

THE INTERNET & THE WEB (2)

"A squirrel dying in front of your house may be more relevant to your interests right now than people dying in Africa."

(Mark Zuckerberg)

BACKGROUND | ONLINE PERSONALISATION

1 You are going to watch a TED Talk by Eli Pariser called *Beware of online "filter bubbles"*. Read the text about the speaker and the talk and answer the questions below:

- 1 Pariser is known for having developed the concept of the "filter bubble". What do you think this concept means?
- 2 Pariser believed that web personalisation is bad for us and bad for democracy. Do you think he's right?
- 3 Can some level of personalisation be useful to our online experience?



ELI PARISER is a North-American activist and author, the chief executive of Upworthy, a website for "meaningful" viral content. He became concerned about the development of web personalisation when he noticed a pattern of differing responses to search engine queries based on a user's past internet search history. He is the man credited with the invention and the development of the concept of the 'filter bubble', referring to the algorithms that dictate what we encounter online. Eli Pariser's idea worth spreading is that web personalisation has an unintended consequence, namely that we get trapped in a 'filter bubble' and don't get exposed to information that could challenge or broaden our worldview, which according to him, will prove to be bad for us and bad for democracy.

VOCABULARY | LISTENING PREPARATION

2 Read the sentences (1-8). The words / phrases in bold are used in the TED talk. First guess the meaning of the words. Then match the words with their definitions.

- 1 I've always **gone out of my way** to meet conservatives.
 - 2 And without consulting me about it, it had **edited** them **out**.
 - 3 Google looks at different signals to personally **tailor** your query results.
 - 4 This is something that's **sweeping** the web.
 - 5 And the challenge with these personalised filters is that, because they're mainly looking at what you click on first, it can **throw off** that balance.
 - 6 In a broadcast society there were these **gatekeepers** who controlled the flow of information.
 - 7 What we're seeing is more of a **passing of the torch** from human gatekeepers to algorithmic ones.
 - 8 If algorithms are going to **curate** the world for us, then we need to make sure that they're not just **keyed to** relevance.
- a to adjust something to suit a particular need or situation / to make something specially so that it is right for a particular person, organisation, or purpose;
- b hand over a job, responsibility, duty or knowledge to a successor;
- c someone or something that has the power to decide who gets particular resources and opportunities and who does not;
- d to try very hard to do something, especially for someone else;
- e to select things such as documents, music, products, or internet content to be included as part of a list or collection, on a website;
- f to remove something before it is broadcast or printed;
- g making a big difference to a particular situation and affecting a lot of people;
- h to relate something to something else so that the two things change at the same time, or by the same amount.
- i get rid of; remove;

TED TALKS | BEWARE OF ONLINE "FILTER BUBBLES"

3 Watch the TED talk and answer the following questions:

- 1 What has been edited out from Pariser's feed?
.....
- 2 How many signals does Google use to tailor your query results?
.....
- 3 What is sweeping the web?
.....
- 4 What is the filter bubble?
.....
- 5 What balance is thrown off by personalised filters?
.....

6 Who were the gatekeepers in a broadcast society?

7 What does Eli Pariser suggest as a solution to the problem of personalised filtering?

THINK CRITICALLY | REFLECT AND SYNTHESIZE

4 Work with a partner and discuss the following questions:

- 1 In his TED talk, Pariser discusses his concerns over automatic online filters. What information would be useful for online users to know about filtering and customizing online content? What positive changes could result from people knowing this information?
- 2 Internet companies are curating and personalising web content experience. But what about the content we are not seeing?
- 3 Editors have traditionally been tasked with curating the world of information. How does the world around us change when we get curated - or personalized - content, automatically for us?
- 4 How serious of a problem do you think the filter bubble is? Do you consider it to be a real threat?

COMMUNICATE | CLASS DEBATE

5 You will have a debate about the topic below. Team A will argue for the topic; Team B will argue against it.

TOPIC	<i>The 'filter bubble' is not as dangerous as Eli Pariser had argued. Information filtering takes place in the offline world just as often as it does in the online world and we are the ones deciding which type of content the algorithms show us.</i>
FORMAT	Round 1 - In turn, a member of Team A and a member of Team B present their team's position. Round 2 - In turn, a second member of each team responds to the other team's position. Round 3 - In turn, a member of each team asks two questions of the other team. The other team responds to the questions. Round 4 - In turn, a member of each team summarizes that team's ideas and view. Each round lasts up to five minutes. After round 1, teams will have five minutes to discuss how to argue against the ideas that the other team presented. A different member of the team should speak in each round.
RULES	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1 Pay attention to everybody's speech.2 Try not to interrupt others and do not speak over others.3 Try to keep your answers concise and to the point.4 Be engaged and ask questions about your opponent's points.5 Try to be dispassionate. Don't let your emotions carry you away.6 Let your teammates share their ideas as well.

6 You will be assigned to a team. Work on these tasks with your team members.

- Make sure you fully understand the format of the debate.
- Decide which supporting opinions, reasons and examples you will discuss.
- Do some research to find other people's viewpoints or facts that you could mention to support your ideas.
- Think of what the opposing team will argue and how you could argue against their position.
- Predict which questions the other team might ask, and discuss how to answer them.

