Internet and Users. Who is the Reader?

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Abstract

Internet has turned into a fundamental component of everyday life, as it plays a major role in advancing the globalization process. Globalization was fostered by the idea of creating equal-access opportunities for all and facilitating communication worldwide. Using internet as the core platform, billions of people try to access and benefit from this opportunity through search engines, service providers, websites and social media. However, given the profound difference between internet and user's languages, users end up on relying on search engines and tools to translate their ideas into a computer-readable language and derive information from them.

In order to provide the best possible services, search engines and social media need to accumulate comprehensive data on each user's identity. The challenge is that once they are fed with convenient information on each user, they tend to personalize the idea they grasp of him or her based on their given regulations and policies, which in the mid- and long-term results in managing users' access to information..

By applying the reader-response theory, this paper seeks to focus on the challenges stemming from the adoption of users' personalized profiles by Google, Facebook and Amazon as the most common part of users' performance in internet. It also explores how the reading differences of the users and the tools result not only in personalized versions of users, but also engender an unrecognized virtual in-betweenness of users' own perception of themselves and the tools' perception of users.

keywords: Project Cycle Management, Logical Framework, planning, development cooperation Input-Output Analysis, Cost-Benefit Analysis, Complexity, non-linearity, Real options.

1. 1.   Introduction

The emergence of globalization, that has generated the international integration of ideologies, economies, services and cultures, can be described as a double-edged sword that carries enormous advantages, as well as disadvantages in all aspects of the process. On one side, it can be claimed that by eliminating national barriers globalization has facilitated free flowing of ideas, knowledge, services, money and people, raised living standards, and opened new avenues for cultural

advancement. On the other side, it can be argued that the propagation of the globalization process, that has gone hand in hand with the technological advancement, led to some controversies in respect of the interaction of human beings with the system. The main challenge in this regard is that advanced tools, instead of directing users toward the reality, tend to construct and present the reality through their particular selection algorithms.

i. Globalization, Technology and Challenges

Globalization as a concept has been studied from scientific, political, economic, philosophical and cultural point of views by specialists and all these studies have recognized the contribution of technological advancement in the development of the globalization process. According to Anthony Giddens, "it is the technology that has accelerated the impacts of local happenings on other part of the world and vice-versa" (Giddens, 1990). Even the four main categories of globalization introduced by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) have been significantly influenced by advancements in technologies and communication, which include movement of trades, capitals and peoples, as well as knowledge (IMF,2000).

Technology, which is considered as the driving force of globalization, has entirely altered the way in which the world functions. Therefore, the adoption of new technologies and the method through which they operate can have worldwide effects at different levels; that is why it is significantly important to understand the pattern of their operations. The main challenge in the interplay of humans and system is about the in-between reading process or, in other words, the differences in the approaches employed by the system and the user to interact. These differences may end up in misleading the user, by imposing an extra and unexpected limitation to user's access to the global data or shaping user's behavior.

ii. Methodology

This paper, by applying the reader-response theory, tries to identify and analyze the approaches employed by Facebook, Google and Amazon in the reading process of users. It also explores how the reading differences between the user and the system result not only in the emergence of a personalized version of the user from the system's point of view, but also bring about an unrecognized

virtual in-betweenness of the user's own image and the system's image of the user.

Amazon, Facebook and Google were chosen as the subjects of this research for three reasons: first, they cover the four main levels of user's behaviour in the virtual world, i.e. social, economic, individual and informational aspects. Second, they have the highest usage rate on a large scale and, finally, they employ a shared process for analysis and classification of users for different purposes.

In this research, a quantitative method has been applied to examine the data collected, using a two-stage analysis solution. In the first stage, the rules and regulations from the three companies concerning the information requested of users were collected from their respective websites; after a detailed examination of the data by the authors, the reading processes employed by these companies were specified and placed in the data panel. In the second stage, the data obtained were evaluated using the reader-response theory and the results presented in the form of perspectives. In this respect, the significance of this study also lies in the fact that it offers a new viewpoint to evaluate the interaction between a user and the system through the reader-response theory.

2. Theoretical Framework: User and System as Author and Reader

The reader-response theory was developed by Louise Rosenblatt as a confrontation with the New Criticism and its dismissal of the reader in the interpretation process. To make her position clear, in the premise of *the Reader, the Text, the Poem,* she claims that "a text, once it leaves its author's hands, is simply paper and ink until a reader evokes from it a literary meaning... then, it must be thought of as an event in time. It is not an object or an ideal entity. It happens during a coming-together... of a reader and a text. The reader brings to the text his past experience and present personality" (Rosenblatt, 1994).

