How to permanently step out of your filter bubble

Do you live in a filter bubble? Do you see more Trump-related news every time you click on Trump-related news? If the answer is yes then you probably do live in a filter bubble, like most of us using the internet. But some of us try to burst the bubble. Here are some tips from my side on how I am always trying to burst my filter bubble.

The internet was supposed to be liberating, globalizing, and democratizing. Now it has become one of the most corporation-conformist places on earth. At least for those of us who live in our filter bubbles. Most of us, when we sit down with our smartphones or tablets –which we do many hours each day –go directly to the apps or web pages set up by big companies like Facebook, Google, Twitter, Apple etc. We don't really see the internet anymore. Algorithm monsters developed by big companies select the information we are allowed to see. I am not against big companies earning money –as long as they pay their taxes. But why not decide for myself what I want to see? Wouldn't that be more fun? So why not try and burst your filter bubble? Here is my recipe as a researcher.

Make the decision

Take a deep breath and give it a thought: Do you really want to step out of your filter bubble? Do you really want your views and opinions to be challenged? Have you heard about confirmation bias? Are you tolerant to other people's views? One way to check this is to ask yourself: Do I often end up in discussions where I try to convince others to believe what I believe? Then maybe you should reconsider your need to step out of your filter bubble. Overcoming own confirmation bias requires genuine curiosity about others, no matter what they think and say and believe. It is not an easy job.

Get the tools

Once you have made the decision, how do you practically and systematically burst your filter bubble? You need to rethink the way you use the internet. You need to bypass the companies and intermediaries who want to curate information for you. Here are some of the tools and routines that I use:

- **RSS is king**. RSS is shorthand for Really Simple Syndication. RSS is an information channel that puts you in control. Think of it this way. Facebook, Google and other popular services have internal processes to decide what to show to you. You have very little control over those process. RSS

returns that control back to you without too much hassle. You decide which web pages you want to keep informed about, and RSS channels notify you when new information arrives. This blog for instance has an RSS feed. With an RSS reader (or feed aggregator) you can subscribe to my blog's RSS feed and get notified every time I write a new blog post. By subscribing to RSS feeds that interest you, you create a personalized information feed that is made by you. I myself use the RSS reader QuiteRSS as my main information app, and have around 100 feeds I follow (most of them professional feeds, such as research journals). The set of feeds changes as I find new feeds or abandon old ones. (Sadly RSS is an endangered species. When you use RSS you don't give back to those who provide the feed. Therefore big data companies such as Facebook, Twitter and Google don't provide RSS feeds)

- **Anonymous search is the queen**. If you use a personalized search engine, such as Google, your search results will be tailored to you and will confirm your biases. If you and I search for "filter bubble" in Google, we will get different results based on our personal Google profiles. That is called personalized search. I therefore rarely use Google for searching and rather use Duckduckgo, which is an anonymous search engine. Duckduckgo's algorithms are unbiased and do as good as they can to give you the relevant hits based on the keywords you enter. If you and I search for "filter bubble" in Duckduckgo, we will get the exact same results. I don't deny that Google has a better search engine, but I use Google as my secondary search engine because I know it creates a filter bubble for me.
- **Good old bookmarks**. For those pages that don't provide an RSS feed –or provide a crowded RSS feed with tens of entries every day –use good old bookmarks.You find bookmark feature in all major browsers, and they are all controlled by you.
- **Twitter is not so bad**. Compared to Facebook, I find my Twitter feed more controllable. It contains fewer advertisements, and I can turn off all retweets (which I do for everyone I follow on Twitter). I also tell Twitter that I don't like to see tweets that others like (normally Twitter respects my requests). In this way I get a quite clean feed containing updates only from people I follow, which is the main strength of Twitter as a platform.

Make it a habit

Of course, as any other lifestyle change, you need to turn living outside your filter bubble into a habit. Remember that all the world will all the time fight back and will want you to quietly go back into your bubble. Facebook and Google and Amazon and Apple will all the time try to hook you to their services. So this is a continuous struggle. Some points to remember:

- **By all means, be social**. I am not against social media, and actually spend a lot of time on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. But then I try to focus on what my family and friends –that meas human beings I care about –are saying. I don't use Facebook as my news source.
- **Challenging views**. Read a diverse list of newspapers to challenge your views and give yourself different perspectives. I have the impression that many people are allergic to reading news from sources with opposing political views. This is sad but a consequence of confirmation bias. I try to avoid this by reading news from right and left side of politics. Believe me, newspapers can provide

very different analyses of exactly same news!

- **Learn to be critical**. One thing is to be exposed to biased information. A completely different thing is to believe that information without any critical thinking. Learn to be critical. The rule of "too good to be true" is always true and a simple way to make you alert about a news story.

Pay for good information

Good information, such as investigative journalism, costs money. If good journalists are not paid, all the world will become a bad filter bubble anyhow. I believe all of us who appreciate good news have a duty to pay journalists and other good information producers (such as researchers like myself!). If we take it for granted that good information is free, then there will not be any good information left. Find the newspaper you think deserves your money, and pay them. It is a good investment.

More to read

- This article in NYT gives some more tips on the topic, with links to browser plugins and apps to escape your bubble.It is more focused on political issues.
- This article from Nieman Journalism is good. Though I don't believe we can ever expect Google or Facebook to help us burst our filter bubble.
- Let me know if you have more interesting stuff about the topic!

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