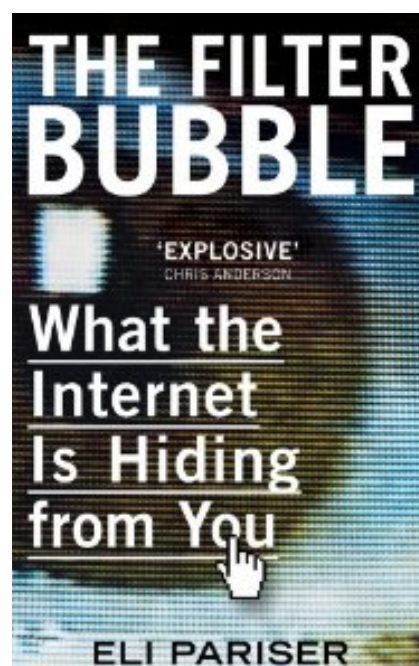# Reviews

The Filter Bubble: What the Internet Is Hiding from You by Eli Pariser, London: Viking, 2011. 294 pp., £12.99 (paperback), ISBN-978-0-670-92038-9

Arguing that personalization of the web 'poses a threat to public life itself' (p. 154), Eli Pariser— board president of MoveOn.org and the chief executive of Upworthy, a website for 'viral meaningful content'—attempts to demonstrate how the Internet places u nseen and insidious limits on our minds, public culture and political discourse. In his recently re-released book *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet Is Hiding from You*, Pariser presents a well-written and cogently argued case against the widely-used filtering technologies of Internet heavyweights such as Google, Facebook, Twitter and Pandora.

A quick read despite its relative length, *The Filter Bubble* is divided into eight chapters. The first, 'The Race for Relevance', details the economic and corporatist parameters for developing and deploying personalization tools for Internet users. Chapter 2, 'The User Is the Content', explores the vagaries of disintermediation, i.e., the elimination of middlemen (p. 59), and user-driven content in a world where information is almost always free (or at least you do not pay for it with money). The next chapter, provocatively-titled 'The Adderall Society', explores the factors behind our current need for speed when it comes to locating and processing information, and the unavoidable and sometimes debilitating price we pay for data streamlining. Chapter 4, 'The You Loop', examines the self-fulfilling information landscapes we create through our highly monitored, cataloged and categorized actions in cyberspace and offers insight into the future of Internet searches. Next up, 'The Public Is Irrelevant' turns towards the use of personalization in politics, showing how 'you-centric' technology can be used to win votes, as well as abused to subvert genuine democracy and a functioning civil society. The sixth chapter, 'Hello, World!' focuses on the hard-wired nature of the Internet, including how databases, code and software programs create rails and ditches that guide or mire us, based on often unpredictable factors that are often barely understood by the engineers who created these 'tools'. The penultimate chapter, 'What You Want, Whether You Want It or Not', predicts a host of dystopian-lite outcomes based on the current personalization and filtering paradigms. In the concluding chapter, 'Escape from

the City of Ghettos', the author becomes activist, offering numerous 'How-to's' that can help the world mitigate and/or eliminate the problems presented in the previous chapters.

According to Pariser, the 'age of personalization' began on 4 December 2009 when Google began using fifty-seven 'signals'—including the location of one's log-in, browser type, etc.—to target your 'intended' outcomes (pp.1-3). In effect, who you are, where you are, and what type of technology you use would—from that point on—determine what you found. Pariser links this trend to the epiphenomenon of 'atomization' of media, wherein narrowcasting, 'pull' (rather than 'push') media and user-generated content has transformed the way we collect information, particularly news and opinions, and even how we decide what we 'like' (for Pariser, we are rather weak-minded creatures beholden to our corporate masters when it comes to tastes, desires and passions). Much of *The Filter Bubble* focuses on the ways in which information is controlled, both explicitly and implicitly, by corporations who have our best (consumer-based) interests at heart. Through the use of prediction engines— what Pariser deems the 'filter bubble'—these corporations have fundamentally altered our encounter with ideas and information (p. 9). Given that Facebook is arguably the largest source of daily news (and Google the quickest way to find what is not 'pushed' to us), the importance of such a 'bubble' is not trivial.

Undoubtedly, there is something incredibly appealing about the 'Ptolemaic universe' of information created and sustained by these new tools since the world seems to 'revolve around us' (p. 12). According to Pariser, we need not be confronted with ideas we do not agree with, news we find disturbing, or data that we find boring; that is unless we actively seek it out, and even then the Olympian masters of Silicon Valley will—like Zeus protecting one of his demigod scions—provide some form of protection from the perils of the world. As Pariser frames it:

> Left to their own devices, personalization filters serve up a kind of invisible autopropaganda, indoctrinating us with our own ideas, amplifying our desire for things that are familiar and leaving us oblivious to the dangers lurking in the dark territory of the unknown (p. 15).

Yet, there is a high price to be paid for the ambrosia of personalization, a sort of Lotus-eater satisfaction that comes from thinking everything fine, everyone agrees with you and nothing is uninteresting. The 'endless you-loop' (p. 16) is, paradoxically, self-negating as it retards the intellectual, cultural and political evolution that comes from the natural exposure to divergent and sometimes jarring ideas and opinions. Instead, Pariser laments, we are all being sucked into a morass of the 'unobjectionable entertainment' (p. 68) that depletes the need to actually learn or genuinely like anything.

