

MyUniversity.com?



By Cass R. Sunstein

# Personalized Education & Personalized News

Is the power of personalization a wonderful development? For institutions of higher education? For democracy? Should we celebrate complete freedom of choice with respect to the content of education and the content of news?

As a result of new technologies, we certainly do have much to celebrate. The power to personalize enables people to learn far more than they could before, and to learn it much faster. If you are interested in issues that bear on public policy—environmental quality, wages over time, motor-vehicle safety—you can find what you need to know in seconds. If you want to design an educational package that is specifically for you, and for no one else, you are increasingly able to do precisely that. And if you are suspicious of the mass media and want to discuss current issues with like-minded people, you can do that too, transcending the limitations of geography in ways that could barely be imagined even a decade ago.

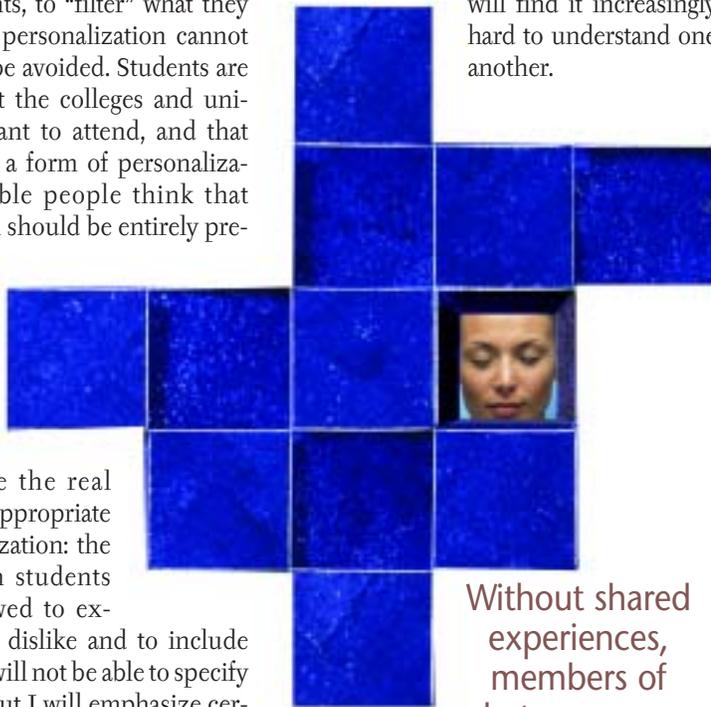
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But in the midst of the celebration, I want to raise a note of caution. I do so by emphasizing one of the most striking powers provided by emerging technologies: the growing power of consumers, including students, to “filter” what they see. To be sure, personalization cannot and should not be avoided. Students are allowed to select the colleges and universities they want to attend, and that very selection is a form of personalization. Few sensible people think that higher education should be entirely prescribed for students—that two years or four years of study should be selected by educators in advance. Hence the real question is the appropriate *level* of personalization: the extent to which students should be allowed to exclude what they dislike and to include what they like. I will not be able to specify that level here. But I will emphasize certain risks that accompany personalization in a world in which the Internet, and other technological developments, increasingly enable people to filter in, and also to filter out, information and opinions with unprecedented powers of precision.

Of course, these developments make life much more convenient and in some ways much better. Students, like everyone else, seek to reduce their exposure to uninvited noise. But filtering is a mixed blessing. In a heterogeneous society, institutions of higher education, like democracy itself, require something other than free, or publicly unrestricted, individual choices. I will stress two distinctive requirements here. First, people should be exposed to materials that they would not have chosen in advance. *Unanticipated encounters*, involving topics and points of view that people have not sought out and perhaps find quite irritating, are central to education, democracy, and even to freedom itself. This point has special force in the academic setting, where unanticipated encounters are a chief source of learning. Second, many or most citizens, including members of educational insti-

tutions, should have a range of *common experiences*. Without shared experiences, members of a heterogeneous society will have a difficult time addressing social problems, since people will find it increasingly hard to understand one another.



