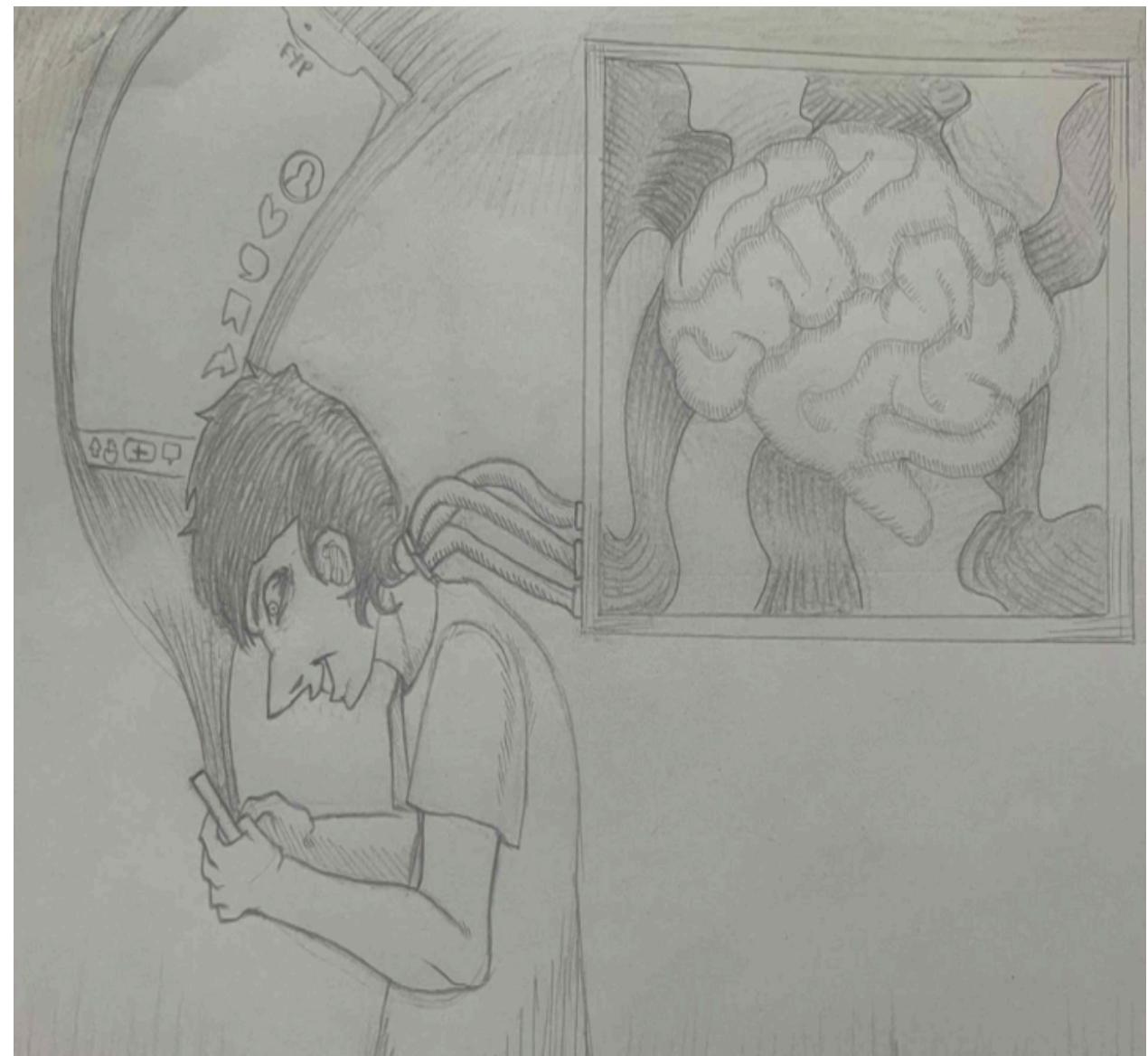




EDITORIAL ARTICLE

Free Will in a World That Thinks for You:

