

GOOGLE IS MAKING YOU BORING

**BEFORE YOU CAN BURST THE BUBBLE,
YOU HAVE TO REALIZE YOU'RE INSIDE IT.**

BY ANA BRASIL

"There is no standard Google anymore," says Eli Pariser. "And the funny thing is, you can't see how different your search results are from anyone else's." To conduct a little experiment, the pioneer online campaigner asked two of his friends to Google the word 'Egypt' and take screen shots of what came up. In one case, the results showed touristic information about the country, while for the second friend it highlighted news of the Palace-sponsored street clashes with rival political forces.

According to Pariser, there are 57 signals that Google looks at to tailor your query results that include "everything from what kind of computer you're on to what kind of browser you're using, to where you're located". In 2011, just before releasing The

Filter Bubble: What the Internet is hiding from you (Penguin Books), which became a New York Times bestseller, Pariser gave a TED Talk explaining his new idea.

Even the most naïve Internet user realises his online moves are being registered when he sees brands and products he's researched suddenly pop up in advertisement areas later on. However, what they haven't quite grasped is that the things you Google now influence the results of what you will Google in the future. In other words, you're inside what Pariser defines as a filter bubble.

"Your filter bubble is kind of like your own unique universe of information that you live in online. What's inside it depends on who you are and what you do, but the thing

is you don't decide what gets in and, more importantly, you don't actually see what gets edited out," he explained during his TED talk. Algorithms filter results based on our search history, previous dwell time, location and even gender, guessing what we want to see from what we've seen before. In this way, Google is controlling what we're exposed to, deciding on our behalf and often without our knowledge. And, most importantly, it is taking away the possibilities for discovery.

Bianca De Sousa, from the strategic-led creative agency Collective London, wrote an article for Brand Republic in which she raises an important question. She asks "if you live in a filter bubble all the time, when will you be exposed to opin-

ions or content that challenges and inspires you? When we start to control the Internet's content, we compromise its inherent idea of discovery and our influences begin to be manipulated”.

However, it's not like Google is doing it behind our backs - on the contrary. On its website the company states that its mission “is to organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful”. As De Sousa explains, “while this seems perfectly logical – the Internet is after all a plethora of content that can be difficult to navigate and make sense of – I feel a sense of chaos is essential. In effect, our inability to control the filter bubble means we become enslaved by it”.

Larry Page, co-founder and Google CEO, describes the perfect search engine as something that “understands exactly what you mean and gives you back exactly what you want”. Thus, they are in fact doing you a huge favour when they choose what you should see, because they in fact know you and your needs very well. Fun fact: Google's motto is “Don't be evil”. For real!

Nonetheless, it is too easy to make Google the scapegoat. “This is something that is sweeping the web”, says Pariser. “Yahoo News, the biggest news website is now personalized. The Huffington Post, The Washington Post, The New York Times are all flirting with personalization in various ways. And this moves us very quickly toward a world where the Internet shows us what it thinks we want to see, but not necessarily what we need to see”.

Facebook knows more about you than Google does and, of course, it is also ‘curating’ the content on your news feed based on your likes, friends, events, groups and posts, a fact that becomes more alarming as the social network grows and becomes an increas-

ingly influential source of news for their users.

A Pew Research Center study released last July states that four in ten American users get their news from Facebook. A rather important fact to take into consideration is their age: 49 percent of American Facebook news users aged 18-24 say it's the most or an important way they get news, versus 34 percent of people aged 35 and older. “This reinforces findings from another recent report by Pew Research which found that Facebook was relied on as a source for political news among Millennials more than any other news source and at a higher rate than both Gen Xers and Baby Boomers”, claimed the authors.

Last August, Mark Zuckerberg, co-founder and CEO of the world's biggest social media platform, announced that Facebook had reached another milestone. For the first time over a billion people used the online social network on a single day. This means that “one in seven people on Earth used Facebook to connect with their friends and family”, he said in a post.

In early June 2015, Google and Facebook were openly attacked by Apple CEO Tim Cook due to their privacy policies. Cook delivered a speech in which he criticised his competitor's advertising-supported business models for their disregard for user's privacy. “They're gobbling up everything they can learn about you and trying to monetise it. We believe that the customer should be in control of their own in-

google is |

google is your friend
google is skynet
google is my friend
google is god
google is my best friend
google is now alphabet
google is going to take over the world
google is a woman
google is it going to rain today
google is amazing

“WHAT WE'RE SEEING NOW IS MORE OF A PASSING OF THE TORCH FROM HUMAN GATEKEEPERS TO ALGORITHMIC ONES”

formation. You might like these so-called free services, but we don't think they're worth having your email, your search history and now even your family photos data-mined and sold off for god knows what advertising purpose,” he said. “And we think someday customers will see this for what it is.”

This was not the first time Apple showed its teeth to Google and Facebook. However, the App Store is one of the key distribution networks of the apps of these companies to the iOS devices bought by its customers. “When it is not immediately apparent which political or social groups, forces or alignments advocated certain proposals, measures ... one should always ask: ‘who stands to gain?’”. More than a hundred years after this was written, Lenin's question seems very up to date.

The Internet is a constant flow of information, where the old doesn't disappear and the new is updated by the minute. Editing is thus a vital and necessary task, but should it be done by companies looking for profit using the parameters that they think fit?

Pariser tracks the problem back to the disappearance of the traditional gatekeepers. “In a broadcast society there were gatekeepers, the editors, and they controlled the flows of information. Along came the Internet and



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it swept them out of the way. What we’re seeing now is more of a passing of the torch from human gatekeepers to algorithmic ones. And the thing is that algorithms don’t yet have the kind of embedded ethics that the editors had”.

While newspapers and other media outlets are edited and prioritize one piece of information whilst ignoring another, the people making these choices have some sort of accountability. Articles are signed, journalists and editors can be held responsible for their work. As a reader, you are free to pick the newspaper you want to buy and deposit your trust in – it’s an investment and a relationship of trust.

The curation process is now something that spans the whole of the Web. Search engines are the gateways we use to access this immense virtual world and thus should be picked as carefully as we pick our Sunday newspaper or the columnist we chose to follow – it too will influence our opinions. As a

society, we need gatekeepers that have no invested interests. Online news and information are apparently free, but they come with the cost of narrowing our worldview.

Google search dominates desktop and mobile usage, but it is not the Internet. It is a mere website that is an index and there are more out there (think about Bing), each one being curated and choosing what it is they think you want. Just being aware of the fact that they only show a small piece of what is really out there should motivate us to start looking in new places and asking different questions, and to create new tools that can burst the system.

Created in 2008, DuckDuckGo is making a business out of not collecting user’s personal information - and standing up to Google along the way. Relying on “a lot of great free and open-source projects to keep” their “wings flapping”, as written in their website, this new

search engines claims to avoid the filter bubble and protect searcher’s privacy. It has distinguished itself by not profiling its users and by deliberately showing everyone the same search results for a given search term. Most importantly, it might be a step towards a different Internet, where we can still be introduced to new ideas, new people and different perspectives. Because, as Pariser put it, the Internet “is not going to do that if it leaves us all isolated in a web of one”.

READ THE BOOK: THE FILTER BUBBLE: WHAT THE INTERNET IS HIDING FROM YOU BY ELI PARISER, PENGUIN BOOKS, 2012

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