PROJECT
Information Literacy

Faculty Focus Group Script | The PIL Algorithm Study (2020)

For the next hour, I want to hear your thoughts about experiences with the ever-changing online landscape and platforms that increasingly try to personalize the content to match your likes and dislikes. Your thoughts will help us understand how you feel about personalization of your online content — and concerns you may have about privacy and automated decision making for yourself as well as the students that you teach.

Before we begin — some things to make our discussion more productive:
- No wrong answers
- Don't hold back
- Feel free to share your opinions and experiences
- Interested in negative as well as positive experiences
- Assured confidentiality (name will not appear in results)
- As to timing – 25-30 minutes for the discussion

My role:
- Ask questions
- Listen
- Won't participate in the actual discussion, as far as my own opinions

KEY FOCUS OF THE FOCUS GROUP

Most of us would agree there has been a significant shift in how we get information and news about the world around us. Even though Google is only 20 years old, many of us automatically rely on Google to find answers — on average, over 40,000 searches are made on Google every second. Other online platforms are heavily used, too, i.e., 40 million YouTube videos are viewed in a minute, and three million photos are uploaded to Instagram in an hour.

We call online platforms like this "internet giants." Today, I'm interested in hearing about perceptions about this significant shift in how we get information and news about the world and how platforms, and that don't produce content shape and influence what we see.

During this discussion will be asking five open-ended questions about your experiences and your thoughts how you get information from algorithm-driven news and information platforms, such as Google, YouTube, or Facebook, and how you talk with students, if you do, about these topics.

Shall we begin? Any questions?

Question 1.
Let's talk about some of your experiences with how you've gotten online information in the past few weeks. Can someone give me a recent example of finding something online on a site like Google, YouTube, Instagram, or Facebook?

What happened?

 Prompt: How was the information quality of the answer that you received? Did anything about the search results surprise you or make you wonder how those results rose to the top?

 Prompt: Did the information seem credible and unbiased? (If lateral reading is mentioned for verifying information, what sequence of sources do they use and for what reasons?)

 Let's also talk about getting news — information about what's going on in the world around you. Do you find news or does news find you through social media and other feeds?

 If you did, what happened when you got news from a social media platform, like Instagram, Facebook or Twitter during the past couple of weeks?

 Prompt: How would you rate the quality of the news that you got? Did it seem credible and unbiased?

 Prompt: Would you say that the news that you got reflect a particular political orientation, were mainstream, or were they a mix?

Question 2.
Are *you aware* that these platforms — Google, YouTube, Instagram, or Facebook — try to personalize the information and news that you get using *algorithms* — lines of coding you don't see — in order to match your likes and dislikes?

For instance, there's Google's algorithm for ranking the search results you see. There's YouTube's algorithm for recommending which videos you may like. There's Facebook's algorithm for deciding what posts you see in your feed.

(*For those who don't know that modeling is used*) Does this come as a surprise to you? How about the rest of you? Is this anything you give much thought to?

For instance, there's Google's algorithm for ranking the search results you see. There's YouTube's algorithm for recommending which videos you may like. There's Facebook's algorithm for deciding what posts you see in your feed.

Question 3.
Internet giants we've been discussing aren't the only sites that do this. Lots of platforms personalize what you end up seeing on your screen, including learning management systems, like Blackboard and

Canvas. Why do you think online platforms personalize your content, and some would say, even try to shape your opinions, and influence you?

Prompt: Why do you think different people get different news than others on the same platform, like Facebook or YouTube? Ever thought of that?

Prompt: Why would online platforms want to show you content chosen to match your beliefs and opinions?

Prompt: So, how can you find information and news online that's trustworthy and accurate?

Question 4.
Some people are worried about how far online platforms have gone with personalizing the results they deliver, while others worry about how much data is being collected about them and how big data ends up being used.

For instance, some computer programs use machine learning that looks for certain demographic patterns in large, historical datasets to figure out who should get into college (based on their ability to succeed), get a loan (based on their earning potential), get a job interview (based on their ability to achieve), or, in the case of convicted felons, how long a prison sentence should be (based on their socioeconomic status).

Let me read THREE statements that are concerns some people have about personalization, privacy, and automated decision-making and artificial intelligence *(distribute these concerns as a handout):*

(1) Computer programs decide what results you end up seeing based on the personal information that's been collected about your likes and dislikes.

(2) Personalizing news and information means we don't end up seeing the same reality about the world around us.

(3) Relying on computers, big data, and artificial intelligence programs to make important decisions can have real-life consequences that reinforce inequalities in society.

How about you? What are some of the concerns that you have about these platforms, if any?

Prompt: What worries you the most, and why? Can you give me an example?

Prompt: What do you like about these platforms, what do you not like online platforms that personalize results and collect data about your likes and dislikes? Do these concerns worry you, or are they helpful with filtering ALL the info that's out there?

Question 5.

In the courses you teach, yourself, do you ever discuss how information that is created and shaped by different online platforms that are commonly used, and if so, how?

Prompt: Are there some ways that students can learn about how technologies may be fundamentally changing how we find and share news and information?

Prompt: Can you give me an example? Or do these kinds of discussions even belong in your college classroom?

CONCLUSION AND DEBRIEF

Inform the interview participant of privacy and confidentiality measures. Inform the participant that findings will be reported in a synthesized format, descriptive of the group, as a whole, and posted on the PIL Website in summary form on December 12.

Summarize what has been learned from the interview and how it will be used in the findings. Thank the interviewee for their participation.

AFTER THE INTERVIEW CONCLUDES

1. Remove name and/or any personal identity characteristics from notes and assign coding numbers to each participant.
2. Add in any missing data and review observations.
3. Write a brief summary of discussion themes for tracking trends ASAP (within 7 days).
4. Send an email thank-you to the interview participant.
5. Destroy and shred research notes and erase the audio recording once the study concludes.

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