Too Much Personalization

Tom's online behavior and other basic information like where he lives, his language preference, and his gender and age, is what social media companies use to place him into a specific segment or bucket.

There is some level of control that Tom has on his personal data and who can see his posts, but he is surprised to know that what he shares and who can see his information is just the beginning of what should be his privacy concerns. He should also be concerned about how his online "behavior" is used by companies, including his clicks outside of social media while browsing the internet.

Today, companies can buy advertising based on a specific audience, regardless of where Tom consumes content; companies can drill down to very specific consumer factors, such as whether Tom owns a home, if he is in the market for a new appliance, and even whether he has a particular political orientation.

Tom remembers seeing a list of "suggested friends" appear on his Facebook page not too long ago. He also started getting information about gardening products after he clicked on a post about gardening techniques. Suddenly, he started seeing lawn mowers suggested on his Facebook page. Now he knows that this is exactly what social media platforms are designed to do: personalizing the experience for people so that advertising they see appeal to them at a moment that makes sense.

Facebook and other social media platforms target people's online behavior to make predictions about what content is most relevant and will keep people engaged. When Tom gets the content he likes, he will continue to scroll, watch, and click to consume more content; and suddenly, ads and paid sponsored content are sprinkled in between his friends' posts.

Now that he thinks about it, he is amazed by the similarity of the type of content he often sees in his feed. Before knowing how social media worked, he used to think that someone, a real person, was watching his posts!
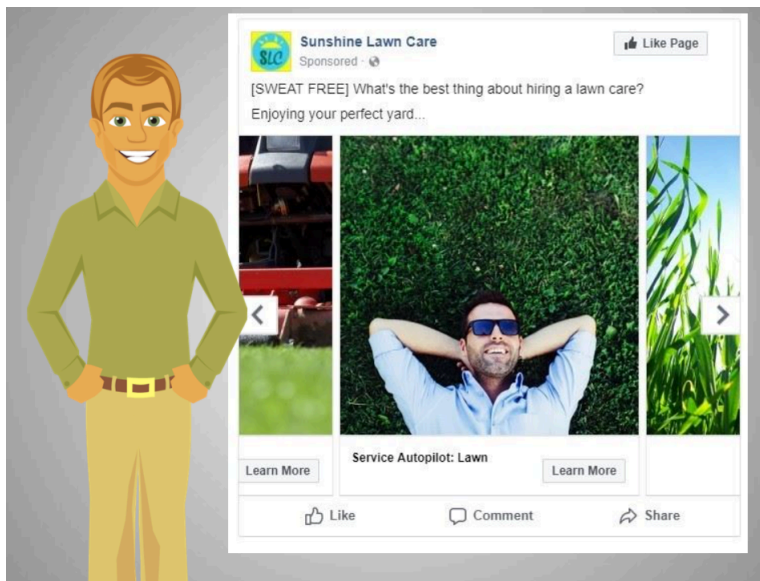
There is no one watching his posts, but with all the data he generates every time he uses his favorite social media sites, the algorithms running quietly behind the scenes are making smart predictions about the content that will be most interesting for him and the ads that he will be more likely to click on.

He thinks of these algorithms as the planners of a party for total strangers, looking for people that are likely to be happy with the same kinds of things, agree on the same topics, and have similar thoughts.

Tom thinks that must be pleasant; however, too much personalization can create what it is known as hyper targeting, and that can be dangerous. Why? Because this means that the information that Tom sees may be partial and biased to only what he tends to agree with. And what he tends to agree with becomes just another data point that is collected and sold to advertisers of all kinds.

Advertisers use the power of social media, but they are not the only ones. Political campaign managers, religious groups, and conspiracists also take advantage of the personalization in social media.

Biased information means selective information. Such information isn't necessarily untrue, but it may, for example, be related to a specific company or service provider, or a particular political campaign targeting Tom's age, political affiliation and even income bracket!

There is bias built in our brains, for example, research shows that we tend to be more trusting of the information that confirms our previous experience or beliefs. And while it is not necessarily bad, because of the way social media works, people gravitate towards news sources which most closely resemble their own worldview or political leanings.

