

The Search for a new Stupid

Introduction

On June 23rd 2011 the RSA in London hosted a presentation by Eli Pariser¹ who discussed some alarming trends happening with the manipulation of information delivered by search engines and social media²; in that the information delivered is filtered to suit the searcher, a bit like Amazon selects books you might enjoy. Some of the possible effects are considered below.

The basis of his thesis is that the impact of the filter is to keep us in a personal bubble that's warm, comforting and offers no challenges (and consequently, no progress) – even though we know there are myriad challenges to our ways of thinking and beliefs.

In allowing the challenges to be suppressed are we being led into an advanced state of stupidification?

The spark for the thesis was Eli entering a search term himself whilst a colleague entered the same term and simultaneously each pressed 'search' – they got very different results; the Screen Prints were displayed side by side and very different they were too. This experiment was repeated several times to ensure its validity.

Health warning

Please note the study was done in America with a .com search engine and I have failed to repeat the same experiment in the UK with its .co.uk counterpart. Could it be that the UK isn't significant enough in global terms to justify this level of attention? Or the Data Protection Act?

Despite my inability to repeat the experiment here in the UK with just one search engine, there are numerous social networking sites, special interest groups and other ways to link people that were not explored. The story holds water and despite my inadequacy – which shouldn't be a reason to stop reading – ***the implications are significant.***

Demographics

With the advent of social networking and mobile media the entire understanding of demographics has been turned upside-down. No longer are we categorised simply by: age, sex, address, job and position.

We are increasingly categorised by interest; no longer is address significant (unless our interest involves something tangible, such as steam engines or a particular theatre) – we have global communications where common bonds can be established for likes and dislikes, and people with similar interests (however strange) can be readily found anywhere on the globe and from any social class.

Marketers have increasing difficulty reaching into these emerging communities because the definition of likes, wants and benefits cannot be applied to readily identifiable groups and a whole new approach to demographics needs to be developed. It is this drive that has led to filtering.

¹ Published as *The Filter Bubble*, Eli Pariser, Penguin Viking, ISBN 978-0-670-92038-9

² Here's a link to the presentation: <http://www.thersa.org/events/audio-and-past-events/2011/the-filter-bubble-how-the-hidden-web-is-shaping-lives>

By filtering traffic passing through pages on websites, and profiles on social sites, it is possible to build up a picture of a person's character. In the early 1990s a UK company³ developed descriptive terms for different types of person which included: Golf Clubs & Volvos, Safe & Sensible, Home & Garden and Carry on Camping as representatives from 20 different categories. By exploring people in this way the established demographics were being broken down and reformulated.

The issue at the time was surely that companies and marketers were very comfortable with the existing system which identified readers of magazines and watchers of programmes – where adverts are traditionally placed; and it was too much effort to change to a whole new system.

Today, a whole new approach is being established by the search companies for use by the big advertisers and is being managed on behalf of the advertisers so there is no longer the need to overcome the difficulty in bringing about change or the acceptance of a different system to replace the old ABC₁C₂DE classification; this is a lot more sophisticated yet easier to accept.

In selling this sorted and filtered information to the big users for them to more closely target their various messages, the searchers can make money from their growing data banks as different user groups and ever more disparate sources of information are added. Others are also using the information such as lending agencies and security organisations including police – also profitable for the search engine owners.

The filter

The effect of filtering is like looking into a mirror that only reflects the bits of you that you like (where's my nose?); yet it's the collection of all the bits – liked and disliked, loved and unloved – that makes you what you are, gives character and the challenge of some bits that drives change, whilst at the same time this mix of attributes arouses interest in and by others.

A short digression – Five 'megatrends'⁴ have been identified that will last well into this century, these are: totally weird weather, endless religious wars, obesity, the rich getting richer and stupidification (brought on through ignorance, misinformation and goofball theories through the internet). It is the last two that may be affected through filtering: the rich getting richer by outbound filtering and stupidification by inbound filtering.

As an example of the rich getting richer it's been recognised since Adam Smith⁵ in 1776, to BBC Question Time on 31st June 2011⁶ that wages stay pretty constant yet GDP continues to rise

Even when taxation is quite lenient, peoples' spending power does not increase – why? The reason lies in rents – for buildings, land or equipment; as GDP increases, so does rent which makes the landlords⁷ increasingly wealthy and the producers less able to give their staff wage increases [which have been taken up in rent] at the expense of the workforce.

