

IT & TELECOM

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When the internet thinks it knows you

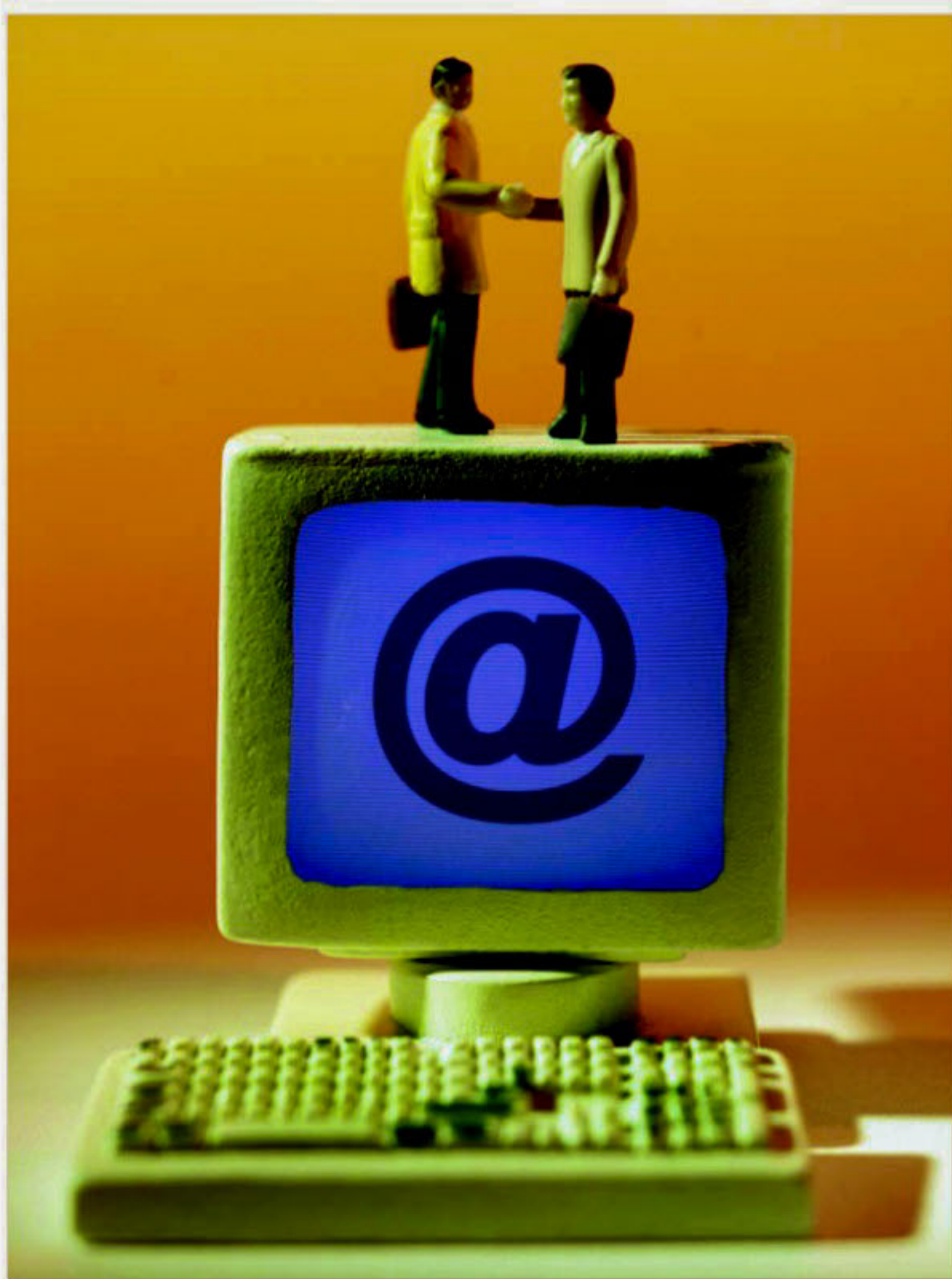
ELI PARISER

Once upon a time, the story goes, we lived in a broadcast society. In that dusty pre-internet age, the tools for sharing information weren't widely available. If you wanted to share your thoughts with the masses, you had to own a printing press or a chunk of the airwaves, or have access to someone who did. Controlling the flow of information was an elite class of editors, producers and media moguls who decided what people would see and hear about the world. They were the Gatekeepers.