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### A Thought Experiment

To explore the issue, let us engage in a thought experiment: an apparently utopian dream, that of complete individuation, in which people, including students, can entirely personalize (or “customize”) their universe. Let us imagine, that is, a system of communications and a system of higher education in which each citizen and each student has unlimited power of individual design. If people want to watch news all the time, they would be entirely free to do exactly that.

If they dislike news and want to watch football in the morning and situation comedies at night, that would be fine too. If people care only about the United States and want to avoid international issues entirely, that would be very simple to do indeed; so too if they care only about New York, or Illinois, or California. If people want to restrict themselves to certain points of view by limiting themselves to conservatives, moderates, liberals, vegetarians, or Nazis, that would be entirely feasible with a simple “point and click.” If people want to isolate themselves and speak only with like-minded others, that would be possible as well.

Now let’s turn to students. For higher education, we can easily imagine a system in which students are able to use technologies, including the Internet, to select exactly what they would like to learn. If they want to learn only about math or only about English literature, they are entitled to do that. If they want teachers of a particular point of view—say, liberals who admire the student movements of the 1960s, or conservatives who lionize former U.S. president Ronald Reagan—they can do that as well. If they want to avoid a conventional campus, they can do that too, learning from home. The exchange of ideas with others, or at least with unwanted others, can be avoided, as can encounters with those aspects of higher education that some dislike: football games, clubs, social organizations, and so forth. People can mix and match, to the extent that the technology allows it.

At least as a matter of feasibility, our communications market is moving rapidly toward this picture. In terms of news itself, a number of publications allow readers to create filtered versions that contain exactly what they want and no more. The Internet also greatly increases people’s ability to expand their horizons, as millions are now doing. For colleges and universities, the picture is similar, with many campuses and institutions increasing students’ ability to create individuated learning. Whereas Professor Nicholas Negroponte refers to the emergence of the “Daily Me”—a communications package that is personally designed, with its components fully chosen in advance by the

reader—we can likewise imagine a MyUniversity.com, which will enable students to construct their own, personally designed educational experience.

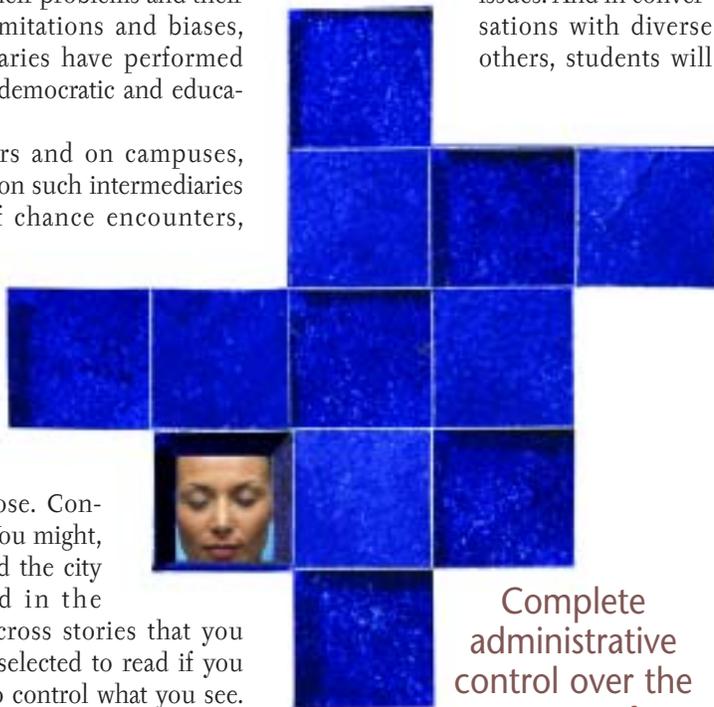
Of course this is not entirely different from what has come before. Not all people who read newspapers read the same newspaper; some people do not read any newspaper at all. People make choices among magazines based on their tastes and their point of view. Students choose many of their courses and professors. But in the emerging situation, there is a difference of degree if not of kind. What is different is the dramatic increase in individual control over content and the corresponding decrease in the power of general-interest intermediaries—the newspapers, magazines, television broadcasters, and educational administrations. For all their problems and their unmistakable limitations and biases, these intermediaries have performed some important democratic and educational functions.

