

## **We Don't Want To Burst Your Bubble, But...**

**By George Cunningham**

I often hear people complaining about how the press is biased and yearning for the old days when journalists were objective. My friends on the right all mutter about the liberal slant that the mainstream media put on the news, and my friends on the left rail about how corporate journalism is merely intent on protecting the fortunes of the ruling class. And I have to say, as a long-time journalist, that I am a bit amused by it all.

It's not that I necessarily disagree with the basic premise. Of course, the press is biased because reporters like all human beings are biased and the companies that employ reporters – which must make profits to exist – are also biased, whether those companies are Fox News, the Los Angeles Times, or MSNBC.

Objectivity is a journalism school myth. It has never existed, not now and not ever.

All a journalist can hope to be is fair. But fair from whose perspective? Fairness, much as beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. And the beholder in this case is the journalist himself. And, of course, the company for which he works.

But the journalists are not the only ones who are biased. So are the readers and viewers of the news. They select the news they want to read or watch and reject the news that they don't.

When I was a young reporter forty years ago, people used to lament how successful newspapers had driven less-successful newspapers out of business to the point that many towns had only one newspaper. What a shame, they would say, that people no longer had a choice on where to get their news and that there was no longer competition between publications.

What it meant was that there would be only one gatekeeper of knowledge in a city, they said. If one newspaper controlled what people got to read, what would it mean for democracy?

Of course, the truth was that many people had simply stopped reading the newspaper and turned on the TV. One gatekeeper replacing another.

In order to remain the dominant gatekeeper, newspapers attempted to be “professional” and “objective.” On the opinion pages, a liberal publication might include a conservative columnist, and if they were a conservative publication, they might have a piece by a liberal columnist. And they would try to have rules and policies to insure they were not leaning one way or the other.

Newspapers wanted to make sure that readers got the important news that they needed to read, even if it wasn't as interesting or relevant to the reader's immediate lives as the news they wanted to read. But the readers have always been the final gatekeeper. They would just skip right over stories in which they weren't interested.

As it turned out, the concerns about democracy were somewhat overblown.

Now that the Internet is here, the concern is just the opposite. Now there are too many sources of news and many of them are quite open about their biases. Now readers can go online and customize the news so it reflects and reinforces whatever preconceptions and biases they may have and never be bothered with viewpoints that differ from their own. But just in case readers need help not being exposed to a variety of world views, Google, Facebook, Yahoo, and other Internet companies have come to the rescue.

Author Eli Pariser has written a book called: *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet Is Hiding from You*. Pariser is the board president of the MoveOn.org. MoveOn.org advocates for progressive causes, and Pariser's views tend to be on the left side of the political spectrum. But, he is also interested in what conservative folks have to say and keeps in touch with many people whose views differ from his own.

What he found was his conservative Facebook friends began disappearing from his daily feed. And then he discovered that the result he got when he Googled a term was much different than the result other people got when they Googled the exact same term at the exact same time.

It turns out that the software programs at Google and Facebook and Yahoo are keeping track of the things we click on throughout the day, along with other information about us, such as where we live, what kind of computer we have, what type of things we buy. Pariser claims that Google has 57 points of reference it uses to "personalize" your service. The computer then uses that information to determine what it thinks we want and gives it to us. We become part of our own little filter bubble that helps protect us from dealing with things we might not want to hear.

Sometimes that's benign or even helpful. If I like to play the ponies and you like to go to rodeos, when we both Google horses, I will get links to websites about horseracing and you will get links to websites about rodeos.

But sometimes it can get in the way. If you mostly like to watch Fox News, but you are also interested in once in a while checking into what the New York Times or NPR has to say on a subject, the filter bubble is going to put the Times and NRP way down in your search results.

Pariser says the problem is that Google and the others are doing this without many of us being aware of it. And the criteria for determining what the computer program thinks we like are secrets. Pariser is worried about democracy. At a time, when we should all be listening to what other folks who may disagree with us have to say and looking for common ground, we are shuttled off to our own bubble by algorithms drawn up by the whiz kids in Mountain View.

He may have a good point, but that's not what makes me the angriest. Who the Hell do these people think they are, deciding what I want to see and what I don't and doing it behind my back and then putting a computer in charge of my choices?

I take that personally.

Check out Pariser's talk at the TED conference earlier this year in Long Beach at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B8ofWfx525s>

Check out his book at <http://www.amazon.com/Filter-Bubble-What-Internet-Hiding/dp/1594203008>

And you can contact me at [george@readerpublishing.com](mailto:george@readerpublishing.com) be my friend on Facebook at <http://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=747454750> and read my tweets at <http://twitter.com/#!/GeoCunham>