The Web Is Turning Us Into Narrow-Minded Drones

How Eli Pariser and Siva Vaidhyanathan convinced a roomful of New Yorkers they'd been brainwashed by the Internet.

By Katy Waldman | Posted Wednesday, April 18, 2012, at 4:51 PM ET

If you live in Manhattan and get hungry for pizza, you'll probably want your Google search for "pizza" to return local results. In fact, the more the search engine knows about your location and preferences, the better off you are. But does the same hold true for politics? Should Internet companies aim to serve you the news stories that best suit your taste?

Think of Tuesday's Slate/Intelligence Squared live debate in New York as a contest between pizza and politics. "Pizza" represents the consumer paradise companies like Google and Facebook dream the Internet will become. Politics, meanwhile, could suffer if we let profit-driven firms decide what information we see online. In utilizing customized search results (which all four panelists agree exist to some extent), do Americans imperil their democracy—or just improve their dinner options?

Author-activist Eli Pariser believes the former. He joined University of Virginia professor Siva Vaidhyanathan to defend the motion that "When it comes to politics, the Internet is closing our minds." Across the aisle, Evgeny Morozov, a Schwartz fellow at the New America Foundation, teamed up with Slate Group editor-in-chief Jacob Weisberg to argue the opposite—that the Internet nurtures new political perspectives. The audience was polled on the motion both before and after the debate, and the side that persuaded more people won. This month's laurels went to Pariser and Vaidhyanathan: While 28 percent of the crowd originally supported the motion, the final tally showed 53 percent in favor. Meanwhile, at the beginning of the night, 37 percent of the audience opposed the idea that the Internet was closing our minds, and 35 percent were undecided. Two hours later, 36 percent remained opposed and 11 percent said they were unsure.

The panelists at the debate seemed roughly on the same (web)page. All four grasped the Internet's vast potential to broaden horizons. All four wanted the Web to host national conversations that were rich, nuanced, and multivocal, especially in politics. (If they're anything like the debate itself, those ideal conversations will also be jokey and entertaining.) But as they probed the latest developments from Silicon Valley, the participants split along the lines of hope and pessimism. Eli Pariser, former director of MoveOn.org and author of The Filter Bubble, the book that inspired the motion, claimed that personalization on Facebook and Google builds invisible walls between people holding different viewpoints. According to his theory, attention has emerged as the hottest commodity in cyberspace. The companies that flourish are those that can command attentioni by displaying links people want to click on. And yet most users take special delight not in learning new things but in hearing their own beliefs echoed back at them. This incentivizes Google and other Internet actors to customize search results to confirm, rather than challenge, user biases.

Pariser wrapped his hypothesis in a moving personal testimony: He used to be a believer, he said, but then "the Internet changed." It went from a noisy commons to a handful of islands with no bridges. "This isn't the place that I would want to be," he said, referring to his position on the debate motion—but also, perhaps, to an archipelago of eerily concordant online communities.

Weisberg, a pioneer in digital media, took a less regretful tack. He seemed at once intrigued by and skeptical of what he deemed a purely "theoretical problem": that Web personalization might one day subtly edit our opinions. For now, he insisted, the empirical evidence for such a claim remains "laughably weak." To prove his point, Weisberg noted the proliferation of news sources beyond a token three cable channels, described watching the Arab Spring unfold on Twitter, and finally asked audience members to consult their own experience. Did they find that the Internet shut out opposing views? (Of course, as moderator John Donvan observed, the insidious nature of Google's new practices might blind people to their own blindness.)

While Weisberg stressed the lack of data to support Pariser's filter bubbles, his partner Evgeny Morozov provided historical context. "Technology always plays scapegoat when it comes to debates about the closing of the American mind," he said. Before Google and Facebook, CD players and headphones took the blame. Yet there's something especially alluring about a conspiracy theory that implicates shadowy corporate interests in our cognitive decay, Morozov argued. The Internet is a Leviathan we don't yet understand; greed is something we know to fear. That's why the "fairy tale" that ad-driven personalization closes our minds has such staying power.

"Do you still think Google is evil?" Donvan teased Siva Vaidhyanathan, a notable critic of the search engine. "The really important question is, does Google think I'm evil?" Vaidhyanathan replied. He mostly played wise-acre to Pariser's somber apostate. And while he agreed with Morozov that social filters expedite shopping, he challenged their utility for organizing the news. "When you want to learn about anything complex," he said, "the worst thing you can do is subject yourself to a social filter."

"You need better friends," Morozov interjected.

"You're the person I retweet most!" Vaidhyanathan shot back.

Weisberg also drew laughs when he tried to imagine a paternalistic gatekeeper supplementing Google's algorithms. "What kind of regulation do you want?" he queried Pariser. "If you're searching for a Lady Gaga video, [should] you also have to have a little bit of this interesting study from the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office?"

Pariser's answer, though, took a fascinating turn. He suggested adding an "Important" button on Facebook to accompany the "Like" button. Without coercing or patronizing, this move would make it easier for users to propagate information they didn't necessarily endorse, such as a massacre in Darfur.

For a debate about something as remote and mysterious as the inner workings of the Internet, Tuesday's Slate/Intelligence Squared event had the aura of good friends hashing it out at a beer summit. Rarely did the panelists' bantering familiarity flare into impatience—although Morozov and Vaidhyanathan had some heated moments, such as when Morozov, the author or Net Delusion, mockingly asked his opponent whether he "aspire[d] to one global Utopia where people in China feel like people in India and Iran."

"Yeah, that would be really nice," said Vaidhyanathan.

The exchange crystallized a tension that had already surfaced a few times. If companies make poor information mediators, then what should take their place? Government? Morozov's remark hinted at the short distance between the beginnings of thought regulation, no matter how well-intentioned, and totalitarianism. And while Pariser and Vaidhyanathan were quick to deny that the Internet should be nationalized, the warning from a Belarusian born in the waning days of the Soviet Union made their idealism sound naive. Vaidhyanathan's later suggestion that nonprofits spearhead the organization of the world's knowledge seemed more credible.

Afterward, moderator John Donvan wondered briefly at the direction the dialogue took. "I thought our focus would be on the quality of political discourse," he mused, "but people seemed far more interested in the technical details surrounding personalization." In small ways, the Internet continues to surprise us.