NEWS ARTICLES, TRENDING VIDEOS, AND FAMILIAR FACES PASS BY AS YOU SCROLL DOWN THE DAY'S FEED. YOU NOTICE RECOMMENDATIONS FITTED JUST FOR YOU, WHETHER IT IS A POST ABOUT ONE OF YOUR HOBBIES, OR A COMMENT ABOUT YOUR FAVORITE SHOW. "PERFECT!", YOU THINK AS YOU CLICK THROUGH EACH ONE. AND YET UNBEKNOWNST TO YOU, EVERYTHING YOU'VE JUST SEEN AND HEARD, EVERY BUTTON CLICKED, AND EVERY SECOND SPENT WATCHING EACH POST LIES UNDER THE WATCHFUL GAZE OF A HIDDEN MECHANISM BUILT TO TRACK AND ANALYZE YOUR EVERY MOVE. THIS IS THE SYSTEM THAT EVERY SITE AND DOMAIN IN THE MODERN AGE HAS GROWN TO ADOPT. THE VERY MOMENT YOU GO ONLINE, AN ALGORITHM FOLLOWS YOU CLOSELY, QUIETLY OBSERVING AND LEARNING ALL OF YOUR HABITS - ALL TO PROVIDE WHAT IT DEEMS TO BE THE BEST SET OF CONTENT FOR EACH INDIVIDUAL. AND YET WHILE MOST SEE IT SIMPLY AS AN OBJECT OF CONVENIENCE, IT HAS BEEN ENGINEERED TO BE MUCH MORE THAN SO. THIS IS THE WORLD BROUGHT UPON US BY ALGORITHMS - THE INVISIBLE FORCE THAT HAS SLOWLY CONQUERED OVER THE HUMAN MIND, ALL AS WE GIVE UP OUR WILLS TO ITS ABSOLUTE CONTROL.



HOW ENGAGEMENT BECOMES EXTREMISM

FOR A LONG TIME NOW, SOCIAL MEDIA SITES HAVE USED ALGORITHMS TO PREDICT USER PREFERENCES. THESE ALGORITHMS USE PATTERNS AND INFORMATION GATHERED FROM LARGE SETS OF DATA TO ACHIEVE A DEFINED GOAL. HOWEVER, WHILE ONE MAY ASSUME THIS GOAL TO BE BUILT ON USER CONVENIENCE, IN TRUTH, THESE SYSTEMS WERE CREATED MAINLY TO SUIT THE INTERESTS OF ITS CREATORS. AT THEIR CORE, THESE SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS, AND THE LARGE CORPORATIONS BEHIND THEM ARE BUSINESSES - WHICH EACH STAND TO GAIN FROM THE TIME SPENT BY THE USERS. AS A STUDY DONE BY THE GEORGETOWN LAW TECHNOLOGY REVIEW STATES, SOCIAL MEDIA COMPANIES DERIVE PROFIT BY ENCOURAGING USERS TO STAY ENGAGED, BECAUSE ENGAGEMENT TRANSLATES TO GREATER AD EXPOSURE AND REVENUE. AS SUCH, TO KEEP USERS ENGAGED FOR AS LONG AND AS FREQUENTLY AS POSSIBLE, SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS WANT TO MAKE THEIR FEEDS MORE INTERESTING AND RELATABLE TO USERS.

TO MAXIMIZE EVERYONE'S ENGAGEMENT, THE ALGORITHM FIRST IDENTIFIES WHAT KIND OF CONTENT CAN RELIABLY HOLD EACH INDIVIDUAL'S ATTENTION. OVER TIME, SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS DISCOVERED THAT NOT ALL CONTENT IS PERCEIVED AS EQUAL. THEY DISCOVERED THAT SOME TYPES OF CONTENT CONSISTENTLY PERFORMED BETTER AT KEEPING USERS ENGAGED. EMOTIONALLY HEAVY POSTS, SURPRISING HEADLINES, AND CONTROVERSIAL OPINIONS WERE FOUND TO GENERATE MORE REACTIONS, MORE CLICKS, AND MORE SHARES THAN CALM OR NEUTRAL CONTENT. AS A RESULT OF THIS, ALGORITHMS HAVE LEARNED TO FAVOR, AND EVEN TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THESE PATTERNS. UNLIKE A HUMAN, THESE SYSTEMS CANNOT TELL THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN HEALTHY CONTENT AND RADICALIZATION, OR BETWEEN A MOTIVATIONAL POST AND FEARMONGERING - IT ONLY SEES DATA, CLICKS, AND ENGAGEMENT. ACCORDING TO MIT RESEARCHER ZEYNEP TUFEKCI, ALGORITHMS ARE DESIGNED TO AMPLIFY THE MOST EMOTIONALLY CHARGED AND POLARIZING CONTENT, AS THESE GENERATE STRONGER ENGAGEMENT THAN BALANCED PERSPECTIVES. THIS CAUSES ALGORITHMS TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF HUMAN TENDENCIES TO ACHIEVE ITS GOAL TO ENGAGE USERS, REGARDLESS OF ITS EFFECTS.

