Too much of a good thing can be bad for you

Taming the Wild, Wild Web 2

One of the Internet's shining potentials is to bring the world together, as the connections linking data also join the humans on either end. Communication barriers of time, distance, and even language have fallen, so that users can reach a global audience as easily as calling on their next door neighbor, if not more so.

And yet, our planet seems more divided than ever. Positions have become more extreme, voices louder, civility is lost, and compromise has become a dirty word. It's most obvious in politics, but today it seems like *every* social issue has become highly contentious. How did this happen and why? In other words, how did everybody become such arrogant idiots?

Your world, just the way you want it

The answer, of course, is that they aren't. But *something* has happened that deepens social fault-lines rather than fill them in. Somehow this mighty engine of connectivity has become a sword of division.

We've already examined the license that **assumed anonymity** gives to some people. But there seems to be something *more* at work here. Whereas rudeness gets power through a *lack* of information, as we shall see, the problem here comes from sharing *too much*.

The Web has become deeply personalized, and nowhere more so than in **Google searches**. Say that you want to find out more about **unicorns**. The results you see after you enter the term into the Google or Yahoo search bar can differ wildly from what *anyone else* may find, depending on your searching and browsing history, and ranked according to a complicated secret formula based on webhits, and again, what Google knows of your personal history.

In first rank, Google may offer you a recent story on **single-horned Ice Age rhinos**, or one about startups worth over a billion dollars, bisexual female swingers, virginal geek girls, or rare, unique treasures – all of which are **current uses** for "unicorns". The **original mythical beasts** of fairy-lore may show up far down the list, and quite likely after an ad for collectible figurines and some funny unicorn images.

Moreover, the **results will vary** depending on where you live, your income, age, sex, previous searches, plus web-page ranking and other factors that Google won't disclose. And Google is certainly not alone.

By now, such practices are universal among search engines, social networks, and large retailers. They are all based first and foremost on **cookies** – small files placed your machine to identify and track you. While they are essential for navigating many sites, they can also be used to trace your travels across the Web.

What cookies offer to consumers is **convenience**. They make it easier to surf, but the quest for easy access is by no means limited to websites. It's even baked into browsers with features like favorite lists, bookmarks, and stored browsing history, as well as auto-completion and correction widgets.

All of this is done seamlessly in the background. Most users *never* realize that they are seeing anything *other* than what everybody else is seeing. This can lead to what author and activist Eli Pariser called the **filter bubble** in his 2011 book of the same name. By eliminating conflicting viewpoints, the effect is to isolate users intellectually. In closing off new ideas, this can narrow and impoverish outlooks, stifle innovation, and give users false impressions of the world.

Indeed, **one study** found that just *using* search engines tends to make people think they're much

smarter than they really are, and unjustifiably so. Worse, combined with feedback loops created by the firms using those same searches for advertising or to pull up similar content, the insulation only grows.

In 2010, Web inventor **Sir Tim Berners-Lee** noted a kind of "*Hotel California*" effect where social networks walling themselves off from other networks trap users within a "closed silo" of information, where the more you participate, the more locked in you become. Your data, your life, becomes captive to the platform. He warns that this could splinter the Web.

And so the Internet becomes a narrow hall of mirrors, where self-interest feels vindicated and righteous. Is it any wonder, then, that intolerance is so prevalent on the Internet and continually feeds on itself?

The message is in the massage
The firms that silently gather such information are *very* quiet about their uses of it. But leaks do happen.

One talkative statistician at Target revealed some **interesting facts** about how such data is used – before the company silenced him. He said that simply through tracking purchase histories, they were able to pinpoint precisely when their female customers became pregnant, based on tiny clues. One of those key indicators turned out to be when women switched from perfumed lotions to unscented ones.

Using such intimate info to zero in on customers backfired at first, when an angry dad demanded they stop sending such ads to his teen daughter. But the man apologized after he found that the girl was indeed with child. So the retail giant became more cunning – placing ads for diapers sent to expectant women between those for lawnmowers and wine.

Such stories show both the extent of such tracking, and just how cleverly it may be employed. And that's just with data from a *single* store. Just imagine what could happen when even *larger* sources of data are aggregated. For while Google tracks all your interests, Facebook collects information on your friends, and Amazon what you want to buy. It's all freely given by users, but it leaves *very* little unknown about them.

The potential is there not only to come up with dossiers whose completeness would be the envy of the notorious East German **Stasi**, but the power to underhandedly wield them to manipulate preferences and results – *without ever being noticed*. Can democracy long survive under such conditions?

Facebook got into hot water when it was **revealed** they had performed experiments on some users, by skewing the stories it offered them in its News Feed feature. They wanted to see if changing the emotional tone of the stories affected them. And it did. But many people condemned it as highly **unethical**.

You can check out, but you can never leave
If one is disciplined and thorough, one *can* cut down such information sharing somewhat. But it is impossible to eliminate *all* of it, for much is automatic. As we have reported, **Windows 10** (and now even **7 and 8**) *continuously* reports back to Microsoft, even when the computer is inactive with all sharing features turned off. No one outside the company has any idea what data is being collected, or its ultimate purpose.

The balanced solution would be to limit sharing to **appropriate disclosure** – giving just enough information to do what is necessary. Users would have to declare their real identity, and websites limit what data they collect, and how they use it. Such rules might have to be encoded in law within an electronic **bill of rights**, like **this one** proposed back in 1993.

But don't hold your breath. There's too much money involved for reforms to happen anytime soon, if ever.

Until then, it's up to us. One long-time user of Facebook, realizing that it only serves her what she *chooses* to see, used the "**law of attraction**" to systematically train the interface by what she clicked on to eliminate unacceptable content. For now, conscious mastery of our own filter bubbles may be our sole practical alternative.

WordCamp Returns to Albuquerque
SWCP is a proud supporter of **WordPress**, so we are delighted to announce the return of **WordCamp**. This is a one-day-only intensive info-sharing event that covers everything about the remarkably versatile and powerful Content Management System that is WordPress, which today runs a quarter of the Web.

The event will be held at **WESST Enterprise Center** downtown, all day Saturday, April 30. WordCamp will feature a number of interesting speakers, including our own Jamii Corley, the catalyst of our own coworking space, **Ideas & Coffee**, one of this year's sponsors. Tickets are available at the **WordCamp Albuquerque 2016 website**, along with full details. Space is limited for this popular event, so sign up today.