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# The Filter Bubble: How the New Personalized Web Is Changing What We Read and How We Think

*By Eli Pariser*



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## The Filter Bubble: How the New Personalized Web Is Changing What We Read and How We Think By Eli Pariser

In December 2009, Google began customizing its search results for all users, and we entered a new era of personalization. With little notice or fanfare, our online experience is changing, as the websites we visit are increasingly tailoring themselves to us. In this engaging and visionary book, MoveOn.org board president Eli Pariser lays bare the personalization that is already taking place on every major website, from Facebook to AOL to ABC News. As Pariser reveals, this new trend is nothing short of an invisible revolution in how we consume information, one that will shape how we learn, what we know, and even how our democracy works.

The race to collect as much personal data about us as possible, and to tailor our online experience accordingly, is now the defining battle for today's internet giants like Google, Facebook, Apple and Microsoft. Behind the scenes, a burgeoning industry of data companies is tracking our personal information to sell to advertisers, from our political leanings to the hiking boots we just browsed on Zappos.

As a result, we will increasingly each live in our own, unique information universe—what Pariser calls “the filter bubble.” We will receive mainly news that is pleasant, familiar and confirms our beliefs—and since these filters are invisible, we won't know what is being hidden from us. Our past interests will determine what we are exposed to in the future, leaving less room for the unexpected encounters that spark creativity, innovation and the democratic exchange of ideas.

Drawing on interviews with both cyber-skeptics and cyber-optimists, from the co-founder of OK Cupid, an algorithmically-driven dating website, to one of the chief visionaries of U.S. information warfare, *THE FILTER BUBBLE* tells the story of how the Internet, a medium built around the open flow of ideas, is closing in on itself under the pressure of commerce and “monetization.” It peeks behind the curtain at the server farms, algorithms, and geeky entrepreneurs that

have given us this new reality, and investigates the consequences of corporate power in the digital age.

THE FILTER BUBBLE reveals how personalization could undermine the internet's original purpose as an open platform for the spread of ideas, and leave us all in an isolated, echoing world. But it is not too late to change course. Pariser lays out a new vision for the web, one that embraces the benefits of technology without turning a blind eye to its negative consequences, and will ensure that the Internet lives up to its transformative promise.

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### Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

### Author Q&A with Eli Pariser



**Q:** What is a “Filter Bubble”?

**A:** We’re used to thinking of the Internet like an enormous library, with services like Google providing a universal map. But that’s no longer really the case. Sites from Google and Facebook to Yahoo News and the *New York Times* are now increasingly personalized – based on your web history, they filter information to show you the stuff they think you want to see. That can be very different from what everyone else sees – or from what we need to see.

Your filter bubble is this unique, personal universe of information created just for you by this array of personalizing filters. It’s invisible and it’s becoming more and more difficult to escape.

**Q:** I like the idea that websites might show me information relevant to my interests—it can be overwhelming how much information is available I already only watch TV shows and listen to radio programs that are known to have my same political leaning. What’s so bad about this?

**A:** It’s true: We’ve always selected information sources that accord with our own views. But one of the creepy things about the filter bubble is that we’re not really doing the selecting. When you turn on Fox News or MSNBC, you have a sense of what their editorial sensibility is: Fox isn’t going to show many stories that portray Obama in a good light, and MSNBC isn’t going to the ones that portray him badly. Personalized filters are a different story: You don’t know who they think you are or on what basis they’re showing you what they’re showing. And as a result, you don’t really have any sense of what’s getting edited out – or, in fact, that things are being edited out at all.

**Q:** How does money fit into this picture?

**A:** The rush to build the filter bubble is absolutely driven by commercial interests. It's becoming clearer and clearer that if you want to have lots of people use your website, you need to provide them with personally relevant information, and if you want to make the most money on ads, you need to provide them with relevant ads. This has triggered a personal information gold rush, in which the major companies – Google, Facebook, Microsoft, Yahoo, and the like – are competing to create the most comprehensive portrait of each of us to drive personalized products. There's also a whole "behavior market" opening up in which every action you take online – every mouse click, every form entry – can be sold as a commodity.

**Q:** What is the Internet hiding from me?

**A:** As Google engineer Jonathan McPhie explained to me, it's different for every person – and in fact, even Google doesn't totally know how it plays out on an individual level. At an aggregate level, they can see that people are clicking more. But they can't predict how each individual's information environment is altered.

In general, the things that are most likely to get edited out are the things you're least likely to click on. Sometimes, this can be a real service – if you never read articles about sports, why should a newspaper put a football story on your front page? But apply the same logic to, say, stories about foreign policy, and a problem starts to emerge. Some things, like homelessness or genocide, aren't highly clickable but are highly important.

