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The Troubling Future of Internet Search

Data customization is giving rise to a private information universe at the expense of a free and fair flow of information, says the former executive director of Moveon.org.

By Eli Pariser

Someday soon, Google hopes to make the search box obsolete. Searching will happen automatically.

"When I walk down the street, I want my smartphone to be doing searches constantly—'did you know?' 'did you know?' 'did you know?' 'did you know?' In other words, your phone should figure out what you would like to be searching for before you do," says Google CEO Eric Schmidt.

This vision is well on the way to being realized. In 2009, Google began customizing its search results for all users. If you tend to use Google from a home or work computer or a smartphone—i.e., an IP address that can be traced back to a single user (you)—the search results you see incorporate data about what the system has learned about you and your preferences. The Google algorithm of 2011 not only answers questions, but it also seeks to divine your intent in asking and give results based, in part, on how it perceives you.

This shift speaks to a broader phenomenon. Increasingly, the Internet is the portal through which we view and gather information about the larger world. Every time we seek out some new bit of information, we leave a digital trail that reveals a lot about us, our interests, our politics, our level of education, our dietary preferences, our movie likes and dislikes, and even our dating interests or history. That data can help companies like Google deliver you search engine results in line with what it knows about you.

Other companies can use this data to design Web advertisements with special appeal. That customization changes the way we experience and search the Web. It alters the answers we receive when we ask questions. I call this the "filter bubble" and argue that it's more dangerous than most of us realize.

In some cases, letting algorithms make decisions about what we see and what opportunities we're offered gives us fairer results. A computer can be made blind to race and gender in ways that humans usually can't. But that's only if the relevant algorithms are designed with care and acuteness. Otherwise, they're likely to simply reflect the social mores of the culture they're processing—a regression to the social norm.

The use of personal data to provide a customized search experience empowers the holders of data, particularly personal data, but not necessarily the seekers of it. Marketers are already exploring the gray area between what can be predicted and what predictions are fair. According to Charlie Stryker, a financial services executive who's an old hand in the behavioral targeting industry, the U.S. Army has had terrific success using social-graph data to recruit for the military—after all, if six of your Facebook buddies have enlisted, it's

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2. Identify which part of the notes copy Pariser's exact wording, and should therefore be in quotation marks.

Sample Notes

Source Details: [fill in]

Google internet searches
- 2009/11 – Google using algorithms to keep track of what we search for
- Sells our searches to companies who design direct advertising information
- Customization of our web searches changes the way we experience and search the web.