Tom often clicks on Facebook links from Fox News and now Facebook shows him more of that site's content than others. This means that Tom is exposed to a less diverse set of news when using social media. Because it is not only Facebook, but most digital platforms, this creates a "filter bubble" effect that may isolate Tom from diverse perspectives, strengthening his own bias.
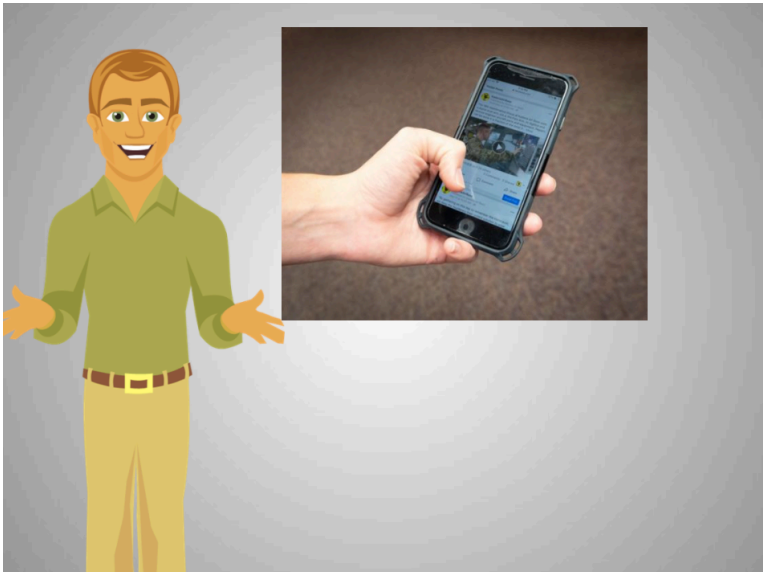
Tom started to pay more attention to what he finds online. He understands how his online behavior follows him outside social media.

While searching on Google at the library computers, he saw again the lawn mowers he once was looking for and ads from Fox News, the site he often sees on Facebook. Someone at the library told him that this is referred to as an "information bubble." Meaning that information he sees is biased towards his preferences and views. In other words, he is more likely to see things he likes and agrees with.
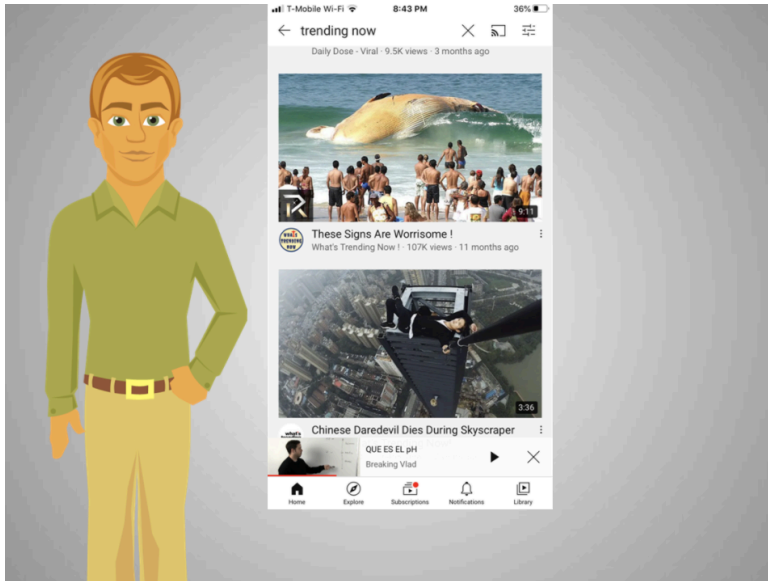
Besides advertisements, trending information is also tailored to individual preferences, which is another important aspect that contributes to biased information in social media. "Trending information" is information that gets the most clicks, but mostly within Tom's information bubble. Tom sees trending information that promotes popular content among his group of like-minded people, reinforcing what appears to be popular regardless of its quality.

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