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Op Ed — If Filter Failure is the Problem, Then What is Filter Success?



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In 2008 **Clay Shirky** (NYU new-media professor and author of “*Here Comes Everybody*”) presented a provocative keynote at the Web 2.0 Expo in New York City entitled “It’s Not Information Overload. It’s Filter Failure” (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LabqeJEOQyI>). He asserted that everyone harping on “information overload” was being silly because, in point of fact, humans have experienced information overload ever since **Gutenberg** invented the moveable-type printing press thereby making more books available to the public than one could ever read in a lifetime. **Ann Blair, McArthur Fellowship** winner and professor of intellectual history at **Harvard University**, says that information overload long pre-dated **Gutenberg**. Her recent book, *Too Much to Know: Managing Scholarly Information before the Modern Age*, has many examples of pre-**Gutenberg** scholars using early types of reference books to deal with the volume of work it took to master human knowledge.

What **Shirky** points out about **Gutenberg**, however, is that he not only created an efficient press but this press then was the economic basis for a publishing industry in which publishers needed to manage risk associated with what got published. There were significant up-front costs which had to be paid before any revenue could be obtained from a published work — so this meant that publishers had to be good at selection and design rather than just the publishing process itself. The crux of **Shirky’s** argument is that we are now experiencing “post-**Gutenberg** economics” in that the production costs to making what you have to say available to everyone in the world have truly gone to zero. This means that the task of filtering the wheat from the chaff, that which is useful for a particular task from the distracting and irrelevant, is now a “post-production” task performed by other players or the information consumers themselves. This is why he terms our information crisis as “Filter Failure.”

It’s useful to agree here how **Shirky** is using the term “filter.” At a very high level of abstraction he is including in the term “filter” any mechanism, technology, or process which selects what comes into our view (and in doing so puts other things out of view) when we are seeking information. Spam filters are a great example, but so are search engine results, discovery tools, meta-searchers, database queries. Websites that curate content for particular user needs are all working as “post-production” filters to bring into view the best content while leaving the unimportant out of sight.

Matt Asay, a frequent blogger on all things open source, asserts on his **C|net** blog (http://news.cnet.com/8301-13505_3-10142298-16.html) “I think there’s a billion-dollar business resident in **Shirky’s** thoughts, business that **Google** is missing with its focus on “search.” The best emphasis should be on “finding,” not searching. The need is for filters of a more refined, catered kind.”

If there’s a “billion dollar business” here then there needs to be a billion dollars of user need, a billion dollars someone is ready to pay, and a billion dollars of new products and product features which are chasing these needs. How do we know where to look for this “billion dollar business”?

I suggest that we can take the phrase “filter failure” and flip it around to ask, what is filter success? How can we envision a world in which students, researchers, and life-long learners in general experience a world of filter success? And further, what roles will be played by publishers, aggregators, discovery tool vendors, search engine designers, librarians, and users themselves?

This then leads to my long list of questions, purposely presented here in no particular order:

- Who creates and disseminates filters?
- Is there a set of requirements for filter developers that requires things like transparency?
 - Shouldn’t we know that an information source includes a filter so that we can circumvent the filter should it serve our inquiry to do so?
 - If a filter is based on some demographic about us, shouldn’t we have the right to inspect and change or simply delete that demographic data?
- Is there a “seal of approval” for filters that live up to standards on transparency, customization, and user-controls?
- Will acquisition librarians seek out specific filters for their patrons which will help users focus on their specific information needs?
 - The needs are possibly quite detailed: a first-year Sociology major at a big university would benefit from different filtering than the graduate student in Sociology at that very same university.
- Who will create and sell filters to libraries and universities?
 - Publishers? How will they avoid just filtering out their competitors’ content?
 - Aggregators?
 - Discovery Tool vendors?
- Will these filters be customizable by institution, by academic discipline, by student level, by the learners themselves?
- Will semantic web technologies become sophisticated enough to distinguish between the information needs of a first year student vs. a third year student?
- Will “Filter Literacy” become a standard part of “Information Literacy”?
 - How will this topic be included in the curricula of research effectiveness?
 - What aspects of “Filter Literacy” should be part of the preparedness for life-long-learning of any high school graduate?

Some of what’s needed here are things we already know how to do. Approval plans match an ever-flowing number of books to specific profiles of a library in order to optimize what books are sent to a library without having to manually pick each and every one. Will some library vendor gather up a profile of your library and its focused areas of interest and construct for you the best filters for your patrons’ online information lives?

Here are some glimpses of developments which show promise towards developing a world of filter success:

- **Ex Libris’** personalized ranking recently introduced as an opt-in feature to their Web scale discovery tool, Primo Central;
- **Credo’s** Literati with its customized service-based offering focused on specific information literacy and research effectiveness issues;
- If publishers are able to implement the personalization features of **TEMIS’** semantic publishing technologies;
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I’m looking forward to seeing how these questions end up being answered. 🐼