Filtering helps maintain this state of unknowing as discussed below

³ CMT Data Corp Ltd (made dormant in December 2001)

⁴ Geoffrey James in B-Net 29th November 2010

⁵ "I shall conclude this very long chapter with observing that every improvement in circumstances of the society tends to either directly or indirectly to raise the real rent of land, to increase the real wealth of the landlord, his power of purchasing the labour, or the produce of the labour of other people" pg. 284 The Wealth Of Nations, published by The Modern Library ISBN 0-679-78336-9

⁶ Polly Toynbee's comment

⁷ Which can include pension funds, as well as individuals and estates, so may be considered beneficial

It is worth noting that many of our leaders, whether commercial or political, are property owners and consequently reluctant to even discuss the topic, let alone do anything about it. In some countries there is no chance of high office unless an individual has sufficient wealth to mount an election campaign

What does this mean for those who are not leaders but want to understand better what is happening to the country and to their livelihoods? Searches for 'wage inequality', 'rent/al', 'trade' and other related terms delivered a range of targets. Examining these targets as if filtered material gives a number of possible options:

- For those interested in wages – tables and comparisons, little about underlying cause
- For those interested in economics – learned papers (often directed to the skills gap!)
- For those interested in politics – the deployment of wages and regional differences
- For those interested in trade – balance of payments, tariffs and cost of imports⁸
- For those interested in rent – properties available

So, a possible discussion to improve the lot of the UK people based on on-line search by different people would give different results; each result strengthening the resolve of the individual searcher by providing information relevant to their particular area of interest, with few searches addressing the real cause [rents] so that the disparity between rich and poor is growing to the point where the cracks are increasingly difficult to paste over, but still not enough people have enough information to begin to address the real problem.

Question – are the Trades Unions fighting the right battle? – or are they just protecting their own significant assets that attract rent by means of diversionary tactics?

In turn, this bias caused by filtering raises the barriers to accept challenge and to consider alternative ways of thinking. In short, by playing to our [superficial or specialist] interests progress is avoided by concentrating on the symptoms not tackling the underlying issues.

Is this an example of what the psychologists refer to as *cognitive dissonance*, where people know there is more stuff out there but are too busy, too cosy or too set in their ways to chase it down – such as used to be the case with tobacco, where the contribution of duty to the exchequer 'justified' in smokers' minds the continued purchase of cigarettes, despite the damage they cause?

Unlike outbound filtering which biases what we receive, there is little inbound filtering of the material that populates the database. It is not practical to manage inbound filtering because there is so much information arriving at the database in many different forms. Hence the goofball theories, daft ideas and the patently wrong can find a space.

One of the few examples of inbound filtering is by some governments for their own political ends.

Because inbound material is not filtered there is ample opportunity to support and promote any off-the-wall theory that might draw attention, hence the tacit support for stupidification which may be exacerbated through the social networks being used as promotional highways as well as means of sharing with virtual friends. The social networks are, themselves subjects of search and so can further promote strange notions and the seriously weird.

⁸ See also Henry George 1886 'Protection or Free trade' <https://mises.org/etexts/freetrade.pdf> Chapter 19 who is actually addressing the issues

Comments

Filtering is surely set to continue and grow, getting ever more sophisticated as technology continues to evolve and become more readily available. There is also discussion about the integration of technology into the minds and mindsets of people⁹ to provide information more readily on the one hand, but on the other hand opening the door to persuasion and collusion.

Communications will continue to speed up with mobile devices becoming more used as part of everyday life which, when taken with the various apps and inbuilt features, will provide increasingly detailed profiles of users and their habits – advertisers may be able to target us individually at specific times in specific locations – single stores posting an offer on our handsets as we're walking by and in a buying mood (an application that isn't far away).

Already, Facebook is used by US divorce lawyers as an easy way to gather evidence (and witnesses?) so how much further might this reach, and what information might be assembled in future from our past adventures as adolescents or as students. Might sites such as this select our 'friends' for us; there's a start by recommending people one or twice removed – could our social life be manipulated and managed on our behalf at some point in the future?

Increasingly LinkedIn is used to examine a person's profile ahead of a meeting, but how much more might there to be gleaned from knowing who that person is linked to and their preferences and propensities? This is finding its way into job applications as a means to better understand the candidate, and no doubt as a means to open some searching questions that wouldn't become evident at interview.

The IT powerful will become increasingly powerful. Interestingly, there was little resistance by any of the big players to the demand for unasked-for cookies be outlawed by June 2012. Yet, at the same time, there is increasing pressure for us to use cloud computing. One scenario is that in time anyone wanting on-line analysis will have to go to one of the big suppliers because the little guy won't be able to operate without cookies tracking on-line movement. The big guys simply have to watch what's going on within the servers that make up their cloud.

After 9/11 a data company called Acxiom¹⁰ contacted the FBI and it is reported to have passed over files about the hijackers which contained more information about eleven of the nineteen perpetrators that that owned by the US government – and not just the hijackers, also their various contacts. This action allegedly resulted in deportations and indictments although the data has never been made public. If data such as this is readily available now, how soon before the people in authority use it to their personal benefit (rather than to benefit society as a whole)?

On a more sinister note, if Acxiom can provide the detail to the CIA that identifies potential collaborators, can such a level of personal knowledge be used to 'colour' the information provided from search engines to subtly cause us to change our political leanings for example?

One thing is sure, the use of collected and analysed personal data by the big players is still in its infancy – it will be interesting to see just how these adolescents develop.

Steve Mullins July 2011

⁹ See Ray Kurzweil and the film *The Transcendent Man* which postulates even closer integration of people and machines

¹⁰ Note taken from *the Filter Bubble* – Acxiom holds data on 96% of the American people and half a billion people world-wide