7 Practice. Work with your team members. Complete the tasks below.

- Decide which member of your team will be lead speaker in each round.
- Practice what you will say in the round for which you will be the lead speaker.
- Think about which important information you should stress in order to make your points clearly.
- Listen to feedback from your team members about how you could speak more effectively.
- Read the rubric below. Notice how your debate will be evaluated. Keep these categories in mind as you take part in the debate.

Note: 1 = lowest; 5 = highest;

Name _____ Name _____ Name _____ Name _____

The presenters ...

1. clearly argued for their position using opinions, reasons and examples.	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
2. effectively responded to the other team's position	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5

3. presented other people's point of view	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
4. stressed important information	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
Overall rating	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
What did you like?				
What could be improved?				

- 8 Have the team debate. Your teacher will act as the timekeeper and the moderator. If it is not your turn to speak, listen to what other students are saying. You can quote or use their words when it is your time to speak. After the debate, provide feedback using the rubric as a guide. Add notes or any other feedback you want to share.

WRITING | INTRODUCTION TO DISCURSIVE ESSAYS

- 9 In the table below (1-3) you will find a brief description of different types of discursive essays in English. Can you guess what type of essay is being described?

1 _____	A type of essay that presents both sides of an issue, discussing points for and against a particular topic.
2 _____	A type of essay in which the writer presents his / her own opinion concerning a particular topic, supported by reasons and / or examples.
3 _____	A type of essay in which problems associated with a particular situation are analysed and possible solutions are put forward, together with their expected results or consequences.

- 10 Study the paragraph plans below and answer the questions that follow:

PLAN A

Introduction
P1: state the topic and your opinion

Main body
P 2, 3 & 4: present your viewpoint with reasons and examples
P 5: discuss possible opposing viewpoint with reasons and examples

Conclusion
P6: summarize / restate your opinion

PLAN B

Introduction
P1: state the problem(s) and its main cause(s) or effect(s)

Main body
P 2 - 5: suggest possible solutions to the problem, while discussing the expected results / consequences

Conclusion
P6: give a brief summary and present your opinion

PLAN C

Introduction
P1: state the topic without stating your opinion

Main body
P 2 & 3: arguments for, justified with reasons and examples
P 4&5: arguments against with reasons and examples

Conclusion
P6: give a balanced consideration or opinion

- Which plan do you think corresponds to each of the essay types from exercise 10?
- Take a look at the paragraph plans above and highlight any differences you can notice between them in terms of structure.
- Which plan would you choose for the following task?

WRITING TASK

You have been asked to write an essay giving your views on the following statement.

Some people argue that using personalisation algorithms is beneficial to online users since they save precious time by filtering out information that is not interesting or relevant for the user, while others argue that they tend to reinforce previously existing biases instead of broadening people's horizons and should therefore be eliminated.

- Which paragraph plan would you choose and why if an essay contained the following words in the title?
 - How far do you agree?
 - Discuss the statement.

- To what extent do you think / agree ... ?
- Give an opinion on ...
- Write a balanced discussion on ...
- Discuss the following statement and suggest what might be done to remedy the situation.
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of ...

11 Mark the following sentences as true (T) or false (F). Justify your answers.

- | | |
|---|-------|
| 1 Each paragraph should begin with a topic sentence. | T / F |
| 2 Statistics can be referred to even if you are unsure of the source. | T / F |
| 3 You should always use formal language and impersonal style. | T / F |
| 4 Linking words should be used. | T / F |
| 5 You must give examples from your own life. | T / F |
| 6 You can use short, contracted forms. | T / F |
| 7 You can disagree with the essay title. | T / F |
| 8 You should only give your own opinion. | T / F |
| 9 The introductions should explain why the issue is under debate / controversial. | T / F |
| 10 You should never exceed the specified word limit. | T / F |

12 Read the three writing tasks below and underline the keywords in each.

WRITING TASK 1

Your teacher has asked you to write an essay saying if you agree with the following statement.

Relevance algorithms used to filter and display online content narrow people's horizons and keep them less informed.

Write your **essay**.

WRITING TASK 2

More and more people are becoming aware of the fact that online websites often use personalization algorithms to curate content based on users' preferences. While some people argue that using personalization algorithms can save people time and energy, others argue that it poses a potential danger. Discuss both sides and give your opinion.

Write your **essay**.

WRITING TASK 3

In class you have been discussing some problems related to the use of personalization algorithms and filtering online content. Your teacher has asked you to write an essay on the following topic:

Using personalization algorithms has become mainstream in the online world, and some people fear that this leads to the narrowing of people's minds and reinforces biases. Discuss this statement and suggest possible solutions to remedy the situation.

Write your **essay**.

13 Which format would you choose for each of the writing tasks from above?

14 Choose one of the writing tasks from above. Plan and write your answer in 200 - 250 words.

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AN INSIGHTFUL ARTICLE FOR THOSE INTERESTED:

ZUIDERVEEN BORGESIU, Frederik J., Damian TRILLING, Judith MÖLLER, Balázs BODÓ, Claes H. DE VRESSE & Natali HELBERGER. 2016. "Should we worry about filter bubbles?", *Internet Policy Review*, 5(1). Available at: <https://policyreview.info/node/401/pdf>