Plessner's Philosophical Anthropology

de Mul, Jos

Published by Amsterdam University Press

de Mul, Jos.
Plessner's Philosophical Anthropology: Perspectives and Prospects.
Amsterdam University Press, 2014.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/112196.

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A Moral Bubble

The Influence of Online Personalization on Moral Repositioning

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Introduction

One of the greatest challenges in our information society is to acquire knowledge out of all the information that is piling up around us. Especially in the online world, where the bits of data are constantly multiplying, it has become impossible to efficiently search and find information without some – technological – assistance.

Many consider online personalization – the possibility to tailor online services to the individual needs and preferences of users – as one of the “Holy Grails” in the world of ICT (Van der Hof and Prins 2008; Nabeth 2008). The search engine Google, which provides users with search results relevant to their individual context, is a prime example of online-personalization practices. But also Facebook personalizes its services by ranking the messages on a user’s page in order of importance, and online advertisement companies make it possible for their clients to display tailored adds to potential costumers all over the internet. Obviously, online personalization has many advantages. It provides an easy retrieval of relevant information and enables a more efficient and adequate way of doing business. In short, it makes online interactions run smoothly.

However, as online personalization becomes more and more sophisticated, it might also affect users negatively. Online personalization may lead to, what I will refer to as, a moral bubble. Contradicting information often triggers moral repositioning. However, by presenting users with information that only affirms their initial beliefs, online personalization might hamper this moral evaluation. Although in everyday life, we usually act without giving it a second thought, by following routines more than by engaging in conscious decision-making, the possibility to reflect upon our actions, nevertheless, is an important human attribute. Or, as Hildebrandt (2008, 27) claims: “the very small amount of actions we actually consciously intend, are distinctive for our moral competence.” Information works as a key to open the room of moral reflection. Although the room is not frequently visited, it nevertheless is an important place to reside once in a while to affirm who we are or per-
haps change who we want to be. Without being confronted with alternative beliefs of others or contradicting information, it becomes more difficult to comprehend the motives of other persons or feel empathy for their considerations (Nussbaum 1997). Moreover, even when the moral bubble turns out to be a positive one, a bubble that guides our actions in ways we consciously endorse, it still deprives us of the possibility to practice our reflective attribute. Reaffirming the choices once made is also a valuable pursuit. All in all, by presenting users with information that dominantly confirms their initial beliefs, online personalization aims at the heart of moral agency.

Although it becomes quite evident that profiling is a technology that may leave a mark on moral practices, it is only quite recently a material turn has occurred in the field of applied ethics, resulting in more attention to the moral agency of artifacts (Verbeek 2011a; Swierstra et al. 2009; Swierstra and Waelbers 2012). While there is still debate on how to define this moral agency of artifacts, some consensus has been reached on the fact that “the artefacts we deal with in our daily life help to determine our actions and decisions” (Verbeek 2009, 226). In other words, online personalization practices are based on technologies that “mediate what we believe to be the case, what we believe to be possible and what we believe to be desirable” (Swierstra and Waelbers 2012, 160, italics in original). Because of this technological involvement, it is important to look deeper into the way a technological practice such as online personalization influences moral decision-making. Although a lot of attention has been paid to the phenomenon of online personalization and more particular to its legal, democratic, and economical consequences (Hildebrandt 2009; Hildebrandt and Gutwirth 2008; Hildebrandt and Rouvroy 2011; Van der Hof and Prins 2008; Solove 2004), very little research has been done on the implications for moral agency of this widely used online technology (an exception is the edited book of Hildebrandt and Rouvroy 2011).

In this book chapter, I will make use of some key insights of the philosophy of technology – more specifically deriving from postphenomenology as formulated by Ihde and Verbeek – to clarify and analyse the way online personalization can result in a moral bubble. I will turn to the work of the German philosopher Helmuth Plessner to analyze the profiling technologies that enable online personalization.

