ONE OF THE GREAT DANGERS of the Internet is its much-discussed “echo chamber” effect. People, we worry, spend too much of their time seeking out like-minded peers (a phenomenon called homophily) and thus encounter only news and opinions that reinforce what they already believe.

Surely this can’t be good for society, right? If we’re to be responsible citizens—or creative workers or even interesting conversationalists—we need to be regularly exposed to fresh facts and diverse opinions.

But what if homophily doesn’t always diminish the diversity of our info diet? What if homophily can actually improve it? This surprising suggestion comes out of new research by information economists Sinan Aral and Marshall Van Alstyne. In a paper to be published this summer, they note that our negative view of homophily stems partly from studies like Mark Granovetter’s famous 1973 research into “weak ties.” Granovetter asked hundreds of people how they found their last job and discovered that when it was through another person, that person tended to be a “weak,” or distantly known, contact.

This, he concluded, suggests that weak ties are the ones most likely to bring us new information and opportunities. Your close friends are too similar to you, the theory goes, so everything they know, you probably know, too. Someone with fewer close friends but a wider circle of casual acquaintances is more likely to get ahead. But Aral and Van Alstyne think this reasoning—which has been dominant for decades—has one big flaw: It doesn’t account for how often we talk to people.

Their argument goes like this: Sure, weak ties are better positioned to bring us new info. But they don’t do it frequently, because we don’t interact with them very often. Such a person might be, say, five times more likely than a close friend to tell you something surprising in conversation. But if you interact with your friend 10 times more often, the odds suddenly tip toward their being a more valuable source of news.

In other words, bandwidth matters. Plus, your close peeps have social-capital advantages: They know what’s likely to be new to you and how to frame things so you’ll listen.

To test the relative advantages of strong links, Aral and Van Alstyne analyzed 10 months of email from an executive recruiting firm. Recruiters, they recognized, thrive if they receive a steady stream of new leads, both from colleagues inside their firms and contacts outside. The scientists ran linguistic crunches on the text of each email to infer how “new” its information was—judging newness by how unusual the word usage was compared with the recruiter’s norm.

Sure enough, those who relied on a tight cluster of homophilic contacts received more novel information per unit of time. This even translated into dollars and cents. Strong-tie recruiters produced more revenue for the firm. Or as Van Alstyne puts it: “Having a smaller number of high-bandwidth relationships can be good for you.”

Now, it’s not that high-bandwidth ties are always superior, Van Alstyne adds. There are situations where weak ties are still better (like keeping abreast of foreign affairs, possibly). And to be a truly well-informed citizen, perhaps the best approach is to cultivate close friends from eclectic backgrounds—so you’ll benefit from both diversity and the surprising power of strong ties.

Either way, maybe you shouldn’t worry about having so many like-minded peers. They might surprise you yet.

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