Filter Bubbles

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Abstract

The term 'filter bubble' was coined by Eli Pariser. This paper will explore the implications of filter bubbles on society, and how they have changed the internet. At its core, this paper will describe how filter bubbles have affected society, and argue why they *are an important factor for society.*

1   Introduction

The idea of filter bubbles was created by Eli Pariser [1]. The key idea revolving around how the public disseminate content, and how the internet has changed the way we consume information. In short, the internet has allowed (if not required) for websites to develop automated algorithms for prioritizing and deliverying content to users. One of the key points that Pariser makes is that the change in how we filter information has lead to people being 'lazier' in their consumption of information.

Pariser describes how though people may have skipped over the front page of a newspaper, they would still be exposed to the headlines. Quoting Clary Shark, Pariser writes 'But to do so, they had to at least glance at the front page-and so, if there was a huge political scandal, enough people would know about it to make an impact at the polls' [1].

To contrast, Pariser goes on, the internet allows for filtering out content before it even reaches the user. The modern internet now hinges on having some form of filtering in place,

and many services (such as Google, YouTube, and other social medias) extend this filter into the bubble that Pariser describes.

This brings up the question as to how filter bubbles are affecting society. Pariser argues that filter bubbles are a 'threat to democracy', and take power away from the people. Websites are now the deciders of what content you do (or don't) see.

2   Analysis

2.1   Historic Prevalance in News

The internet has enabled any person to generate content and share it with the world. This has lead to an explosion of information, and the need to filter out the noise. The goal of the internet ultimately is to spread information. News sites and social media platforms at the end of the day need to stay profitable. Filter bubbles aren't only pertinent to these types of sites, but any with a large amount of content are reliant on filtering.

Filter bubbles are absolutely an important factor for society. Whether a website wants to find the next article that you are most likely going to click on, or Amazon trying to suggest to you new product in their storey, filter bubbles dictate the content that people see.

A similar idea to filter bubbles is the idea of echo chambers. An important distinction between filter bubbles and echo chambers as Dr. Richard Fletcher points is as follows:

> 'An echo chamber is what might happen when we are overexposed to news that we like or agree with, potentially distorting our perception of reality because we see too much of one side, not enough of the other, and we start to think perhaps that reality is like this.
>
> Filter bubbles describe a situation where news that we dislike or disagree with is automatically filtered out and this might have the effect of narrowing what we know. This distinction is important because echo chambers could be a result of

filtering or they could be the result of other processes, but filter bubbles have to

be the result of algorithmic filtering.' [2]

In essence, all filter bubbles are echo chambers, but not necessarily vice-versa. This implication that filter bubbles are echo chambers would suggest that they would lead to a narrowing of the mind.

Note that Dr. Fletcher finds that these types of filter bubbles tended to result in a person viewing more media from a varying amount of sources than they would have otherwise [2].

2.2   Terminology

The deciscion to use the term 'bubble' when describing filters implies a similarity to other types of bubbles. Bubbles are fragile, and can be popped easily. Some examples are the housing [3] and tulip bubbles [4]. Eli Pariser thus implies that the usage of these types of automated filters are fragile and subject to public opinion.

It must be considered what would happen if this bubble were to 'pop'. In the two above examples, the popping of the bubble lead to great economic issues and volatility. For the filter bubble to pop would likely lead to an enourmous change in paradigm for how the internet organizes content.

It may be unfair to label this model as a bubble, as unlike the housing and tulip bubbles, the filter bubble is not a result of speculation. While investments are certainly made into the algorithms that go behind these filters, these algorithms at their core solve current and present problems.

In order for this 'bubble' to pop, the underlying content and media would similarly need to pop. The algorithms and filters used in modern day simply prioritize and serve the content; even a simple 'most recently created' algorithm would be considered a filter.

2.3 Prevalence in other Media

Though Pariser claims that filter bubbles are recent, in reality these types of filters have always existed. Regardless of what medium, the source of information has always been filtered. Someone had to write the article, someone had to decide what to put on the front page, and someone had to decide what to put on the evening news. The difference with the internet is that the filter is now automated, and can be based on a person's individual behavior and preferences (hence the bubble).

In my experience, I have found that filter bubbles rely on proper development, balance, and scope. I have seen countless of times people on YouTube attribute their success / failures to 'the algorithm'. Similarly, these types of algorithms apply to other social platforms, and have faced their fair share of controversy. The most recent example is the 2020 US Presidential Election, where Facebook and Twitter were accused of censoring content [5].

2.4 TikTok

Similarly to Facebook's debacle, TikTok has faced numerous controversies revolving its algorithms. TikTok has had countless trends that have largely affected our society as a whole. From its teeth filing trend [6] to the 'Kia/Hyundai challenge' where people would steal cars [7], these trends have had a large impact on society.

I personally experienced the effects of TikTok's algorithm when my mother's car was stolen. Many insurance companies began refusing to insure Kia and Hyundai cars, leading to a large spike in insurance rates for these cars.

3 Conclusion

Summarize your key points and offer concluding thoughts.

References

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