In newspapers and on campuses, people who rely on such intermediaries have a range of chance encounters, involving shared experiences with diverse others and also exposure to materials that they did not specifically choose. Consider the news. You might, for example, read the city newspaper and in the process come across stories that you would not have selected to read if you had the power to control what you see. Your eyes may stray to a story about politics in Germany, or crime in Los Angeles, or innovative business practices in Tokyo, and you may read those stories even though you would hardly have placed them in your “Daily Me.” Or you might watch a particular television channel, and when your favorite program ends, you might see the beginning of another show, one that you would not have chosen in advance. Reading *Time* magazine, you might come across a discussion of endangered species in Madagascar, and this discussion might interest you,

even affect your behavior, although you would not have looked for the story at first. A system in which individuals lack control over the particular content that they see has a great deal in common with a public street, where people may encounter not only friends but also a heterogeneous variety of others engaged in a wide array of activities (including perhaps political protests and begging).

Education can be analyzed similarly. Complete administrative control over the content of a college or university is not desirable, but chance encounters, and even unwanted encounters, are a large part of a good education. A well-designed campus will itself ensure such encounters, as students meet people engaged in very different activities and concerned

with very different issues. And in conversations with diverse others, students will



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discover topics that can alter their interests and attentions, even change their lives. Here a campus has crucial advantages over a computer terminal. And insofar as there are distribution requirements that expose people to topics and ideas that they would not antecedently choose, a great deal is to be gained.

In fact, one risk with a system of perfect individual control is that it can reduce the importance of the “public sphere” and of common spaces in general. A key feature of such spaces is that they tend to ensure that people will encounter materials on important issues, whether or not they have specifically chosen the encounter. This point is closely connected to a central, and somewhat exotic, constitutional principle, to which I now turn.

### **Public (and Private) Forums—and Campuses**

In the popular understanding, the free-speech principle forbids the government from “censoring” speech of which it disapproves. In the standard cases, the government attempts to impose penalties, whether civil or criminal, on political dissent and on speech that it considers dangerous, libelous, or sexually explicit. The question is whether the government has a legitimate, and sufficiently weighty, basis for restricting the speech that it seeks to control.

But a central part of free-speech law, with large implications for thinking about personalization, takes a quite different form: the Supreme Court has also held that streets and parks must be kept open to the public for expressive activity.<sup>1</sup> Hence governments are obliged to allow speech to occur freely on public streets and in public parks—even if many citizens would prefer to have peace and quiet and even if it is irritating to come across protesters and dissidents whom they would like to avoid. For well over a century, the “public-forum doctrine” has required parks and streets to remain open. To be sure, the government is allowed to impose restrictions on the “time, place, and manner” of speech in public places. For example, no one has a right to use fireworks and loudspeakers on the public streets at midnight to complain about the size of the defense bud-

get. But time, place, and manner restrictions must be both reasonable and limited, and the government is essentially obliged to allow speakers, whatever their views, to use public property to convey messages of their choosing.

The public-forum doctrine promotes three important functions.<sup>2</sup> First, it ensures that speakers can have access to a wide array of people. If you want to claim that taxes are too high or that police brutality against African-Americans is common, you can press this argument on many people who might otherwise fail to hear the message. Those who use the streets and parks are likely to learn something about the substance of the argument urged by speakers; they might also learn the nature and intensity of views held by their fellow citizens. Perhaps their views will be changed; perhaps they will simply become curious enough to investigate the question on their own.

Second, the public-forum doctrine allows speakers to have general access not only to a heterogeneous group of people but also to specific people, and specific

institutions, with whom they have a complaint. Suppose, for example, that you believe that the state legislature has behaved irresponsibly with respect to crime, education, or health care for children. The public forum ensures that you can make your views heard by legislators simply by protesting in front of the state legislature itself.

