

Google knows your need before you ask

By [Lisa Landoe](#)

July 7, 2011

Along with [questions](#) about fairness to advertisers and competitors, Google's current approach to web searching raises another issue: the tailoring of information for consumers. You and I can type the same keywords into Google and get vastly different results. This personalization is ostensibly a service to us.

But are machines able to determine what is relevant information for us and what is not? Is it possible to embed algorithms with a sense of civic responsibility or journalistic ethics?

The Internet is often described as a radically democratic mechanism that strengthens our communicative sinews. But this notion of the web as a tool of interconnectivity is becoming mythology. "Going online" means entering not a global conversation so much as an informational space created by algorithms that pick up dozens ([Eli Pariser argues 57](#)) of personality indicators in order to deliver the search results that you want to see.

But what about what you should see? Do we really want our search results to reinforce our existing preferences and biases?

Pariser, author of *The Filter Bubble*, [puts](#) it well:

If algorithms are going to curate the world for us...then we need to make sure that they're not just keyed to relevance. We need to make sure that they also show us things that are

uncomfortable or challenging or important...other points of view.

The problem is that we don't even realize how much is edited out--there is the illusion of choice, the illusion that we are the ones deciding how we navigate the available information.

And soon even the search bar may be obsolete, further diminishing our agency. Google's Eric Schmidt [said this last year](#):

One idea is that more and more searches are done on your behalf without you needing to type. . . . I actually think most people don't want Google to answer their questions. They want Google to tell them what they should be doing next.

Are we comfortable with this assumption? [Comparisons to Jesus Christ](#) aside, Google seems to be developing a Big Brother complex.