Based on this body of literature, I will discuss two ways in which online personalization influences moral repositioning. First, I will focus on the way in which profiling technologies build a closed Umwelt instead of an open world, resulting in an online environment that is characterized by cold ethics rather than by hot morality.
Second, I will focus on the opaqueness of the personalized interface. Up until now, there has not been much public debate about online personalization. As a consequence, a clear set of rules or agreements on how to implement profiling technologies is lacking. Therefore, most of the time it is not transparent based on which – automatic – decisions an interface has been designed. Moreover, because users have no direct access to the settings of the interface, they cannot judge for themselves whether the filtering of information is taken place accurately (Hildebrandt 2011a). Consequently, there is little room for moral repositioning.

Online personalization might hamper normative reflection. The moral change activated by online personalization can be characterized as establishing moral stagnation. By way of conclusion, I will explore means to avoid this stagnation. Based on a multi-actor approach, I focus on possible ways to counter the negative effects of a moral bubble on the level of user, technology/company, and regulation.

Setting the scene

A personal internet

Personalization can be perceived as an organizational strategy of companies, governments and other organizations to provide services by means of ICTs to a large number of individual customers worldwide on an individualized basis (Van der Hof and Prins 2008, 113). Delivering personalized services based on detailed information about the preferences and behavior of users is one of the key ambitions of almost all online retailers (Van der Hof and Prins 2008; Prins 2011). Online companies see personalization as an excellent tool for presenting users with a selection of information based on personal preferences instead of letting their potential customers swim (and probably drown) in an endless sea of data. The overall goal they want to achieve by tracking users is to increase their sales (Etzioni 2012). Nevertheless, personalization might also benefit users. It can ensure a flow of information a user on its own would not be able to generate. Personalization can make interactions online easier because they are already deprived of useless data. Personalized information might also empower an individual and strengthen personal development (Kelly 2010). Moreover, Sunstein (2013) speaks of personalized default rules, which could be installed to provide people with personalized nudges to ensure they act in a way that might make them “healthier, wealthier, and happier” (ibid., 9). Moreover, by sup-
porting personal aspirations, personalization, ideally, could contribute to a better world (cf. Nabeth 2008).

The *conditio sine qua non* for online personalization is automated profiling. By means of algorithms, databases filled with huge sets of data are mined to create, discover, or construct knowledge (Hildebrandt 2008, 17). Profiling is used to create profiles of individual users based on which personalization can take place. These profiles can be seen as “hypotheses” (ibid., 18); predictions about future preferences and behavior. Interestingly, these hypotheses are not necessarily based on a common sense expectation or on earlier-established knowledge. The hypotheses often just “emerge” in the process of gathering and analyzing data (ibid.).

To gain a better understanding of how profiling works, we will focus on retargeting, a form of profiling, which has skyrocketed over the last couple of years and is an important feature of the personalized web (Beales 2010; Helft and Vega 2010; Lambrecht and Tucker 2012). Online retailers do not merely want to display a website tailored to the specific interests of their visitors. Better still, since visitors often leave the website without purchase, corporations want to *follow* visitors all over the web with personalized adds in the hope to persuade them to buy the item – or a related one – they have shown interest for in the past.

E-Advertising companies make this real-time targeting possible for online retailers. By dropping a cookie – a small, non-intrusive text file – in the potential buyer’s browser, retargeting systems are able to identify this specific user when visiting the web shop (Watts 2012). If this potential buyer is for example, looking at a pair of shoes, a cookie is placed into her browser connecting it to that pair of shoes (Steel 2007; Helft and Vega 2010). When she leaves the online shoe retailer, surfing to another website, the company is alarmed and automatically starts bidding on advertisement space on that other website, ensuring a personalized shoe-advertisement shows up when that web page has been loaded. All this happens fully-automated in a mere 6 milliseconds (Criteo 2013). Retargeting makes it possible for companies to ‘follow’ a user online, showing her advertisements and other information tailored to her previous online actions and interests, consequently, contributing to the arrival of a personalized online environment.

