

# The Google “Filter Bubble” and Its Problems

If anyone had doubts that politics is involved in search engines, then the \$5 million plus that Google spends on lobbyists each year should be enough to make the picture clear. It’s not entirely surprising, then, that political activists like Eli Pariser of MoveOn.org have some opinions to state on the matter. Pariser’s thoughts, however, hone in not on Google’s massive size, purchasing power, corporate responsibility, or anything similar. Rather, he is concerned with how Google personalization is impacting the way information is distributed.

Pariser calls this issue the “filter bubble.” It’s a problem not just with Google but with almost all major information distributors on the web. From Facebook to The Huffington Post, personalization has become a prominent part of how we interact with the web. Links that we tend to respond to quickly rise on our results, while those we click on rarely fade into the background. For Google and users, this tends to mean a priority on getting the most “relevant” information out there. But relevance, says Pariser, is not the only concern.

He compares the issue to that of journalistic ethics in the early 19th century. The editorial decisions made were made by humans who had to, through the public behest or their own moral compass, let in a diverse number of viewpoints and give unbiased information. Personalization of the modern web, however, removes this diversification and creates a self-based bias, putting us in a narrow loop of information: “the filter bubble.”

Beyond merely providing less diverse information, and only that which is unlikely to challenge our current beliefs, Pariser states that this filter bubble disconnects us from our “ideal selves” – that version of ourselves that we want to be in the long-run, but that we struggle to act on quickly when making impulse decisions. The solution to the problem, though, is just as complex as the issue itself. Pariser’s end conclusion is that the creators of the modern web, including those at Google, need to adopt an ethical standard that includes showing a diversity of viewpoints, giving users a say in what information is filtered out, and creating opportunities for users to – through selecting a different but visible link – challenge their standard viewpoint.