**Q:** Which companies or Websites are personalizing like this?

**A:** In one form or another, nearly every major website on the Internet is flirting with personalization. But the one that surprises people most is Google. If you and I Google the same thing at the same time, we may get very different results. Google tracks hundreds of "signals" about each of us – what kind of computer we're on, what we've searched for in the past, even how long it takes us to decide what to click on – and uses it to customize our results. When the result is that our favorite pizza parlor shows up first when we Google pizza, it's useful. But when the result is that we only see the information that is aligned with our religious or social or political beliefs, it's difficult to maintain perspective.

**Q:** Are any sites being transparent about their personalization?

**A:** Some sites do better than others. Amazon, for example, is often quite transparent about the personalization it does: "We're showing you *Brave New World* because you bought *1984*." But it's one thing to personalize products and another to personalize whole information flows, like Google and Facebook are doing. And very few users of those services are even marginally aware that this kind of filtering is at work.

**Q:** Does this issue of personalization impact my privacy or jeopardize my identity at all?

**A:** Research psychologists have known for a while that the media you consume shapes your identity. So when the media you consume is also *shaped by* your identity, you can slip into a weird feedback loop. A lot of people see a simple version of this on Facebook: You idly click on an old classmate, Facebook reads that as a friendship, and pretty soon you're seeing every one of John or Sue's posts.

Gone awry, personalization can create compulsive media – media targeted to appeal to your personal psychological weak spots. You can find yourself eating the equivalent of information junk food instead of having a more balanced information diet.

**Q:** You make it clear that while most Websites' user agreements say they won't share our personal information, they also maintain the right to change the rules at any time. Do you foresee sites changing those rules to profit from our online personas?

**A:** They already have. Facebook, for example, is notorious for its bait-and-switch tactics when it comes to privacy. For a long time, what you “Liked” on Facebook was private, and the site promised to keep it that way. Then, overnight, they made that information public to the world, in order to make it easier for their advertisers to target specific subgroups.

There’s an irony in the fact that while Rolex needs to get Tom Cruise’s permission to put his face on a billboard, it doesn’t need to get my permission to advertise my endorsement to my friends on Facebook. We need laws that give people more rights in their personal data.

**Q:** Is there any way to avoid this personalization? What if I’m not logged into a site?

**A:** Even if you’re not logged into Google, for example, an engineer told me there are 57 signals that the site uses to figure out who you are: whether you’re on a Mac or PC or iPad, where you’re located when you’re Googling, etc. And in the near future, it’ll be possible to “fingerprint” unique devices, so that sites can tell which individual computer you’re using. That’s why erasing your browser cookies is at best a partial solution—it only partially limits the information available to personalizers.

What we really need is for the companies that power the filter bubble to take responsibility for the immense power they now have – the power to determine what we see and don’t see, what we know and don’t know. We need them to make sure we continue to have access to public discourse and a view of the common good. A world based solely on things we “Like” is a very incomplete world.

I’m optimistic that they can. It’s worth remembering that newspapers weren’t always informed by a sense of journalistic ethics. They existed for centuries without it. It was only when critics like Walter Lippman began to point out how important they were that the newspapers began to change. And while journalistic ethics aren’t perfect, because of them we have been better informed over the last century. We need algorithmic ethics to guide us through the next.

**Q:** What are the business leaders at Google and Facebook and Yahoo saying about their responsibilities?

**A:** To be honest, they’re frustratingly coy. They tend to frame the trend in the passive tense: Google’s Eric Schmidt recently said “It will be very hard for people to watch or consume something that has not in some sense been tailored for them,” rather than “Google is making it very hard...” Mark Zuckerberg perfectly summed up the tension in personalization when he said “A squirrel dying in your front yard may be more relevant to your interests right now than people dying in Africa.” But he refuses to engage with what that means at a societal level – especially for the people in Africa.

**Q:** Your background is as a political organizer for the liberal Website MoveOn.org. How does that experience inform your book?

**A:** I’ve always believed the Internet could connect us all together and help create a better, more democratic world. That’s what excited me about MoveOn – here we were, connecting people directly with each other and with political leaders to create change.

But that more democratic society has yet to emerge, and I think it’s partly because while the Internet is very good at helping groups of people with like interests band together (like MoveOn), it’s not so hot at introducing people to different people and ideas. Democracy requires discourse and personalization is making that more and more elusive.

And that worries me, because we really *need* the Internet to live up to that connective promise. We need it to help us solve global problems like climate change, terrorism, or natural resource management which by their

nature require massive coordination, and great wisdom and ingenuity. These problems can't be solved by a person or two – they require whole societies to participate. And that just won't happen if we're all isolated in a web of one.

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### **From reader reviews:**

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