Online parties that want to make use of retargeting can also turn to Google that started testing this specific form of profiling – they refer to it as *remarketing* – in 2009 (Helft and Vega 2010). For Google, retargeting is just a more specific form of *behavioral targeting* (cf. Beales 2010), which is one of their core occupations (Helft and Vega 2010). Google’s business plan is built on two pillars. One the one hand, the company wants to sell advertisements
that ensure their clients a good return on investment; on the other hand they want to provide users with accurate search results. Mager (2012) speaks of the “service-for-profile model.” A user can use the search engine free of cost because the profile Google creates is sold to profit-making corporations.

In order to build these profiles and provide users with personalized search results, Google has to have access to a large body of behavioral data. Taking into account their status as an “obligatory passing point” (Mager 2012, 776) for almost everyone who wants to find information online, this does not seem to impose problems. Google can relate a query to the user's search history and has the ability to cross-reference this information with data coming from their other services such as Gmail and Google Docs (Tene 2008, 1448). In addition, Google always makes use of contextualization (Enge 2011). The search engine takes into account context elements such as geography, language, and seasonality to make the interaction between its interface and the user run smoothly. In addition, even when a user is not logged in to Google, the search engine personalizes its results by making use of cookies. For a period of 180 days, a cookie linked to the user's browser keeps track of the search history.

All these sorting techniques enable Google to tailor its list of results to the specific needs of the user. For what is relevant to one person does not have to be relevant to someone else. Similarly to the way in which the targeted ads of online retailers add to the personalization of the internet, the personalized search results of Google shape the online environment. The information Google presents to the user is based on automated profiling rather than on transparent or objective standards.

Although users have the feeling they are anonymous online and nobody is interested in their online activities, the opposite is the case (Benoist 2008, 168). Almost 80% of the most often-visited websites use tracking technology to gather information of their visitors (Angwin 2010) and a majority of them use this information to tailor their interface – the website environment – to the personal profile of their users (Pariser 2011; Solove 2004; Zittrain 2008; Morozov 2011; Goldsmith and Wu 2008). Even people who are aware of these profiling practices cannot always escape. Etzioni (2012, 929) reports the use of “supercookies” which are not only difficult to detect but can even reinstall themselves after they are removed. Also Facebook, with its Like button implemented on many websites, is able to track the visitors of those websites even when they are not a Facebook-member themselves (Roosendaal 2011). All in all, there is a whole range of online actors, from retailers such as Zalando and Amazon to the search engine Google, working hard to turn the internet into a filtered and personalized environment.
Filter bubble

Nowadays, the vision of an *open and free internet* as it was proclaimed in the early 90s of the last century can be judged as utopian and perhaps a little naïve (Morozov 2011; Wu 2011; Ess 2011). It is now generally recognized that internet service providers (ISPs), search engines, online businesses, and social network sites have a big say in what kind of information a user has access to (Zittrain 2008; Goldsmith and Wu 2008). Consequently, we see a *filtered internet*, tailored to the specific needs and habits of its users.

Pariser (2011, 9) coins the term “Filter Bubble” to refer to this “unique universe of information for each of us” that has come to dominate the online world. Although Pariser acknowledges the advantages of online personalization, in his book he primarily stresses its dark sides. An online world with information that only confirms previous actions and beliefs, Pariser claims, might negatively impact the creativity, empathy, and personal development of people. Moreover, because more and more online parties are using these personalization technologies, Pariser (ibid., 111) states “we’ll increasingly be forced to trust the companies at the center of this process to properly express and synthesize who we really are.”

Pariser (2011) and others – such as Zittrain (2008), Sunstein (2007), and Solove (2004) – claim that the internet is transforming from an open to a closed environment. I will elaborate on the analysis of Pariser by underpinning it with a theoretical framework and investigate the workings of this *personalized internet*, or *filter bubble*, in a normative setting.

Analysis

Technological mediation

Authors like Latour (1992), Ihde (1990) and Verbeek (2000) have convincingly shown that technologies are not just neutral instruments performing a pre-defined task, but that artefacts also influence the actions and experiences of their users in often unforeseen ways. This co-shaping of experiences and actions of users has been called “technological mediation” and it is a useful starting point to analyze human-world interactions, or in our case to analyze human-personalized interface interactions.