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THIS MANIPULATION DOES NOT STAY CONFINED WITHIN JUST THE ONLINE SPACE. WHAT MAY START WITH SIMPLE CURIOSITY OR AN INNOCENT COMMENT, MAY VERY WELL RESULT IN THE ALGORITHM POINTING TOWARDS DIFFERENT EXTREME PATHS. A FRIEND LOOKING FOR SIMPLE ADVICE IS GRADUALLY PUSHED TOWARDS EXTREME OPINIONS WITHOUT NOTICING THE CHANGE, OR A FATHER WHO USED TO WATCH HARMLESS VIDEOS NOW SPEAKS WITH COMPLETE CERTAINTY ABOUT IDEAS HE NEVER ONCE CARED FOR - NONE OF THEM ARE MAKING DELIBERATE CHOICES TO GO DOWN THESE PATHS. THIS IS SIMPLY WHAT THE ALGORITHM HAS DECIDED FOR THESE PEOPLE. IN FACT, A 2019 INVESTIGATION BY THE WALL STREET JOURNAL FOUND THAT YOUTUBE'S ALGORITHM REGULARLY LED NEW USERS FROM INNOCENT VIDEOS INTO CONSPIRACIES AND RADICAL POLITICAL CONTENT, EVEN WITHOUT THEM SEARCHING FOR IT.

THIS IS NOT AN ISOLATED INCIDENT. MANY MORE CASES HAVE BEEN REPORTED WITH SIMILAR ONLINE PLATFORMS LIKE X (FORMALLY KNOWN AS TWITTER), INSTAGRAM, AND FACEBOOK - INCLUDING TESTIMONIES FROM WITHIN THESE VERY CORPORATIONS. INTERNAL DOCUMENTS LEAKED BY FACEBOOK WHISTLEBLOWER FRANCES HAUGEN SHOWED THAT THE COMPANY KNEW THAT ITS ALGORITHM AMPLIFIED DIVISIVE AND HARMFUL CONTENT. HOWEVER, THEY DECIDED KEEP IT IN PLACE BECAUSE IT INCREASED ENGAGEMENT AND PROFIT. THIS STRONGLY PUTS INTO QUESTION THE SAFETY AND CREDIBILITY OF OUR ACTIONS IN THE ONLINE SPACE. ARE WE THEN TRULY CHOOSING THE CONTENT WE WATCH, OR HAS IT ALL ALREADY BEEN DECIDED FOR US BEHIND THE SCREEN?