Third, the public-forum doctrine increases the likelihood that citizens will be exposed to a wide variety of people and views. When you go to work or visit a park, you may have a range of unexpected encounters, however fleeting or seemingly inconsequential. You cannot easily wall yourself off from contentions or conditions that you would not have sought out in advance or that you would have avoided if possible. Here too the public-forum doctrine tends to ensure a range of experiences that are widely shared—since streets and parks are public property—and also exposure to diverse circumstances. In a pluralistic democracy, an important shared experience is in fact the exposure to society's diversity. The cen-

tral idea here is that these experiences and exposures help promote understanding and perhaps, in that sense, freedom. All of these points are closely connected to democratic ideals.

Of course there is a limit to how much can be done on streets and in parks. Even in the largest cities, streets and parks are insistently local. But many of the social functions of streets and parks, as public forums, are also performed by others. Society's general-interest intermediaries—newspapers, magazines, television broadcasters, educational administrations—can be understood as public forums, or as public-forum administrators, of an especially important sort, perhaps above all because they expose people to new, unanticipated topics and points of view. These claims do not depend on a judgment that general-interest intermediaries, including educational administrations, are unbiased, or always do an excellent job, or deserve a monopoly. The Internet is a boon partly because it breaks that monopoly. But general-interest intermediaries do expose people to a wide

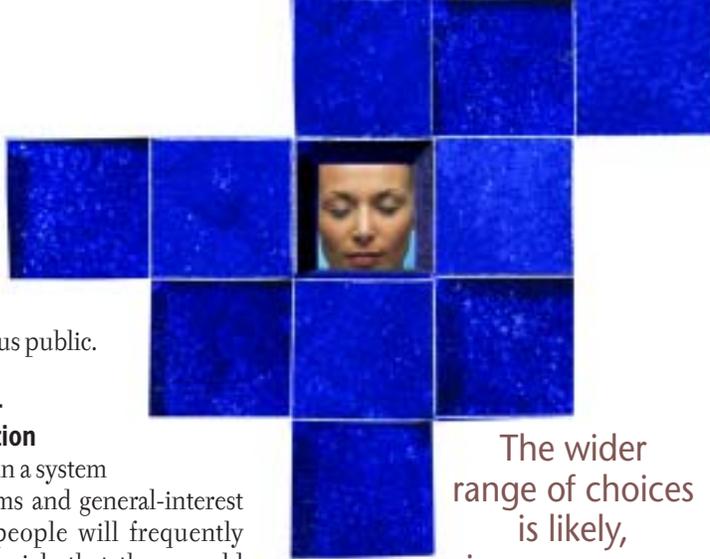
range of topics and views at the same time that they provide shared experiences for a heterogeneous public.

### Specialization— and Fragmentation

I have noted that in a system with public forums and general-interest intermediaries, people will frequently come across materials that they would not have chosen in advance. For diverse citizens, this provides something like a common framework for social experience. The same point is certainly true for students. But for members of a democratic society, or students in higher education, a system of personalization will change things significantly.

Consider some simple facts. If you take the ten most highly rated television programs for whites and then take the ten most highly rated programs for African-Americans, you will find little overlap between them. Indeed, over half of the ten most highly rated programs for African-Americans rank among the ten *least* popular programs for whites. Similar racial divisions can be found on the Internet. Not surprisingly, many people tend to choose like-minded sites and like-minded discussion groups. Many of those with committed views on a topic—gun control, abortion, affirmative action—speak mostly with each other. It is exceedingly rare for a site with an identifiable point of view to provide links to sites with opposing views, but it is very common for such a site to provide links to like-minded sites. We can easily imagine personalization having the same consequence for higher education, with like-minded people increasingly congregating together, either virtually or face to face.

The point is that with a dramatic increase in options and a greater power to customize comes a wider range of choices. This wider range is hardly bad on balance; among other things, it will greatly increase variety, the aggregate amount of information, and the entertainment value of actual choices. Many people will seek out new topics and ideas. But there are serious risks as well. Select-



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ing can produce narrowness, not breadth. The wider range of choices is likely, in many cases, to mean that people will try to find material that makes them feel comfortable or that is created by and for people like themselves. This is what the “Daily Me” and MyUniversity.com are all about. If diverse groups are seeing and hearing their own points of view or focusing on their own topics of interest, mutual understanding might be difficult, and it might be hard for people to solve problems that they face together as a society. If millions of people are listening mostly to Rush Limbaugh and Fox News, problems will arise if millions of other people are listening mostly to people and stations with an altogether different point of view. And a key point is that entirely personalized education would present the same risks.