It is important to understand that this technological mediation is two-folded. Technology and users have a permanent stake in shaping each other. More than the “building bricks,” they are the “products” of their interaction.
Therefore, online personalization is not just about a *personalized interface* but also about a *personalized user*. In the interaction, the user is constantly shaping and re-shaping the interface based on her online behavior. Conversely, the interface, presenting the online world in a personalized manner, is affecting the user by pre-sorting her choices and actions (Pariser 2011).

In analyzing technological mediation, one can take on different approaches. Verbeek (2000; 2009) makes a useful distinction between a *mediation of experience* and a *mediation of praxis*. In the former, the emphasis lays on how artefacts mediate people's perception or rather on how “reality can be interpreted and be present for people” (Verbeek 2011a, 8). In the latter, the focus is on how artefacts mediate people's actions. Consequently, online interaction can be analyzed from a perspective of experience as well as from a perspective of praxis. One can either choose to focus on the way the online world is present to the user or focus on the way a user can (inter) act making use of these online technologies. Because, in this chapter, our aim is to analyze how normative reflections might be influenced by the information and choices that are presented to users online, we will take the *mediation of experience* as our point of reference.

The online world is presented to the user through the interface on her computer screen. Without a computer or other mobile device the online world would remain inaccessible. With Ihde (1990), we could classify this mediation of the online world, therefore, as a *hermeneutic relation*. In a hermeneutic relation, an artifact represents reality in such a way that its users have access to it through the concerning artifact. Behind the computer, a user is looking at the personalized interface, which is the object of her perception, while simultaneously this interface is referring beyond itself to what is not immediately seen, namely the online world. Through this hermeneutic relation of user and personalized interface, the user can, so to speak, read herself into any possible, online situation without actually being there (cf. Ihde 1990, 92).

In mediation also a *translation* takes place (Ihde 1990). Some aspects of the online world are amplified, while others are reduced. Looking at the personalized interface, it even is its principal goal to amplify the information that fits the profile of the user and to reduce information that is irrelevant to it. The personalized interface pre-sorts a specific kind of interpretation and shapes what counts as “real” (Verbeek 2011b).

However, this postphenomenological conceptualization also has its limits. As Søraker (2012) convincingly shows, in analyzing the internet it becomes difficult to clearly distinguish between fundamental concepts
such as *technology* and *world*, since the interface that mediates the online experience simultaneously is the online world itself. “Virtual worlds are both worlds and technologies; the computer simulation is both the underpinning of the virtual world and the means of mediation” (ibid., 504). As a result, when analyzing the interface we have to be aware of its mediating function on the one hand and its ontological function on the other. To put it differently, in the hermeneutic relation of user and online world, a personalized interface does not only *mediate* and *represent* the online world; it also forms its *ontological foundation*.

**A closed interface**

To gain a better understanding of the workings of profiling technology and how it influences our normative reasoning, we first and foremost have to understand that the core activity of this technology, namely to automatically categorize and generalize information, is not merely confined to machines. Perhaps contra-intuitively, the non-reflective profiling of algorithms resembles the way *living nature*, including human beings, interact with their world on a daily basis. In order to hold their ground, plants, animals, and human beings all make use of—what we might call—biological profiling to filter their overly complex environment. In a routine-like manner, they are “extracting relevant information from the environment” in order to adapt themselves to this environment and survive (Hildebrandt 2008, 26). In line with Hildebrandt (ibid., 24), we might say that “profiling is not only a part of professional and everyday life but also a constitutive competence of life itself in the biological sense of the word.”

