

WHEN YOUR LIVED REALITY BECOMES AN ALGORITHM OF THE POPULAR

Yesterday, as people panicked about Twitter's plan to present tweets to users using algorithmic calculations of what that person might like, I wrote this:

What if humans started to experience time as an algorithm of the popular rather than lived narratively ordered experience?

Especially since I work from home and in flyover country, Twitter is very much a lived conversation for me. And if Twitter alters the way it appears to me – basically choosing who it thinks I want to talk to rather than what the serendipity of the unique collection of people I follow presents in time-ordered fashion – it will be fairly dramatically altering my lived reality.

The thought got even creepier for me as respondents to my tweet (author William Gibson was among those who retweeted it, so I got so really awesome responses) pointed out that associations divorced from lived time is much closer to dreaming than waking reality. Of course, as a shrink friend noted, in dreaming, we consciously and unconsciously select what those associations are, rather than having a computer do it for us.

So thought of as its almost most dystopian, Twitter wants to take the serendipitous global conversation we've been having and instead replace it with a living dream world chosen for us algorithmically.

But let me go one step more dystopian. As I noted yesterday, Google recently told the

British Parliament that it is testing ways to show “positive” ad words and YouTubes when people look for hateful, potentially terrorist speech. Google’s announcement follows an earlier one from Facebook, stating it would do the same.

In other words, since the early January meeting in Silicon Valley, two of the big tech companies announced plans to rejigger their algorithms selectively for users the algos identify as expressing an interest in terrorism. For those interested in terrorism, Google and Facebook will create a waking dreamworld.

Thus far, Twitter has made no such announcement. Yesterday (that is, the same day this algorithm report came out) it did, however, announce how many perceived terrorists it has kicked off Twitter.

Like most people around the world, we are horrified by the atrocities perpetrated by extremist groups. We condemn the use of Twitter to promote terrorism and the Twitter Rules make it clear that this type of behavior, or any violent threat, is not permitted on our service. As the nature of the terrorist threat has changed, so has our ongoing work in this area. Since the middle of 2015 alone, we’ve suspended over 125,000 accounts for threatening or promoting terrorist acts, primarily related to ISIS.

The blog post making that announcement also addressed algorithms, admitting that they can’t really work, linking to this report from December (which discussed Facebook and Google) on another presentation to the UK Parliament.

As many experts and other companies have noted, there is no “magic algorithm” for identifying terrorist content on the internet, so global online platforms are forced to make challenging judgement calls based on very limited information

and guidance. In spite of these challenges, we will continue to aggressively enforce our Rules in this area, and engage with authorities and other relevant organizations to find solutions to this critical issue and promote powerful counter-speech narratives.

All of which might have left the impression that Twitter, unlike its counterparts Google and Facebook, would not be fiddling with its algorithms in response to the request to magnify voices deemed to be positive targeted at those seeking terrorism content.

Except that at almost exactly the same time, came these reports that everyone would get (or would get the option of) the algorithmic treatment.

Now, having studied how, after 1848, the powers that be in Paris found ways to eliminate the growing newspaper public in the belief that it had led to that year's revolution (that's partly where the idea of high literature, as embodied in *Madame Bovary*, arose from), I'm pretty paranoid when I see the ways the elite would current neuter the voices that contributed to the Arab Spring, Black Lives Matter, and yes, terrorism.

But I have to say, I always get buggy when communications companies – like AT&T and Microsoft – don't have an apparently robust business model, especially when I consider ways they could (and do, in the case of AT&T) profit handsomely off working for the government. Most people assume Twitter is doing this as a way to monetize, which it has thus far failed to do. And that may well be the case.

If so, who is the customer, and what is Twitter delivering?

Update: Jack Dorsey just had this to say on Twitter.

Hello Twitter! Regarding #RIPTwitter: I want you all to know we're always listening. We never planned to reorder timelines next week.

Twitter is live. Twitter is real-time. Twitter is about who & what you follow. And Twitter is here to stay! By becoming more Twitter-y.