

WHO'S WATCHING?



ARE YOU BEING “WATCHED” ONLINE?

.Back in my hippie days, we all said we had to watch out for “Big Brother” as he was always watching and listening in on our phone calls, etc.



And we were sure

- it was the government



But it turns out,

•“BIG BROTHER” isn’t the government after all. It’s private enterprise:



•And that includes **BIG BUSINESS** and little business.

And that isn't all bad.

- A huge amount of information is in our world and more is added constantly. It is estimated we double knowledge every 15 years.
- Before we get into the social media aspect of the Internet and algorithms, let's look at some of the good things those two things do for us.
- Google is one search engine that collects info on you and your searches. People all over the world use it extensively. Here's a video that explains the good things that comes from private companies watching what you search for and what you do online.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0eKVizvYSUQ>

BERT

- The BERT algorithm (**B**idirectional **E**ncoder **R**epresentations from **T**ransformers) is a deep learning algorithm related to natural language processing. It helps a machine to understand what words in a sentence mean, but with the nuance of context.
- Take the words “how to catch a cow fishing.” In 2018 Google provided results related to livestock. In New England, the word “cow” in the context of fishing means a large striped bass. In 2019, Google began using BERT and now the outcome is full of fishing related results. So BERT appears to understand the context of the word “fishing” as important and changed the search results to focus on fishing related web pages.

Nothing new under the sun

- Organizational systems have been part of our lives before the advent of computers.
- We grew up with libraries where we became familiar with the Dewey Decimal System and card catalogs. That system allowed flexibility to add new information all the time while still keeping track of it and allowing that information (a book) to be found in the stacks.

The Internet & Big Data help small business

- Provides a marketing tool that reaches customers worldwide
- Helps target and pinpoint your particular customer base
- Can all be done online and removes the need for a brick and mortar store or office
- Provides lots and lots of videos and companies willing to help grow your business https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vk6a_Sos5UQ

Another good way algorithms help us

- From the health industry to predicting weather, this video gives you an idea of how companies deal with “Big Data.”



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bAyrObl7TYE> [stop at 4.02]

Then there's the other side...

- When online, you will be monitored and the various websites will do their best to pick out other things along the same line that will keep your interest and keep you online.
- Because algorithms determine what you see, you think you are getting all the information but you are actually being lured down the rabbit hole.
- “If you’re not paying for something with your money, you’re paying for it with your attention.” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mL5zTLMk5AY>

Social Media

.Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube all use algorithms to determine what they will show you. You may not realize you aren't the one deciding what to read or see...



Facebook

- Not even China's Social Credit system has the power of Mark Zuckerberg's Facebook. Every day, nearly 2 billion people visit the site and nearly all allow the algorithm to present posts in the order the company determines most likely to keep you engaged.
- On Facebook.com, click the three dots next to "News Feed," then click "most recent." On the app, you'll need to click "settings," then "see more," then "most recent." It will automatically go back to what the algorithm thinks you want, so you might have to tell it to go back to "most recent" each time you sign on.
- Zuckerberg's trick when it comes to your video feed.

Use a Search Engine for other social media sites

- For Instagram and Twitter, simply use a **search engine** to find “information on Twitter and Instagram algorithms.”
- One **search engine** that doesn't track you is DuckDuckGo and it can be used as a Google replacement. It doesn't track or target your IP address or your search history.
- Two other non-tracking search engines are Yippy and Ixquick.

YouTube.com

- The YouTube algorithm recommends what to “watch next” and is optimized to make you watch more YouTube videos and ads no matter what (average viewing session is now above one hour).
- YouTube prioritizes controversial content, because whether you love it or hate it, you'll keep watching. If you watch one piece of controversial content, the algorithm will assume that's what you're into and steer you to the kind of stuff viewers of that video opted to watch next. That's how your old Aunt Bea, who watched one relatively innocuous news video, ended up going down a QAnon conspiracy theory rabbit hole.

QAnon

- QAnon – the baseless conspiracy theory centered on the idea that prominent Democrats and Hollywood celebrities are cannibalistic, Satan-worshiping pedophiles.
- QAnon isn't a group or an organization and has no leaders or hierarchies. [Side note: Q hasn't posted since December; documentary film maker thinks he knows who Q is.]
- The QAnon conspiracy theory originated in 2017 when someone calling themselves Q posted a Trump quote about the “calm before the storm” on 4chan, a notorious online message board.

The Message Board 4chan

- An Internet forum, or message board, is an online discussion site where people can hold conversations in the form of posted messages which are often longer than one line of text and are at least temporarily archived. In that way, they differ from chat rooms.
- 4chan is a series of wholly anonymous, anything-goes forums. The site is broken up into threads where users can discuss different topics — everything from civet coffee to sex toys — and something like 22 million users do just that every month.

We have always had conspiracy theories...

- In 1824, John Quincy Adams became President although Andrew Jackson won the popular vote but failed to win the Electoral College. The House constitutionally had to choose the President, and Jackson's supporters said House Speaker Henry Clay helped Adams win in return for being appointed Secretary of State.
- In 1828, administration supporters accused Jackson's supporters of plotting a coup d'état if their candidate lost to President Adams. One pro-Jackson supporter declared he wouldn't be "astonished to see Gen. Jackson, if not elected, placed in the Presidential Chair, at the point of fifty thousand bayonets!!!"

Some of the ones in our lifetime...

- Area 51 and UFOs in New Mexico
- Moon Landing – NASA staged in a studio
- Who killed JFK? - the CIA, the KGB, the Mafia, Castro, etc.
- Chemtrails – from planes spraying for nefarious purposes
- The Illuminati – secret society controlling the world
- Pizzagate – man from North Carolina

This is Tech Talk...