To understand how profiling is in fact an important element in the everyday life of all living nature, I turn to Plessner’s *The Levels of the Organic and Man* [*Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch*]. Central to his analysis is the interaction between life forms—plants, animals or human beings—and their environment.¹

According to Plessner, animals are ‘captured’ in a “*Funktionkreis*.” They are aware of their environment as far as their building scheme permits

¹ It has to be stressed that Plessner—not only a philosopher but also a zoologist by training—is well aware of the fact that distinctions made between plants, animals, and human beings can only be of an ‘ideal-typical’ nature. Throughout his work he emphasizes the continuation of life forms, as they are linked as stages of positionality” (see the contribution of De Mul to this volume). Nonetheless, when we compare the interaction between animals and their environment on the one hand and the interaction between human beings and their environment on the other, some central aspects of profiling become apparent.
them. Consequently, the information they receive while profiling their environment can only be of use in a specific situation, for example, when they perceive an enemy close by and have to choose between fleeing and fighting. Although especially higher mammals have a certain awareness of their environment, they cannot reflect upon their choices. They cannot break out of the actual situation, sit down, and wonder how to bring their strategies to perfection based on the gathered information over time. All information that is acquired by profiling their environment must fit into their pre-existing knowledge frame. Not aware of a past or future, non-human animals live “here and now” in an “Umwelt,” a closed environment limited by their building scheme (Plessner 1928, 1978).

Just like other animals, profiling by human beings often takes place in a routine-like manner. People take the presence of the world, their fellow human beings, and the objects they encounter for granted. In everyday life, people do not doubt their existence. Moreover, they expect to see and experience the world in a similar way as their fellow human beings do. The human world is an inter-subjective world. Meaning is, often implicitly, constituted in and through interaction with others. Human beings certainly not think through all the choices they make. To reduce the complexity inherent in human life, they are in an often-unconscious way generalizing and categorizing the information around them (Luhmann 1979).

Notwithstanding the fact that human beings mostly act without giving it a second thought, this does not mean their reflexive attribute is unimportant or even superfluous. On the contrary, according to Plessner, human beings differ from other animals because they are “conscious of their consciousness.” Human beings are aware of the fact that they are the ones who are profiling the world. Human beings can take on an “eccentric positionality,” as Plessner calls it, and reflect upon their relation with the world, with their fellow human beings, and with themselves. They can break out of an actual situation and become aware of its contingency. This second order awareness makes that, so to say, from a distance human beings can look back and reflect upon the course of action, being able to consider possible alternatives. Often, this awareness is triggered by new information contradicting their knowledge frame and, eventually, this confrontation might lead to the adjustment of their initial set of beliefs. De Mul and Van Den Berg (2011, 52) refer to this process of evaluating internal and external motives as “the reflexive loop.”

All in all, this ontological distance defines the way human beings are in the world. They do not live in a pre-existing, fixed environment, tuned to their building scheme as other animals do. Human beings have to mould
their own world through culture, language, and technology. Their world is never finished and, therefore, their interaction with it can be characterized as “open.” Although human beings lack a fixed Umwelt, by making use of artificial means the whole world can become their home. Consequently, Plessner describes human beings as “artificial by nature.” On biological grounds, they need technologies such as automated, online profiling to mediate their interaction with the world. Plessner speaks of mediated immediacy to point out that all human interaction is in fact mediated interaction.

Nevertheless, in daily life people may often ‘forget’ that the routines inscribed in their bodies are human-made and therefore changeable (Plessner 1978). And although all interaction is mediated, human beings experience it as direct, dismissing possible side effects of the mediating artefacts at hand. Human beings tend to uphold a utopian belief in a stable and unchangeable world, steered by universal rules. Morals exist as daily routines and are considered self-evident. As a result, people often experience the world they live in as a closed world instead of as an open, cultural world. This cultural world puts its stamp on human life, but it is only by reflection or when a situation of conflict occurs that people become aware of its contingency. Or as Swierstra and Rip (2009, 210) claim:

We become aware of moral routines when people disobey them, when conflicts between routines emerge and a moral dilemma arises, or when they are no longer able to provide satisfactory responses to new problems. To put it strongly: whereas morality is characterized by unproblematic acceptance, ethics is marked by explicitness and controversy. Ethics is ‘hot’ morality; morality is ‘cold ethics.’ We perform ethics when we put up moral routines for discussion.