Then came the internet, which made it possible to communicate with millions of people at little or no cost. Suddenly anyone with an internet connection could share ideas with the whole world. A new era of democratized news media dawned.

You may have heard that story before maybe from the conservative blogger Glenn Reynolds (blogging is "technology undermining the gatekeepers") or the progressive blogger Markos Moulitsas (his book is called "Crashing the Gate"). It's a beautiful story about the revolutionary power of the medium, and as an early practitioner of online politics, I told it to describe what we did at MoveOn.org. But I'm increasingly convinced that we've got the ending wrong perhaps dangerously wrong. There is a new group of gatekeepers in town, and this time, they're not people, they're code.

Today's Internet giants Google, Facebook, Yahoo and Microsoft see the remarkable rise of available information as an opportunity. If they can provide services that sift through the data and supply us with the most personally relevant and appealing results, they'll get the most users and the most ad views. As a result, they're racing to offer personalized filters that show us the Internet that they think we want to see. These filters, in effect, control and limit the information that



reaches our screens.

By now, we're familiar with ads that follow us around online based on our recent clicks on commercial websites. But increasingly, and nearly invisibly, our searches for information are being personalized too. Two people who each search on Google for "Egypt" may get significantly different results, based on their past clicks. Both Yahoo News and Google News make adjustments to their home pages for each individual visitor. And just last month, this technology began making inroads on the websites of newspapers like The Washington Post and The New York Times.

All of this is fairly harmless when

information about consumer products is filtered into and out of your personal universe. But when personalization affects not just what you buy but how you think, different issues arise. Democracy depends on the citizen's ability to engage with multiple viewpoints; the internet limits such engagement when it offers up only information that reflects your already established point of view. While it's sometimes convenient to see only what you want to see, it's critical at other times that you see things that you don't.

Like the old gatekeepers, the engineers who write the new gatekeeping code have enormous

power to determine what we know about the world. But unlike the best of the old gatekeepers, they don't see themselves as keepers of the public trust. There is no algorithmic equivalent to journalistic ethics.

Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook's chief executive, once told colleagues that "a squirrel dying in your front yard may be more relevant to your interests right now than people dying in Africa." At Facebook, "relevance" is virtually the sole criterion that determines what users see. Focusing on the most personally relevant news the squirrel is a great business strategy. But it leaves us staring at our front yard instead of reading about suffering, genocide and revolution.

There's no going back to the old system of gatekeepers, nor should there be. But if algorithms are taking over the editing function and determining what we see, we need to make sure they weigh variables beyond a narrow "relevance." They need to show us Afghanistan and Libya as well as Apple and Kanye.

Companies that make use of these algorithms must take this curative responsibility far more seriously than they have to date. They need to give us control over what we see making it clear when they are personalizing, and allowing us to shape and adjust our own filters. We citizens need to uphold our end, too developing the "filter literacy" needed to use these tools well and demanding content that broadens our horizons even when it's uncomfortable.

It is in our collective interest to ensure that the internet lives up to its potential as a revolutionary connective medium. This won't happen if we're all sealed off in our own personalized online worlds.

Eli Pariser, the president of the board of MoveOn.org, is the author of "The Filter Bubble: What the Internet Is Hiding From You."

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First Chromebook goes on sale

BBC ONLINE

The first laptop running Google's Chrome operating system has gone on sale in the United States.

The Samsung machine replaces installed software with browser-based apps which store files online.

Google claims that the technology enables a new way of computing, removing the need for features such as anti-virus

software or optical drives.

However, many applications available for Windows, Mac and Linux do not yet exist for Chrome.

The Chromebook is available in WiFi only and WiFi and 3G models for \$429 (£266) and \$499 (£310) respectively.

It is expected to sell for between £349 and £399 when launched in the UK in August.

A second Chromebook, made by Acer is due to start shipping soon.

Sundar Pichai, senior vice president for Chrome, said at the launch last month: "Most people spend all their time on the web, and for the first time we have distilled the entire computing experience to be about nothing but the web.

