

LIFE ONLINE

Algorithms, filter bubbles and echo chambers

In everyday life, we often encounter algorithms – descriptions of how to solve a particular problem step by step. These include recipes or assembly instructions. However, algorithms have also become a common part of many people’s media consumption, as they influence what appears in the feed on various digital platforms.

How do the platforms’ recommendation systems work?

To improve the user experience and increase time, engagement, and interaction, the major platforms (such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok) use something called recommendation systems. These are algorithmic systems that filter and select from the enormous amounts of information available on the platforms, which users neither can nor want to consume in their entirety. Based on the historical data generated by the user, recommendation systems attempt to make predictions about the future and filter information according to certain criteria.

The major digital platforms are profit-driven companies whose business models are based on selling personalised advertising on behalf of their clients. To do this, they build a profile of each user which is used to offer customers a tailored target group based on a certain desired demographic. Because the platforms know

so much about each user, they can tailor where, when and how a particular advertisement is shown in order to generate maximum value for the customer.

The platforms offer their users attractive – and free of charge – services whose purpose is to maximise user engagement with the platform.

The more time a user spends on the platform’s services, the greater the chance that they will be exposed to the customer’s advertising message.

With more use, the user also reveals more about themselves.

All of the platform’s knowledge about the user is based on their behaviour.

Exactly how platform recommendation systems work is known only by the platforms themselves, but today they are highly complex, take many factors into account and are continuously changing.

Examples of actions and behaviours that influence what is shown include what a user clicks on, what they comment on and which other users they interact with, as well as their age, location, the type of device they use, how long and which part of a video clip they watch, and whether they pause while scrolling to read content.

The platforms are constantly looking for new ways to interpret and predict user behaviour.

The platforms also control what is shown based on user trends and regional differences, and prioritise content that they know will keep the user engaged on the screen.

How can you reduce the risk of filter bubbles and echo chambers?

Recommendations from the platforms:

Facebook

- Use the search function to discover new content that is not tailored to you.
- Click “Interested” or “Not interested” on a post to temporarily increase or reduce similar posts.

Instagram

- Use the “Reset content suggestions” function. This resets your recommendations.
- Use the “Following” or “Latest” function. This will show content from accounts you follow in reverse chronological order.
- Use the “Manage suggested content” function. There you can see content that you have indicated you are interested or not interested in.

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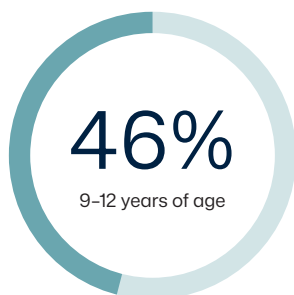
- Use the search function to discover content that is not tailored to you.

TikTok

- Reset personalisation.
- Turn off personalisation of your “For You” feed. You will then receive content based on what is popular in your region or internationally. Content is presented chronologically according to when it was published.

Proportion of people who get their news via social media (ages 9–12)

Source: Youth & Media 2025 (Ungar & medier 2025), Mediemyndigheten



Filter bubbles and echo chambers

As digital platforms have changed the way people access news and opinion, the concepts of filter bubbles and echo chambers have become increasingly popular. The terms refer to conditions in digital environments where only one type of opinion is visible and where opposing or challenging viewpoints are excluded.

The concepts are related but differ somewhat: filter bubbles are created by platform recommendation systems, while echo chambers are created by people. However, the effect is similar and involves the environments creating a positive feedback loop that continuously gives the user more of the same content. They confirm and reinforce the user’s existing worldview.

The idea is that filter bubbles are created because the recommendation system has learned which accounts and types of posts the user interacts with, increases their visibility in the feed and filters out everything else. Echo chambers, on the other hand, refer to how people in digital environments tend to seek out opinions that they agree with.

Although the concepts are often heard in public debate, they are also controversial. Critics argue that people have always sought out communities of like-minded people and adapted to their immediate surroundings, partly as part of a process of socialisation. According to this view, digital environments are a modern manifestation of long-standing tendencies and do not mean that people are unaware of other perspectives or that these do not become part of their worldview.

Research has shown that platform recommendation systems can indeed have filtering effects within individual services, but this does not mean that people who use them never encounter other opinions or challenging viewpoints. At the same time, we know that there are clear differences between age groups in the sources they use for news consumption, with younger people relying to a large extent on social media for their news.

On the website of the Swedish Agency for the Media (Mediemyndigheten) you will find simple tips, support and materials on children’s and young people’s media habits for both adults and children.

The Swedish Agency for the Media monitors and analyses developments in the media sector and in children’s and young people’s media use. The agency also works to protect children from harmful media content.

Safer Internet Centre Sverige is a joint effort to ensure the safety of children and young people online. Swedish Agency for the Media runs Safer Internet Centre Sweden together with the children’s rights organisations BRIS and ECPAT Sweden.



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