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The Daily You: Personalizing Your Media

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By Jenn Hernandez

In his book, Republic.com, Cass Sunstein [1] discusses, “‘The Daily Me’–a communications package that is personally designed with each component fully chosen in advance” [2]. The phrase, “Daily Me”, was coined by MIT professor Nicolas Negroponte [3], who foresaw the “the growing power of consumers to filter what they see” [4]. Technologies have led us into creating our own spheres of concern, by personalizing, and thereby filtering, what we see. We act as editors in dictating what is important to us and what is not. This carries implications not only for the reader, but for our society as a whole.

The personalization of media acts, generally speaking, via a filtering system that builds off of what one has chosen to read in the past. Even without subscribing to services such as dailyme.com [5], we already do a lot of filtering, whether it’s reading select sections of a daily newspaper (or even choosing to subscribe only to a Sunday paper), tuning the radio, or changing channels on the television. We can’t see or hear everything at once, and personalized media realizes that we don’t want to always have to filter through everything on a daily basis to find what we want to read. So after the user chooses a few items, preferences are set and saved for the next time the user visits the page.

Personalizing media can be useful for those away from home, say, for instance, college students, who still want to be connected to the goings-on at home. One of MIT’s Media Lab projects was to create a personalized newspaper for freshman, called “Fishwrap.” The advisor for the project, Pascal R. Chesnais, who is also a research specialist at the Media Lab, detailed the beginning phase of a personalized newspaper: “In the fall 1992 seminar we asked the freshmen to design a paper [of the future],” Mr. Chesnais said. “We didn’t tell them what’s impossible, or what the state of our software is–we just asked them what they would like to see in such a paper.” [6]. The general consensus was that new students wanted, “a personalized paper…that would include news from home, maps of Cambridge and Boston, daily schedules of pertinent MIT events, and more. This idea grew into the “Freshman Fishwrap,” so named for its original target group and for a once-common secondary use of newspapers” [7]. Now the whole MIT community can receive personalized news in their inboxes every morning highlighting exactly
what each individual student is interested in—whether it be national news, news from home, local news, or other, more specific categories.

To find out more about how personalization works, I signed up for a free account at dailyme.com [8]. As soon as I signed up, I was given the option to begin personalizing my page. There are a number of general categories to choose from, plus a variety of subcategories, to which keywords can be added. You can also choose to get news from different news sources specifically. (I could not find, however, the newspaper from my hometown.) There is also the option to search by keyword, which does have the potential of pulling up obscure topics that wouldn’t have been found otherwise.

Another example of a personalization site is CRAYON [9], (CReAte Your Own Newspaper). The signup for CRAYON was simple and free, but I found the actual personalization to be a little clunky and difficult to understand. I eventually figured it out however, and found it to be simpler than I had originally thought. I was able to most easily get local news and weather by simply entering my zip code at the beginning of the customization process. When the paper is published, you get a simple page with the links to sources you chose segmented by broad topic. The only qualm I have with CRAYON is that it’s not an actual “newspaper page”, but actually more like a bookmarking site that the user specifically selects. There is no artificial intelligence working here. The creator of CRAYON shared that, in regards to online newspapers, “[He] thought they were great and thought about making a page that simply listed all the good ones. Even, better, [he] thought it would be neat to divide it up by sections like a regular newspaper.” [10]

The drawback to media personalization is that it has direct implications for democracy and raises concerns about current issues. Spend time talking with an individual or a group of like opinion, and it is highly likely that your views will be even further cemented because of the lack of counter argument. It has been found that, when people are confronted with opinions conflicting with their own, they move towards the center. Conversely—as it has been found in a study based in Colorado—removing all conflicting opinion can have quite the opposite effect. By validating and, as an observed result, polarizing the point of view to create an extremist information culture, any uncertainty or fence sitting is squelched. This can be detrimental to the debate and discussion of issues that is so crucial to our democracy and image as a democratic system. While isolating oneself among like-minded opinions, one not only misses perhaps valid counters arguments, but also may become extremist in their acceptance of other viewpoints. [11]

The Adam Sandler film Click is recent pop culture example of this point [12]. In the movie, Adam Sandler’s character uses his remote to fast forward or skip through certain moments in a day and the “smart” technology saved his preferences. But then the remote automatically fast-forwarded through similar moments and situations in the future, even if he didn’t want to at the time. This may be a hyperbole of the process of media personalization and its outcome, but the main idea is that once preferences are set (hardly implying that they can’t be changed at a later date, which was not an option in the movie), you are in effect fast-forwarding past other more
serendipitous encounters. These alternate events may prove to be just as interesting though you would have hardly chosen beforehand to read about them by general topic.

In conclusion, while the personalization of media can be convenient and useful—saving preferences and time—it can also conflict with the very cognitive behaviors of individuals. While trying to cater to the needs of the individual, media personalization can actually lead to an extreme bias by filtering out of varying points of view.

Endnotes


[7] Ibid.


[10] http://www.crayon.net/about/faq.html#1.2


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