"End-to-end, I think your computing experience will be far simpler, safer and faster."



Some early reviews of Google's Chrome OS have criticised the system for its poor usability when offline.



TECHPHOTO

Twimal

An employee of Japanese toy maker Tomy poses with the computer accessory "Twimal" (Twitter animal), a digital gadget that reads out tweets, at the annual Tokyo Toy Show on June 16. The Twimal connects to a computer via USB and reads out tweets from the Twitter social networking site as they arrive on the users account.

PHOTO: AFP

For a pioneer of technology, 100 years of "Think"

AP, New York

Google, Apple and Facebook get all the attention. But the forgettable everyday tasks of technology saving a file on your laptop, swiping your ATM card to get 40 bucks, scanning a gallon of milk at the checkout line that's all IBM.

International Business Machines turns 100 on Thursday without much fanfare. But its much younger competitors owe a lot to Big Blue.

After all, where would Groupon be without the supermarket bar code? Or Google without the mainframe computer?

IBM dates to June 16, 1911, when three companies that made scales, punch-clocks for work and other machines merged to form the Computing Tabulating Recording Co. The modern-day name followed in 1924.

With a plant in Endicott, N.Y., the new business also made cheese slicers and significantly for its future machines that read data stored on punch cards. By the

offices.

By the late '60s, IBM was consistently the only high-tech company in the Fortune 500's top 10. IBM famously spent \$5 billion during the decade to develop a family of computers designed so growing businesses could easily upgrade.

It introduced the magnetic hard drive in 1956 and the floppy disk in 1971. In the 1960s, IBM developed the first bar code, paving the way for automated supermarket checkouts. IBM introduced a high-speed processing system that allowed ATM transactions. It created magnetic strip technology for credit cards.

For much of the 20th century, IBM was the model of a dominant, paternalistic corporation. It was among the first to give workers paid holidays and life insurance.

IBM had slipped with the rise of cheap microprocessors and rapid changes in the industry. In an infamous blunder, IBM introduced its influential personal computer in 1981, but it passed on buying the rights to the software that ran it



1930s, IBM's cards were keeping track of 26 million Americans for the newly launched Social Security program.

These old, sprawling machines might seem quaint in the iPod era, but they had design elements similar to modern computers.

Punch cards carted from station to station represented what business today might call "data flow."

The force behind IBM's early growth was Thomas J. Watson Sr., a demanding boss with exacting standards for everything from office wear (white shirts, ties) to creativity (his slogan: "Think").

Watson, and later his son, Thomas Watson Jr., guided IBM into the computer age. Its machines were used to calculate everything from banking transactions to space shots. As the company swelled after World War II, IBM threw its considerable resources at research to maintain its dominance in the market for mainframes, the hulking computers that power whole

made by a startup called Microsoft.

IBM helped make the PC a mainstream product, but it quickly found itself outmatched in a market it helped create. It relied on Intel for chips and Microsoft for software, leaving it vulnerable when the PC industry took off and rivals began using the same technology.

The PC's casing wasn't as important as the technology inside it, and IBM didn't own the intellectual property inside its own machines. In addition, the rise of smaller computers that performed some of the same functions as mainframes threw IBM's main moneymaking business into disarray.

With its legacy and very survival at stake, the company was forced to embark on a wrenching restructuring.

One of its major achievements turned out to be re-engineering itself during the upheavals of the 1990s. Viewed as too bureaucratic to compete in fast-changing times, IBM tapped an outsider as CEO in 1993 to help with a turnaround.

Yahoo! helps find smartphone 'apps'

AFP, San Francisco

Yahoo! has begun helping people navigate the sea of applications available for Apple iPhones or mobile gadgets powered by Google-backed Android software.

App Search for personal computers and a free AppSpot program for smartphones were crafted to help people find what they seek at Apple's online App Store or the Android Market.

"Together, they take the guesswork out of finding apps that fit your life," Yahoo! said in a blog post.

"App Search and AppSpot allow you to zero in on any app by showing matching app titles with a full com-



prehensive description, price, overall star rating from users and screenshots in one spot."

The App Store boasts more than 425,000 of the mini-programs for Apple gadgets, while the Android Market was reported to have about 200,000 and growing.



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