We can sharpen our understanding of this problem if we attend to the phenomenon of *group polarization*. The idea behind group polarization is that after deliberating with one another, people in a group are likely to move toward a more

extreme point in the direction to which they were previously inclined, as indicated by the median of their predeliberation judgments. Consider some examples of the phenomenon of group polarization, which has been found in over a dozen nations:

- After discussion, citizens of France become more critical of the United States and its intentions with respect to economic aid.
- After discussion, whites predisposed to show racial prejudice offer more negative responses to the question of whether white racism is responsible for conditions faced by African-Americans in U.S. cities.
- After discussion, whites predisposed not to show racial prejudice offer more positive responses to the same question.
- After discussion, moderately profeminist women become more strongly profeminist.

It follows that after discussion with one another, those inclined to favor more aggressive affirmative-action programs will become quite extreme on the issue, and that after talking together, those who believe that tax rates are too high will come to think that large, immediate tax reductions are an extremely good idea.<sup>3</sup>

The phenomenon of group polarization has conspicuous importance for the issue of personalization, because the likely result of personalization is that groups with distinctive identities will increasingly engage in within-group discussion. If the public is balkanized, and if different groups design their own preferred communications and educational packages, the consequence will be further balkanization, as group members move each other toward more extreme points in line with their initial tendencies. At the same time, differing groups, each consisting of like-minded people, will be driven increasingly far apart, simply because most of their discussions are with members of their own group. Extremist groups will become more extreme. And in fact, group polarization is occurring every day on the Internet. Personalized communications can contribute to the problem. A good system

of education should counteract this risk by exposing people to a wide variety of perspectives.

Finally, it is important to consider the basic ideal of “consumer sovereignty,” which underlies much of the contemporary enthusiasm for personalization in education and elsewhere. Consumer sovereignty means that people can choose to purchase, or to obtain, whatever they want. For many purposes, this is a worthy ideal. But the adverse effects of group polarization show that in communications and education, consumer sovereignty is likely to produce serious problems for individuals and society at large—and that these problems will occur by a kind of iron logic of social interactions. Education is not an ordinary commodity, in part because it should shape preferences and values, not merely cater to them. People are citizens, not merely consumers, and education, properly conceived and operated, is a breeding ground for citizenship. A system of personalization threatens to undermine that ideal.

### Well Beyond Personalization

My principal claim here has been that complete personalization creates risks to both democracy and institutions of higher education. I have not emphasized the standard reason for concern: that students often lack the information that would enable them to make fully informed choices. That point is valid, but my broader claim is that both a well-functioning democracy and a well-functioning system of higher education require that people be exposed to unanticipated, unchosen encounters and that people share a range of common experiences. When a democracy or a campus is working well, these two requirements are met.

Emerging technologies, including the Internet, are hardly the enemy here. They hold out at least as much promise as risk, especially because they allow citizens and students to widen their horizons. But to the extent that emerging technologies weaken the power of general-interest intermediaries, including educational administrations, and increase people's abil-

ity to wall themselves off from topics and opinions that they prefer to avoid, they create dangers too. And if we believe that democracy and higher education institutions should allow unrestricted choices by individual consumers, we will not even understand the dangers as such.

Nothing I have said here establishes the appropriate *degree* of personalization. What I have sought to establish is that personalization is a mixed blessing, because both citizens and students benefit from a system that provides a wide range of experiences—with people, topics, and ideas—that they did not specifically select in advance. *e*

#### Notes

1. *Hague v. CIO*, 307 U.S. 496 (1939).
2. I draw here on the excellent treatment in Noah D. Zatz, “Sidewalks in Cyberspace: Making Space for Public Forums in the Electronic Environment,” *Harvard Journal of Law & Technology* 12, no. 1 (fall 1998).
3. For citations and general discussion, see Cass R. Sunstein, “Deliberative Trouble? Why Groups Go to Extremes,” *Yale Law Journal* 110, no. 1 (October 2000).