

BUBBLE TROUBLE

More and more websites now incorporate some form of personalization into their design. Pandora.com allows users to create highly personalized radio stations that play only the music the user likes. Amazon.com shows users books or items that are most likely to fit their interests, based on previous searches. Netflix makes movie suggestions based on the user's past activity and preferences. Google allows users to customize their online news pages. Companies that personalize their websites collect and use a great deal of data about the user's browsing behavior, location, preferences, previous interactions, and other user-specific information. They feed this data into an algorithm that automatically generates content tailored uniquely to the user. After repeated interactions over time, the web site and the user adjust to one another, presumably leading to a more efficient, pleasant, and engaging interchange, thus making the website ever more relevant to the user.

Advertisers, of course, want their ads to be effective. Before the Internet, the content of ads may have targeted certain groups of potential customers, but the nature of the print or broadcast media resulted in most ads being delivered to far more people than were interested in them. Billboard ads selling specialized products assaulted everyone driving on a certain stretch of road; television commercials interrupted everyone watching a program at a certain time; junk mail filled everyone's mailboxes. The logical extreme of non-personalized ads came with the advent of "spam" or unsolicited email ads. Spamming is so cheap that advertisers who use this approach don't care how many millions of people they spam—nor that spam irritates and often offends virtually every recipient—so long as just one or two people respond. In contrast, personalized ads irritate far fewer recipients and have a much higher chance of finding a receptive audience.

But personalization has its potential downside. While it has the obvious benefit of exposing us to things we will most likely find relevant to our interests, it has the side effect of concealing from us things we don't seem to like or haven't actively cared about. In other words, the more "relevant" a website, the less it pushes our horizons beyond the scope of our current interests. Thus, for example, people who have adopted some one-sided political stance may find themselves enclosed within an invisible bubble that isolates them from exposure to various views that could expand their perception and tolerance of alternate opinions.

Eli Pariser, Senior Fellow at the Roosevelt Institute and former executive director of MoveOn.org, has raised these and other issues in his recent book, *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet Is Hiding From You*. In an address to a TED conference (Technology, Entertainment, Design) on March 11, 2011, he said, "When I was growing up in a really rural area in Maine, you know the Internet meant something very different to me. It meant a connection to the world. It meant something that would connect us all together, and I was sure that it was going to be great for democracy and for our society..." But, instead, he finds that if one site after another makes itself highly relevant to us we run the risk of becoming isolated from things that are important, uncomfortable, challenging, or representative of other points of view. Pariser quotes Mark Zuckerberg, founder of Facebook, in explaining to a journalist the importance of news feeds, "A squirrel dying in your front yard may be more relevant to your interests right now than people dying in Africa." Pariser agrees with this, but wonders what implications this has at the societal level, "especially for the people in Africa."