HOW PERSONALIZATION BECOMES PERSUASION

THE CONTROL THESE ALGORITHMS HAVE OVER OUR LIVES DOESN'T JUST END WITH THE CONTENT WE SEE ONLINE; IT MAY EVEN REACH DIRECTLY INTO OUR WALLETS ITSELF. JUST LIKE HOW PLATFORMS STUDY WHAT WE WATCH AND SHARE TO MAXIMIZE REVENUE, ONLINE MARKETPLACES TRACK OUR ACTIONS ONLINE TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF OUR BUYING HABITS. WHAT ITEMS WE SEARCH FOR, OR WHAT PRODUCTS APPEAR IN THE CONTENT WE WATCH - ALL OF THIS DATA IS FED INTO THESE SYSTEMS DESIGNED TO PREDICT NOT ONLY WHAT WE LIKE, BUT ALSO WHAT WE CAN BE CONVINCED TO BUY. AT FIRST, THIS MAY START WITH HARMLESS RECOMMENDATIONS THAT SIMPLY FEEL HELPFUL AND CONVENIENT. THEN SUDDENLY, AS EACH BUTTON IS CLICKED AND PURCHASES ARE MADE, OVERLY SPECIFIC ITEMS SLOWLY BEGIN TO APPEAR - BE IT THE SHOES YOUR FRIENDS TALK ABOUT, OR THAT ONE PRODUCT YOU KNOW YOU NEED, BUT HAVE NEVER EVEN MENTIONED ONLINE. IT FEELS COINCIDENTAL, BUT BEHIND THE SCREEN, THESE ALGORITHMS ARE NO LONGER JUST GUESsing. THEY KNOW YOU BETTER THAN EVEN YOU DO, AND THEY KNOW EXACTLY WHAT YOU WANT BEFORE YOU EVEN KNOW IT.

IN THE END, INSTEAD OF HELPING US MAKE DECISIONS OURSELVES, THESE ALGORITHMS HAVE BEGUN SHAPING THEM. THEY LEARN OF OUR IMPULSES AND WEAKNESSES, THEN TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THEM FOR PROFIT. AS MENTIONED IN A REPORT BY THE NORWEGIAN CONSUMER COUNCIL, COMPANIES DELIBERATELY DESIGN "DARK PATTERNS" IN ONLINE INTERFACES, WHICH SERVE AS MANIPULATIVE LAYOUTS AND PROMPTS THAT PRESSURE USERS INTO PURCHASES THEY NEVER PLANNED TO MAKE. EVEN MORE SO, ALGORITHMS THEN REINFORCE THESE TACTICS BY PUSHING LIMITED TIME DEALS AND PERSONALIZED DISCOUNTS TO TRIGGER THE FEAR OF MISSING OUT.

NOWADAYS, PURCHASING HAS BECOME MUCH LESS OF A CONSCIOUS CHOICE, BUT RATHER, MORE OF AN AUTOMATED RESPONSE. WE NOW BEGIN TO TRUST THE ALGORITHM TO TELL US WHAT WE "NEED," WITHOUT EVEN REALIZING THAT THIS CONVENIENCE HAS ALREADY TURNED INTO CONTROL. THE LINE BETWEEN GENUINE PREFERENCE AND MANUFACTURED DESIRE NOW CONTINUES TO BLUR. SO, IF ALGORITHMS CAN NOW INFLUENCE WHAT WE WATCH, WHAT WE BELIEVE, AND WHAT WE BUY, THEN HOW MUCH OF OUR FREE WILL IS TRULY THERE LEFT?

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HOW CHOICE BECOMES CONTROL

WITH THE ALGORITHMS OFFERING QUICK AND EASY AUTOMATION, IT HAS COME TO NO SURPRISE HOW MANY LARGE BUSINESSES, AND EVEN GOVERNMENT ORGANIZATIONS, NOW RELY ON ALGORITHMS TO DECIDE ON MORE IMPORTANT MATTERS. IN SEEKING CHEAP AND EFFICIENT WORKFLOWS, WE HAVE NOW GIVEN ALGORITHMS THE POWER TO CHOOSE IN ANYTHING AS TRIVIAL AS TO WHICH ROADS TO TAKE TO BEST AVOID TRAFFIC, ALL THE WAY TO A CHOICE AS HEAVY AS TO WHO GETS HIRED OR WHO GETS FIRED, WHO GETS INSURANCE AND WHO GETS DENIED FROM IT, AND WHO GETS FREED FROM PRISON AND WHO GETS SENT TO IT. THESE DECISIONS NO LONGER HAVE THE HUMAN JUDGEMENT THEY REQUIRE. AND WHILE ONE MAY ARGUE THESE ALGORITHMS TO BE ABSOLUTE AND IMPARTIAL, OR COMPLETELY OBJECTIVE, THESE ARGUMENTS FAIL TO CONSIDER THE OVERSIGHTS THAT THE HUMAN PROGRAMMERS OFTEN MAKE IN DESIGNING THESE ALGORITHMS. INSUFFICIENT DATA, BIASED SAMPLES, TECHNICAL LIMITATIONS - THE LIST OF THESE FAULTS ONLY EVER GO ON.