The first indication that a filter bubble may lead to a moral bubble is the fact that it invites users to live in a closed Umwelt instead of in an open world. Profiling technologies build an online world, which resembles the closed world of animals, determined by their Funktionkreis. In a filter bubble, it is not likely to encounter conflicting opinions or disturbing information that spur moral reflection. Hence, it becomes increasingly difficult to be aware of the contingency of the presented information. Online, people reside in a personalized Umwelt, and contrary to the cultural and open world, this is not a shared world [Mitwelt] in which meaning is inter-subjectively constituted. By feeding users a string of information that only affirms their pre-existing, individual beliefs, a personalized interface is more about cold ethics than
about *hot morality*. Taking into account that “conscious reflection is the incentive to create new habits” (Hildebrandt 2008, 27), a filter bubble gives rise to *moral stagnation* rather than to moral repositioning.

The “technological intentionality” (Ihde 1990) of the personalized interface, therefore, is one of confirming the status-quo. This is not only a threat to the personal development of users, but it also endangers the development of a viable democracy. For a democracy to thrive, it is necessary that citizens have a shared body of knowledge and at the same time become aware of the diversity of opinions (Hildebrandt 2011b; Van der Hof and Prins 2008; Nussbaum 1997). The workings of a personalized interface support neither.

**An opaque interface**

The second indication that a filter bubble may turn into a moral bubble can be found in the *opaqueness* of its functioning. Whereas, even if a user has the intention to reflect upon the way information is presented to her online, she has no access to the information that has led to her personalize interface. Without this information she cannot come to a well-informed judgment and, as a result, she remains in her moral bubble. Moreover, even on a societal level this knowledge about the workings of the profiling practices is lacking. There has not yet been a thorough, public debate about the values and norms profiling technologies have to apply to. Or, in other words, a moral bubble immediately becomes *cold ethics* without any preceding *hot morality*.

Ihde (1990) already pinpointed a possible problem that might occur in hermeneutic human-technology relations when the artifact (the interface) is presenting something (the online world) in a faulty manner. Without the interface, there is no online world. It is impossible to have a “naked perception” or a non-mediated perception of the online world based on which a user can judge if its representation is sufficient. The average user might be able to read the interface, but not to explore the inner workings of the underlying profiling technologies. “Personalization [...] may force individuals into restrictive two-dimensional models based on the criteria set by technology and of those who own and apply the technology” (Van der Hof and Prins 2008, 121).

Instead of delegating functionality to profiling technologies in a deliberate way, these technologies can become to *dominate* our experience of the online world (cf. Verbeek 2011b). Van den Hoven (1998) speaks of “artificial authorities” to emphasize the reliance of users on their devices to function properly.
The impossibility to see through the functioning of the underlying profiling technologies also shows that, although we speak of a personalized interface, this user herself does not own the interface. The mediation of perception taking place through the interface is a mediation enabled by a third party, namely an online company. This company has its own interests, which do not necessarily align with the interests of the user (Mager 2012). Consequently, the only way of gaining access to the settings of the interface is through the company who owns it. And as Hildebrandt states: “If the interests of the data controller (the company behind the interface, EK) and subject (user, EK) differ it may well be that the interests of the data controller, who pays for the whole process, will take precedence” (2008, 19).

A possible answer

Because of the personalized Umwelt instigated by profiling technologies and their opaque workings, users are invited to live in a moral bubble. The arrival of this moral bubble can be categorized as an unintended and unwanted consequence of personalization online. We can assume neither the developers nor the users of personalized services are aiming at diminishing moral repositioning. It is also not the ‘fault’ of the personalized interface that it has the tendency to turn into a moral bubble. Both user and interface constitute each other in the interaction and become as it were a hybrid entity with human as well as non-human features. When a user is online, she comes to embody, so to speak, the interface. And the interface cannot exist without a user shaping it. In other words, while it is true that the personalized interface influences users’ behavior by creating a moral bubble, it is equally true that the way in which users interact with the interface is shaping the working of that same interface. Provoking moral stagnation therefore is not an inescapable characteristic of the personalized interface but of a certain interaction between user and interface.