All of this is seemingly predetermined by our own actions. Google knows even before I type the fourth alpha-numeric character into the embedded search field in my browser what I am looking for, and politely makes a suggestion. I can ignore this suggestion and carry on, but why? Corporate software knows best (l am rather ambivalent about the efficacy of prediction engines, as they smack a bit of 'Big Brother' yet strip out the informational chaff I would otherwise have to sort through on any given day).. Facebook will let us 'friend' anyone we want, but will keep certain posts from us, even—according to Pariser—whole strings

of posts from friends whose attitudes and orientations are not similar to our own, since we could get upset by their online rants and 'unfriend' them. *The Filter Bubble* aims to uncover this brave new world and demonstrate its deleterious effects in detail.

Written in a quick-paced journalistic style and backed up by ample references to (online) news reports, Pariser's opus is persuasive on its surface. However, following an unscientific test of his hypothesis this summer, I came away unconvinced of key aspects of his argument. If Facebook is guilty of the crimes leveled against it, then why am I presented with (digital) reams of posts that frustrate, enrage and even sicken me? Just as I finished reading the book, a number of highly divisive events occurred in the U.S. which quickly translated into digital skirmishes in the larger (American) culture war. The first was the mass killing of moviegoers at the midnight premiere of *The Dark Knight Rises* in Aurora, Colorado. The second was the open declaration of the anti-gay rights stance of the Chick-fil-A fast-food corporation. The third was the XXX Olympic Games in London. Facebook quickly emerged as a battlefield for my circle of friends to emote, assuming dogmatic positions on a number of political fronts. One displayed photographs of his preteen children brandishing pistols at a firing range, boldly proclaiming—or more accurately 'performing'—his right to bear arms (and evidently his underage offspring's, as well). Another friend railed against Boston's mayor for suggesting that Chick-fil-A's retrograde positions of what constitutes 'family' would not be welcome in Beantown, arguing that private enterprise was under siege by a totalitarian tidal wave. A third friend used Michael Phelp's eighteenth gold medal victory to sarcastically (and convolutedly) suggest that America's 'socialist president' Barack Obama wants to distribute these medals evenly among the other swimmers and that 1%-ers like Phelps are only doing so well because they 'steal' from the rest of us.

Reflecting on Pariser's thesis and reeling from these incendiary posts, I found myself—as a user of social media—wishing that his contention about Facebook was true. I would like to have never have seen these posts. They do not reflect my values and, frankly, they made me angry. The 'antiseptically friendly world' (p. 150) that Pariser contends will result from Facebook's filteration technologies does not exist. I have since begun a rather systematic policy of unfriending the people who made these posts. While I realize I may be consigning myself to the 'me-loop' that Pariser describes, I am doing so not because of the 'filter bubble', but despite it. Facebook precludes genuine political discourse by creating a zone where the first to post is the most powerful. Dissenters will automatically be operating from a position of weakness, thus forcing those with differing opinions to submit to a minority (and typically unpopular) position in the information chain or ignore the post. After this summer of discontent, I realized that if Facebook did what Pariser claims it does, I would have not had to worry about such things, but instead, the disconcerting politics of my 'friends' was literally in my face(book).

While Pariser's argumentation regarding Google's search and Pandora's tonality algorithms is much stronger than his analysis of Facebook's purported ability to protect us from the untoward, there are holes in his reasoning here as well. Why is Google convinced that I am only looking for German-centric sites while in Berlin or sites tailored to Israelis when in Tel Aviv? Just because I got on an airplane does not change who I am. Shouldn't personalization, if it is as all-powerful as Pariser claims, work wherever I am? Moreover, Pariser's line

of argument vis-à-vis the Pandora music service is also highly problematic. As a longtime paid subscriber to the service, I would argue that by exposing me to a variety of music—even if it 'jives' with my stated preferences—Pandora has done more to challenge and make me reflect on my musical tastes than any other source (including friends, music festivals and *Rolling Stone*).

Putting these criticisms (which are admittedly from a user's perspective, though informed by new media scholarship) to the side, *The Filter Bubble* synthesizes a number of contemporary issues in the way we go about getting our information and forming our opinions. While certainly a work written for popular consumption, Pariser's analysis is subtly girded by scholarly analysis of the public sphere (Habermas), ideascapes (Appadurai) and Gesellschaft (Tönnies), though none of these scholars appear in the citations or the rather paltry 'Further Reading' list. Pariser backs up his analysis of Web behavior with a goodly number of psychological and sociological studies about groupthink and pack behavior. *The Filter Bubble* can be seen as a timely guide for how we form our convoluted political identities, and the role that Web and its increasingly tortuous geographies play in shaping our minds. For instance, Pariser discusses the fact that more people think that Barack Obama is Muslim now than when he was a comparative unknown running for the Democratic Party nomination (p. 89). More disturbingly, the greatest increase in adherence to this fallacy is among the college-educated since they tend to consume *more* media, which, by default, is shaped by the 'filter bubble' (thus making it *more partisan* media).

Scholars of new media in the post-socialist world will likely find little of specific interest in this book. However, a careful read will undoubtedly stimulate interesting conceptual connections to trends in Central European, Russian and Eurasian cyberspace, perhaps even triggering nightmarish visions of a future wherein the Lukashenkos, Karimovs and Putins of the world put these tools at the disposal of the state. The greatest criticism of the text for readers of *Digital Icons* is that it is blinded by its U.S.-centric focus. There is little recognition that the Internet is a global communications and information platform, much less an acknowledgment that there might be different ramifications for polities outside of North America. Overall, however, *The Filter Bubble* is a worthwhile read, though it suffers from overreach in a few key arguments and is too limited a scope in certain areas of analysis.

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