So, rather than focusing on the author or the text as the exclusive repository of meaning and value in the reading process, the focal point is the reader and the procedure through which meaning is constructed. Reading, in this sense, is a transaction in which the reader constructs meaning as he or she progresses through the text. However, because readers bring their ideologies and experiences to the text, their responses will eventually differ from one another. In this regard, as Deborah suggests, readers infuse personal meaning into verbal symbols on a page and the text channels meaning through its structure. To create

meaning on this ground, readers must be constantly active by building meaning (Appleman,2015). Louise Rosenblatt urged reader to "make a poem as he reads. He does not seed an unalterable meaning that lies within the text. He creates meaning from the confrontation" (Galda, 1981). Critics developed the reader-response theory to the extent that the author will be dismissed, once a reader starts reading. Roland Barthes, addressed it as "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" (Barthes, 1998).

As in the reader-response theory, what this paper is focusing on is the confrontation of human beings and internet, and what the process of meaning-formation within the reader's realm is. Moreover, given that according to this theory any act of reading is a structure constituted of the reader and the text, the central argument is that the same model can be related to decoding the process that Facebook, Amazon and Google apply to read human intentions and ideas. The investigation of this relationship indicates that the concepts of reader and writer are not exclusively related to human interaction anymore and, by employing advanced algorithms, machines attempt to read human minds and categorize them into actual and potential clients. This is also an illustration of the fact that, where meaning resides in this confrontation, it underlines which direction human beings are heading to and the challenges this may bring in terms of human identity.

In the following sections, the performance of search engines and the implementation of new searching policies will be explored, and their objectives will be addressed. Next, the structure through which meaning is channeled in these search engines and tools will be explained and, finally, by applying the reader-response theory, it will be argued how this process can be related to human identity.

3.   Personalized Search and information

Searching technology, which is an essential component of navigation, through the abundance of results has turned into an inevitable part of users' virtual identities. Therefore, any changes in the searching policy leads to the alteration of the scope and the type of users' access to information in the course of time.

As stated in its official blog, in December 2009 Google introduced its personalized search feature that can be considered as the beginning of a new era for search engines, since it represented a big leap toward the infusion of users' perceptions and experience in searching platforms.

The core concepts behind personalized search can be categorized as:

1. Shifting from an autonomous search toward more self-retrieved search;
2. Tracking users' activities, even if they are not signed into their accounts;
3. Collecting data constantly about each user.

Others who followed Google's footsteps also applied the same personalization procedure to provide the most relevant results. Accordingly, the bottom-line of Google, Facebook and Amazon is to target highly relevant users to either any advertisement or information. As Tapan Bhat, senior vice-president of Yahoo's Integrated Consumer Experience, said "The future of the web is about personalization ... now the web is about 'me'" (qtd. in The Filter Bubble, 2012). Sheryl Sandberg, Facebook chief operating officer (COO), told that within three to five years, "the idea of a website that is not customized for a particular user will seem quaint" (qtd. in Filter Bubble, 2012).

In order to personalize users' results, these tools encourage each user to provide his or her own authentic identities, and describe experiences and emotions for every activity performed on these platforms. By doing so, the online identity that each user creates by sharing the information with these platforms will be ultimately employed for "reading" him or her.

i. Personalization on Google

Following the assessment of Google's data collection policy, the following results were achieved.

Google approach users and collect their data in two broad ways:

1. Personal information including, name, birthday, gender, email address, telephone number, country, language or credit card, billing information etc. However, to take advantage of the services, Google encourages users to share as much information as possible. It also collects information about other elements that users create, including correspondence on Gmail, contacts users are adding, calendar events, videos and photos that they upload, documents they create and information they store in Google drive and cloud.
2. Core information including device information such as hardware model, operating system version, unique device identifiers, and mobile network information, things users search for, website they visit, videos they

watch, ads they click, location, IP address and cookie data, google applications contents such as Google map, Google translate, Google book and so on.

ii.   What Does Google Share with Users?

Google states that after collecting information, it may combine the collected personal information from one service with information from other Google services or, depending on users' account settings, associate user's activity on other sites and apps with his or her personal information.

Accordingly, once the collection and connection of data about each user is completed, Google starts to evaluate and process data through its given algorithm that results in creation of an online identity per user. Eli Pariser calls this algorithm a "filter bubble" and says, "these engines create a unique universe of information for each of us—what I've come to call a filter bubble—which fundamentally alters the way we encounter ideas and information" (Praiser, 2012). As Google claims in its privacy policy, it uses this information to "improve users experience and the overall quality of their services". This means that along with the quality improvement of Google services, the quality of the personalized universe per user will eventually be developed.

iii.   Personalization on Amazon

The Evaluation of Amazon Data Collection policy indicates that it collects data about:

1. Personal information, including name, email address, telephone number, country, language, billing information as well as information of the system users are using, location, IP address, operating system version, mobile network information, cookies data and Amazon data storage.
2. Core consumption information including what users purchase, purchase history, recent orders, information when they search, buy, post, participate in a contest or questionnaire, or communicate with customer service as well as their financial information as credit cards, credit, social security and driver's license numbers.

iv.   What Does Amazon Share with Users?

