

Essay on "Ethical Problems with Recommender Systems"

Lorenzo Vigo

March 7, 2022

Recommender Systems are introduced as a powerful tool that both serves a great service to users and poses a threat in terms of manipulation. Idyllically, Recommender Systems should be taught to maximize the utility and the satisfaction of the users. However, more stakeholders are involved during the implementation and the training of these systems.

First, the company providing the service aims to maximize the profit obtained through the generated recommendations. Society itself should also be considered a stakeholder, as our actions and the impact on the user will have collateral effects on it.

Such diverse stakeholders provoke conflicts of interest in what is expected from the output of Recommender Systems. Then, it is interesting to analyze ethically what should be enhanced in our recommendations and what can be expected from different points of view.

A consequentialism approach to Recommender Systems would expect to maximize the positive consequences of the generated output. This statement can be ambiguous as the quantification of goodness is not totally clear and is not consistent along time: as we grow up, we may change our opinion on what is good and what is not, and several people may disagree in certain topics.

Anyways, the maximization of goodness may become damaging for an individual user. As a result of this approach, a specific ideology expected to be better for society will be promoted in the recommendations until it is forced and manipulated into the user's ideals.

In contrast, a more deontological or Kantian analysis would require the system to be upfront towards the user. The recommender should be transparent, explaining its objectives, and the developers should make sure the outputs aim towards those goals.

In this case, only user-interest-oriented systems would prevail. However, it is rather impossible to guarantee that all the results will protect the user's preferences. Biases found in the datasets used for training are a great obstacle in this sense.

Lastly, a utilitarian or Humean perspective defends that the Recommender System should always maximize the user's happiness. This is probably the most common approach nowadays, but with a twist. Happiness is perceived by the businesses as instant stimuli, promoting constant dopamine rushes in the users.

It has been proven that this phenomenon is very damaging. However, as it may provoke addiction, it easily translates into profit for the companies implementing this behavior. Also, the partakers in the podcast jokingly state that if this approach was taken to the

extreme, everything in internet "would be porn".

In conclusion, I personally believe that the podcast is flooded by the belief that humans are weak. Of course, I agree with the fact that recommendations should be more transparent, user-oriented and protecting of society, all of them at the same time if possible. However, whenever manipulation is mentioned, it is always assumed that the manipulation will succeed.

Humans are very manipulable, and it is hard to fight against that. But I believe that an increase in education, culture, strong and correct ideals would progressively defeat manipulative Recommender Systems, hopefully, until their total disappearance. In that scenario, both Humean and consequentialist approaches would be beneficial and ethical for everyone.