The Form of Content Personalisation at Mainstream Transatlantic News Outlets: 2010–2016

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Examples of personalisation

Welcome to News Feed

Our goal with News Feed is to show you the stories that matter most to you every time you visit Facebook.
• “The Daily Me” (Negroponte 1995) ➞ completely personalised newspaper
• We’re not quite there, but...
What is personalisation?

“A form of user-to-system interactivity that uses a set of technological features to adapt the content, delivery, and arrangement of a communication to individual users’ explicitly and/or implicitly determined preferences.” (Thurman/Schifferes 2012)

**Explicit:** users input preferences

**Implicit:** infers preferences from data collected
Challenges

• **Inaccurate profiles** (Gauch et al. 2007; Sela et al. 2015)
  ➔ getting outdated over time
  ➔ multiple users on the same account
  ➔ “do I really say that I want news on Kim Kardashian?”

• **Privacy & retaining control** (Diakopoulos/Koliska 2016)
  ➔ what gets tracked, when and how?
  ➔ need to ensure “algorithmic accountability”

• **Filter bubble** (Pariser 2011; Sunstein 2001)
  ➔ a threat to serendipity (?)
Why is personalisation of interest to news outlets?

• Cater to diverse audiences
• Re-use older items that might still be relevant
• Targeted advertising
Methodology

• Content analysis of news websites and mobile news apps

• UK, US, and German outlets, n=15

• Coding from September to October 2016

• Variables: explicit and implicit personalisation features

• Interviews with representatives in charge of personalisation of four of the outlets
Profound change since 2010

• RSS feeds – mostly gone! ➔ “too techy” ➔ move to social media as one’s personal newsfeed

• Homepage customisation – stable! (more in mobile)
• Geo-targeted editions – rare, mostly hyperlinks to other editions!
Profound change since 2010

- One-to-one & social collaborative filtering – gone!
  ➔ did rarely work; privacy issues

- My Pages – mostly gone!
  Some sophisticated exceptions!
The move to mobile

- New with mobile: engagement with news on public transport and in other places where media were either unavailable or a hassle to use

  ➔ “[Our] app users are the most loyal and the most engaged” (BBC News, personal communication)

- Breaking news push notifications (app or WhatsApp)
  ➔ segmenting news:
  What to send to whom?
  What is special interest, and what isn’t?
A threat to serendipity?:
Homepage customisation
• Users as the news gatekeepers...
• ... or are they missing out?

• **Possible remedies**
  • “Top Stories”
  • “Users really want the FT view” (FT personal communication)
  • “Hey Doris!”
• It’s not personalisation itself, it’s the implementation

→ transparency for the user: how is they data used?
→ don’t ask too much when setting up profiles
→ keep the “outlet’s view”

“If you don’t look at personalisation, you’re probably handicapped.”
(BBC News, personal communication)