Once Amazon has collected sufficient data about customers' personal and consumption traits, its algorithm initiates to read purchase behaviors of customers and personalize their experience. Amazon not only personalizes consumers' experience in its platform, but also provides customized information to sellers and vendors based on their needs. In addition to customizing potential consumers for sellers, personalized algorithm has also enabled Amazon to identify potential consumers based on their previous searches, reviews, wish lists, gift registries plus offering them targeted recommendations.

v.   Personalization on Facebook

According to Facebook's data collection policy, there are many types of information that Facebook collects about its users:

1. Personal information traits, including name, email address, gender, language, location, age, relationship status, educational level, field of study, school or university, ethnic affinity, job title, job position, interests and hobbies, preferred shows, radio, news, whether users are an early or late adopters of technology and whether they are expatriates, Internet browser, IP address, email services, system operation, device information, internet connection type and many more.
2. Core connection information, including contacts list, users' networks and connections, things they do and information they provide, things others do and information they provide about users, Information about users' payments, information from third-party partners, information from websites and apps that use Facebook's Services, information users provide in Facebook to companies including Atlas, Instagram LLC, Onavo, Moves, Oculus, WhatsApp Inc, Masquerade, Crowd Tangle.

vi.   What Does Facebook Share with Users?

Upon the collection of data, the personalization algorithm starts operating to customize users' experience with Facebook. Based on the collected data and their

association with each user's identity, the algorithm concludes that some piece of data is preferred or more relevant for a given user, because Facebook believes this makes users' customized experience more meaningful. Customized experience, as Facebook refers, also helps identifying potential contacts with whom users can connect either socially or economically, because of similarities in location, behavior, interests, app use, as well as look-alike audience.

The examination of Facebook, Google and Amazon showed that, although they are serving for different purposes, all of them are employing a two-stage procedure for reading personal and core information provided by the users. Likewise, after processing the data, the algorithm of these platform hands over the data in the form of potentially retrievable information. To put it simply, the processed data will eventually be recommended in a personalized form. "Customers - as Eric Schmidt refers - don't want Google to answer their questions" but "tell them what they should be doing next." (The Wall Street Journal, 2010). In other words, upon processing the authentic online identity of each user, his or her potential identity will be recommended as a result.

4. Conclusions

By applying the reader-response theory to the analysis of data collection policies of Facebook, Google and Amazon further insights were obtained. In the reader-response theory, the stress is on the interaction of the reader with the text and the intentions of author are irrelevant. Reading is considered as a transaction in which readers construct the meaning as they progress through the text. In the same manner, when data is generated by users as authors in the platform of Google, Facebook and Amazon, the algorithmic structure of the mentioned engines acts as a reader and initiates reading. Therefore, in the same way that readers channel the meaning through the structure of the text in the reading-response theory, in these platforms the meaning is channeled through the algorithmic system. Also, similarly to the reader-response theory, which stipulates that individual responses are different because readers bring their own ideologies, backgrounds and experiences to the text, each search engine applies its past reading experience to interpret individual user's intentions; therefore, its reading is different from that of other platforms. Moreover, in the same way that readers need to be constantly active in the process of reading to construct the meaning, algorithmic systems are also constantly active in the reading process.

The result of this study can be summarized as follows:

1. This study showed that concepts like reader, reading and text are not exclusively related to human interaction anymore, and algorithmic systems and artificial intelligence have the capability to "read" human beings.

2. Despite the differences in functions, policies and behaviors of Amazon, Facebook and Google, it was shown that all of them are following a two-stage procedure in collecting personal and core information and, after processing the data, they produce potential results in the form of suggestions and recommendations.

3. The reader-response theory suggests that the interaction of reader and text creates the meaning; similarly, algorithmic tools interact as a reader with the data created by the user in the form of text, so that the eventual meaning is also constructed.

4. It has been explained that once these tools are fed with convenient information on each user, they tend to personalize their readings based on their own regulations and policies, which in the mid- and long-term results in managing users' access to information.

5. It has been argued that once these tools are provided with systematic models of users' behaviors based on their personal information, users' potential ways of being are created and offered to them. However, it has been indicated that the emergence of personalization brings about an unrecognized virtual in-betweenness of users' own perception of themselves, i.e. "their actual identity", and the tools' perception of users, i.e. "their potential identity."

Finally, it should be concluded that since the algorithmic process continuously reads its users and upgrades its reading over time, its customization capabilities will be developed to the extent that users' choices will be drastically limited, if not completely eliminated.

So, the question that requires reflection is: "If these algorithmic systems are fulfilling the task of "consistency building" (Wheeler, 1999), should we expect that the birth of an algorithmic system as reader must be at the cost of the death of the author (user)?"

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