



CGHE Annual Conference 22-23 May 2023

Session Details

KEYNOTE 2 - Information Overload and the Echo Chamber Effect in Higher Education Research

23 May 2023, 1:30pm - 2:30pm (UK)

Chair: Elisa Brewis

Speaker: Rebecca Schendel

Twenty years ago, Barry Schwartz coined the phrase the “paradox of choice” (Schwartz, 2004) to describe a feeling of paralysis, when faced with a dizzying array of consumer choices in the marketplace. Schwartz’ argument at that time was that, despite what traditional economic theory might suggest, choice is not always a benefit to consumers, especially when there are too many options. In fact, he argued, once there are too many choices, consumers become anxious, as it becomes far more difficult to make an informed choice, which then raises the possibility of making a “wrong” choice that you might regret. Over the past two decades, technology has only augmented this challenge for consumers of all kinds of goods. Indeed, it has significantly exacerbated it, by exponentially expanding the number of choices available. Faced with what can feel like a limitless number of options, consumers either need to spend an inordinate amount of time researching the options available, in order to make some sort of informed selection, or make a choice without engaging with most of the options available. When the latter occurs, choices are generally made based on previous experience and/or brand recognition. A third alternative, Schwartz argues, is paralysis. When faced with seemingly endless choice, it can sometimes be easiest to just not choose at all.

The same phenomenon can be observed in the field of higher education studies, to detrimental effect on both research and practice. Despite the democratic promise of technology, information overload drives us to make the “safe” choice – when consuming research, searching for information, and selecting research collaborators – by gravitating towards names we know and theories, concepts and perspectives we recognize. As such, we are not benefiting from the expansion of our field over the past few decades (both in terms of the sheer size of the field and its geographic distribution). Rather, we are experiencing our own version of the “echo chamber” phenomenon that has been so broadly criticized in the realm of electoral politics – a circumstance which mitigates against our attempts to engage with alternative ways of explaining, engaging with and conceptualizing higher education around the world. The implications are profound, for our scholarly work and

for the higher education systems and institutions that our work (at least theoretically) helps to inform.