daughter, or son; sister or brother; mother or father. The idea that this person might have an infectious laugh, or a warm smile, or love with great ardor — is impertinent. There is no image of this person tending her garden, or romping in the woods with his beloved dog. The person is seen through the veil of cyberspace, and the filter of mob consensus. The person is just — wrong.

Perhaps their position is wrong; perhaps not. Maybe it's just different. But seeing devilry in the disagreement, the mob does what such mobs do — vilifies, and seeks to nullify. It reaches for its cyber-rope.

Of course, the reaction to this piece will be no different than to all the others that inspired it. Those who already tend to like my opinions will appreciate this one. The agnostics will pass by, maybe sympathize, and move on. But if any mobs pass this way, they will roll their eyes at my whining, and their fingers will reach toward the ever-handy noose.

We lose a lot when disagreement is not an opportunity to consider opinions we don't already own. We never learn anything by considering only those we do.

We lose even more when differing opinions lead to dehumanization; when we never even consider a mutual way past any devilry in the details of our divergent positions. We can't do that,

because the devil isn't in the details any more — it's in the disagreement, and the heretic responsible for it. We never even get to the details.

I'm right, because everyone in my group keeps agreeing with me. You're wrong, because you aren't in my group. You may be the devil, but you certainly aren't truly human. We'd rather lynch you than listen to anything you have to say.

So all that's left to say is: God help us all.

-fin

[David L. Katz, MD, MPH, FACPM, FACP](#) is an actual person. He measures his worth every day by looking for respect in the eyes of his wife and his children. His dogs love him no matter what.

<http://twitter.com/DrDavidKatz>