AS THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION REPORTS, AUTOMATED DECISION SYSTEMS USED IN AREAS SUCH AS EMPLOYMENT, LENDING, AND CRIMINAL SENTENCING HAVE BEEN FOUND TO REPRODUCE AND EVEN MAGNIFY EXISTING SOCIAL BIASES, OFTEN MAKING DISCRIMINATORY DECISIONS NOT OUT OF INTENT, BUT AS A RESULT OF FLAWED OR BIASED DATA BUILT INTO THEIR DESIGN. AND YET AS MORE ORGANIZATIONS NOW CHOOSE TO ADAPT THESE SYSTEMS, IT IS NOW ONLY A MATTER OF TIME UNTIL ALGORITHMS TRULY TAKE CONTROL OF ALL OF OUR THOUGHTS, ALL OF OUR CHOICES, AND ALL OF OUR JUDGMENTS. AND SO IF THE SYSTEMS BUILT TO MAKE DECISIONS FOR US CAN NO LONGER TELL RIGHT FROM WRONG, THEN HOW MUCH LONGER NOW UNTIL EVEN WE FORGET THE DIFFERENCE OURSELVES? DESPITE HOW MUCH ALGORITHMS MAY HAVE IMPROVED IN RECENT YEARS, THESE FLAWS STILL REMAIN PRESENT TO THIS DAY, AND UNTIL WE CAN TRULY BE CERTAIN THAT THESE ALGORITHMS TRULY DECIDE BEST FOR US, IT IS IMPERATIVE TO AVOID OUR OVER RELIANCE ON IT.

FREEDOM RETURNS WHEN WE BREAK THE CYCLE!

KNOW THAT THE ALGORITHMS THEMSELVES ARE NOT THE ENEMY, BUT RATHER THAT THEY ARE MERELY TOOLS THAT FOLLOW THE ORDERS THEY WERE DESIGNED WITH. IN TRUTH, THE REAL DANGER LIES BEHIND THE MANY LARGE CORPORATIONS THAT CREATE AND SHAPE THESE SYSTEMS TO THEIR BENEFIT. THEY ARE THE ONES WHO CREATED THESE PROGRAMS TO SERVE THEM PROFIT RATHER THAN PEOPLE, CREATING A WORLD WHERE THEIR CONTROL HIDES BEHIND EVERY CHOICE WE THINK WE MAKE. BUT THEIR POWER IS NOT ABSOLUTE. THE ONE CHOICE THEY CANNOT CONTROL FOREVER REMAINS WITHIN US: THE CHOICE TO BREAK THE CYCLE; THE CHOICE TO REJECT THEIR INTENTIONS; THE CHOICE TO LOOK AWAY AND SEE THE WORLD FOR WHAT IT IS. AND SO JUST LIKE IN PLATO'S CAVE, WE MUST LEARN TO TURN AWAY FROM THE SHADOWS THAT DANCE BEFORE US. RECOGNIZE THE MANIPULATION HIDDEN BEHIND THE SCREEN, AND KNOW THAT THE FEEDS AND POP UPS THAT SHAPE OUR WORLD ARE NOT THE TRUTH. TRUTH DOES NOT LIE BEHIND THEIR ILLUSION, BUT RATHER BEHIND THE EYES THAT REFUSE TO FALL FOR THEIR DECEPTION. AND TO CLEARLY SEE THAT, WE MUST TAKE THE STEP TO QUESTION WHAT THEY SHOW US. RECOGNIZE THE FAULTS IN THEIR DISPLAY; RECOGNIZE WHO TRULY BENEFITS FROM THE IMAGES WE CONSUME; RECOGNIZE THE LIES AND THE TRICKS BEHIND EVERY BUTTON AND AD. FREEDOM WILL NEVER RETURN JUST BY IGNORANCE OR DENIAL, IT BEGINS THE MOMENT WE CHOOSE TO LOOK BEYOND THE PROJECTIONS AND SEEK WHAT IS REAL.