By way of conclusion, I will sketch a preliminary direction for countering the negative effects that might be caused by the moral bubble. Considering the scope of this book chapter and the complexity of the problem at hand, it is not possible to come up with a full-fetched answer. Nonetheless, our analysis of the moral bubble shows that for a solution to be successful, it should at least take a multi-actor approach. The moral bubble arises from the interplay of user, company, technology, and the legislation that imbeds these actors. Consequently, all these actors should be included in our search for a possible answer to the arrival of a moral bubble.
User

Users are able by changing their interaction with the personalized interface to adjust its workings. This “domestication” (Silverstone and Hirsch 1992; Frissen 2004) of artefacts often occurs when the artifact is embedded in daily practice. Pariser (2011) recommends several personal strategies to replenish the filter bubble with new and diverse information.

By altering her daily routines online, a user can open up the personalized interface and indirectly persuade it to build in new elements of information. Or as Pariser (ibid., 223) states: “varying your path online dramatically increases your likelihood of encountering new ideas and people.” Another strategy is to prefer websites that are transparent about the profiling technologies they use to websites that are not. By being conscious about the kind of interfaces one uses, the influence of a moral bubble can be minimized.

However, a necessary condition for successfully getting around the moral bubble is some basic knowledge on how profiling technologies work. If users are sleepwalking into a moral bubble, they cannot change their routines. Unfortunately, knowledge about online personalization is often absent. Pan et al. (2007) for example, show how college students aren't aware of the ranking strategy of Google and blindly trust the search engine by clicking on the first search results that pops up, even when the abstract seems less relevant.

In his pamphlet Program or Be Programmed, Rushkoff (2010) makes a stand against digital illiteracy and encourages the development of basic programming skills for all internet users. Having insight in the basic workings of programming must strengthen users to use personalized interfaces in a safer way. Developing digital literacy or e-skills is also on Europe’s digital agenda. It is assumed that children can benefit more from the internet when they are better able to recognize and deal with online risks such as a biased online environment (De Haan 2010; Sonck et al. 2011).

Technology

By adapting the design of the personalized interface, the development of a moral bubble might also be tempered. Although in general, the influence of the engineer on the design of an artifact is by far the largest in the early stage of development, this does not have to apply to the personalized interface. Different than analog artefacts which, when bought, in general are out of reach for the engineers, digital artefacts such as the personalized interface, never really leave the realm of design. Because of its virtuality,
the personalized interface can interact with users while staying within reach of the engineers. Consequently, the influence of the engineer on the workings of the personalized interface remains significant, even after the interface has been employed.

To counterbalance the workings of the moral bubble, I would like to introduce the concept of programmed serendipity: the intentional replenishing of the personalized interface with random information. By including a portion of information that not directly derives from the personal profile of the user in the interface, the filter bubble and therefore also the moral bubble becomes less absolute. Consequently, there is room for conflicting opinions and information that could instigate moral repositioning.

The question remains however, based on which parameters this ‘unpersonalized’ stream of information should be built. Sheer randomness – as the opposite of personalization – could easily result in information that is of no interest to the user at all. Hence, sheer randomness is not an instigator for moral repositioning since it is more likely to repel a user than to stimulate her in reflecting upon the presented information. With Gadamer (1972), we could say that to get the conversation started, we should find ourselves between the limits of ‘strangeness and familiarity.’ If the random information is completely strange to the user, she probably will not be interested nor make an effort to evaluate it. If the information is completely familiar, no repositioning will take place either. Programmed serendipity therefore is, to a certain extent, depending on the same personalization techniques it is supposed to counterbalance. To replenish the interface with information that will catch the attention of the user, some basic interests of the user simply have to be known first. Eventually, taking Gadamer’s limits a step further, it might come down to finding the right balance between random and personalized information.