...so we aren't viewing this in a political manner but rather are emphasizing that today with our huge internet universe, conspiracy theories can travel faster and wider than ever before.

.Plus we need to be aware of not only the technological aspect, but the psychological, societal, and emotional effects as well. There are many groups out there online like QAnon but we will look generically at why these groups have grown.

We are in the middle of a pandemic.

- History shows conspiracy theories tend to snowball during times of crises due to fear and the desire for clear explanations. People want a straightforward narrative.
- Covid-19 is terrifying, not well understood, and happening on a massive scale.
- Conspiracy theories are more appealing than the truth because they offer the possibility of control. We can foil an evil plan but we can't foil unseen forces of nature.
- Many need conspiracies as the world is too confusing.

Desire for understanding and certainty.

- “Someone planned this for a purpose.” Believers have vested interest in believing theories and need something that gives them an understanding.
- It is easier to believe a conspiracy than it is to believe it was just circumstance and/or happenstance. Believers need someone or something to blame.
- Believers continue to only believe that which supports their beliefs as that gives them certainty.

Desire for control and security

- People need to feel they're in control of their lives. Many people feel safer when they are the driver rather a passenger in a car.
- If global temperatures are rising catastrophically due to human activity, then "I'll have to make painful changes to my lifestyle." But if pundits and politicians assure us that global warming is a hoax, then we can maintain our current way of living.

Desire to maintain a positive self-image.

- Conspiracy theories provide the socially marginalized a community to belong to. It gives them a sense of belonging and acceptance.
- Believers often consider themselves part of a select in-group that, unlike the deluded masses, has figured out what's really going on. Believers possess knowledge that others don't and that gives them a feeling of power.
- Many QAnon believers are parents who aren't doing well financially or emotionally and feel they are letting the family down.

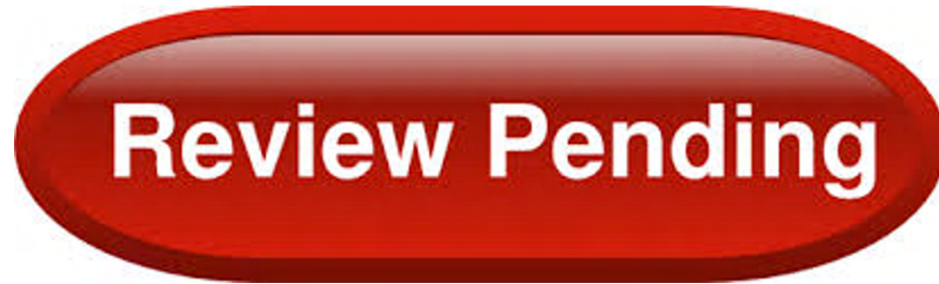
A family member has gone down the rabbit hole

- People reach out to social media seeking human contact so maintain non-confrontational communication by phone and/or visits. Steer the conversation towards shared memories.
- Don't argue facts but encourage doubts. Try questioning responses. "There seem to be a lot of holes in this theory, don't you think?" "I'm not sure we should really trust an anonymous source, are you?" [Explain algorithms?]
- Affirm the "higher self" of a believer. Many think they are rescuing children from blood-drinking pedophiles, so talk about different ways they could actually help children.

- Don't expect an immediate conversion. People who've left QAnon have said that an accumulation of "cracks" caused their reversal rather than a sudden revelation.
- Believers are not the enemy. They are often victims too. Unscrupulous figures on these websites are the reason so many have lost trust in moral leadership. That's what has driven them towards a simple view of good-versus-evil that shows up in conspiracy thinking.
- Most of all, be kind.

Time to review...

- Since this is the last in the algorithm series, it might be good to do a little review of things we've learned.



The Three Questions to Ask...

Who's behind the information?

What is the evidence?

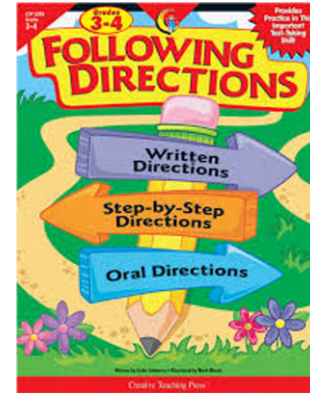
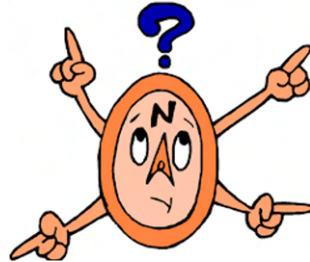
What are other sources saying?

Remember

If it's a news item you are reading, be sure it covers who, what, when, where and why. Look for details like a byline and a date. If an online news story is missing any of these, be suspicious.

Describing Algorithms

- An algorithm is really very simple. It is nothing more than a set of instructions describing how to perform a task.
- A recipe is an algorithm
- Directions are an algorithm



Algorithms can:

- Improve our health (from Fitbit devices to apps that can identify skin cancer)
- Develop a professional network to advance a person's career
- Quickly research and locate a product we want at the best price.
- Recommend products, websites, and movies we might like.
- Suggest new Facebook friends and LinkedIn contacts.
- Run traffic lights to control traffic.

Algorithms on websites, in news, etc.

- Create filter bubbles and divisiveness
- Limit exposure to wider range of ideas and reliable information
- Ability to shape decisions without people knowing they are doing it

Factual or Misinformation?

If anything on the Internet makes

you laugh,



angry,



or tugs at your heart strings, be
suspicious. Make sure it is not something
to lead you astray.

Next Meeting

.Our next meeting will present some hints on how to stay safe on the internet. It will be the last meeting for this club year.



.It will be on Zoom on Thursday, May 13, 2021, at 2:00 PM.