Computer scientists and programmers have taken on the task of finding this balance and safeguarding serendipity in the online world. For example, Campos and De Figueiredo (2002) have investigated the possibility of ‘programming for serendipity.’ They developed a software agent called Max “that browses the web in order to find information that might stimulate the user, especially information that the user is not focused upon” (ibid., 52). Making use of, amongst others, the user’s profile and a lexical database, Max formulates suggestions based on the generation of alternatives, the selection of also less significant concepts, replacing selected concepts by other, related concepts, and random stimulation (ibid., 57).
Also Helberger (2011), who addresses the problem of the moral bubble up and foremost from a policy perspective, sees concrete design principles as a manner of ensuring diverse information exposure online. She speaks of “diversity by design” and analyzes four different conceptions of exposure diversity which could inform the design of internet technologies such as Electronic Programme Guides and search engines, namely: “Discovering the Difference, Exposure to Diverse Media Outlets, Promoting Personal Autonomy, and Encouraging Serendipitous Discoveries” (Helberger 2011, 464).

All in all, it becomes clear that programmed serendipity could help to safeguard the open character of the online world, but only if the engineers/companies that own the interface are willing to cooperate. To a certain extent, their willingness depends on –legal – regulation.

**Regulation**

Finally, to enable moral repositioning, users should be allowed access to the information behind the interface. As we have seen, even if a user wants to reflect upon the way information is represented to her, she is unable to do so because of the lack of transparency of the profiling practices. As Koops (2011) argues, it is not very effective for users to control the process of collecting and managing data as such. It would be more useful to make the process of decision-making transparent. Users should be able to control how companies, but also governments make use of personal data. Eventually, users should have a say in how the interface looks like. This “decision-transparency” is a necessary condition to empower users. It enables them to take a stand against unfair decisions.

The successful establishment of such measures largely depends on the action undertaken by governments and other international institutes. Key actors such as the European Union, the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C), and the American Federal Trade Commission (FTC) recently have been putting the negative consequences of personalization on the digital agenda. In its report “Protecting Consumer Privacy in an Era of Rapid Change,” the FTC (2012) pleads –amongst others – for legislation that enables consumers to access the information that is being collected about them by online companies (more specifically the FTC focuses on “data brokers”). FTC also urges these companies to develop a central website to inform users about the way their data is being collected and used and to explain how users can control this data use.
Within the W3C (2013), the Tracking Protection Working group is preparing recommendations to “improve user privacy and user control by defining mechanisms for expressing user preferences around Web tracking and for blocking or allowing Web tracking elements.” In their effort to deliver “global consensus definitions and codes of conduct” they try to involve as much as possible other relevant actors such as governments, academia, industry, and advocacy groups (ibid.).

In January 2012, The European Commission (2012) announced a comprehensive reform of data protection rules not only to “strengthen online privacy rights,” but also to “boost Europe’s digital economy.” If these changes are instituted, they could help to temper the moral bubble. For example, the European Commission claims that people will be having easier access to their own data. Moreover, wherever consent is required for data to be processed, it should become clear that this consent has to be given explicitly, rather than assumed (which often is the case now). In addition, people will be able to refer to the data protection authority in their own country, even when the company that has been collecting their data resides outside the EU.

Conclusion

All in all, it becomes clear that there is no clear-cut answer to the arrival of a moral bubble online. Nonetheless, since this moral bubble is not a trait of the personalized interface as such, but emerges in the interaction between the user and the interface, a multi-actor approach is needed. Engaging users, companies as well as governments and other international partners, therefore, seems to be the most fruitful approach.

In this book chapter, I have analyzed the way in which a moral bubble arises online. Two main reasons for such a moral bubble to emerge have been examined. First, because the personalized interface shows only familiar and validating information, it gains the character of a closed Umwelt. Users do not encounter countervailing information and therefore are not stimulated to reflect upon their own routine-like behavior. A personalized interface is therefore more about cold ethics than about hot morality. Second, a personalized interface may turn into a moral bubble because of its opaque character. Users have no clear insight into the way the profiling technologies work and shape the interface. Consequently, users are blindly depending on the companies behind the interface to deliver them a good-working and fair interface.
Bibliography


