Creepy Technology

A review of the video documentary The Creepy Line

FRED ELBEL

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, technology offered the surreal promise of making the world's information instantly accessible to everyone. Today, we take the immense power of the Internet for granted, and can hardly imagine living without it.

Yet there's a dark side to this miracle. The feature-length documentary *The Creepy Line* points out that we voluntarily give all kinds of personal information to Google and Facebook. Millions of people worldwide use Gmail, which is archived and processed in order to extract highly detailed personal information. Many schools, universities, and corporations process their email and documents using Google services and servers, thus exposing them to the same information mining. We use Google Maps for navigation and in exchange let Google know exactly where we are every minute of every day.

Although Google and Facebook offer us immense computing power as free services, the cost of server farms must be paid with advertising dollars. In order to maximize advertising revenue, these Silicon Valley giants have mastered how to glean massive amounts of personal information about their users in order to target advertising to each individual user.

Dr. Robert Epstein, Senior Research Psychologist, American Institute for Behavioral Research and Technology, states in the documentary:

> Companies that use the surveillance business model — and this includes Google and Facebook — don't sell you anything. They sell *you. We* are the product.

A DARKER SIDE

Google's superior PageRank algorithm measures links between pages in order to assign relevance to pages, and then presents selected pages in a specific order in response to a user's search query. Google is essentially a giant "compression engine" that simplifies

the world and then presents it to us. Epstein states that its algorithms were written for the purpose of doing precisely two things: filtering and ordering. He states that it would be useless for us unless it was biased, noting that:

> The problem comes in, obviously, when we're not talking about dog food, but where we're talking about things like elections. Because if we're asking questions about issues like immigration or about candidates, well, again that algorithm is going to do those two things….

Luther Lowe, Senior Vice President, Yelp, observes that several trends led Google off the path of being the service that quickly provided people with the best information on the web: the birth of smart phones, and the rise of Facebook. As a consequence of these developments, the amount of time spent on a site became an important advertising metric. This caused Google to deviate from their original ethos — their focus shifted to trying to keep people on the Google ecosystem.

THE CREEPY LINE
Director: M.A. Taylor
Starring: Jordan B. Peterson,
Dr. Robert Epstein, Peter Schweizer
80 minutes
https://www.thecreepyline.com
Available on Amazon Prime and iTunes

Thus, Google branched out into other areas, developing the Chrome browser so that they can collect information about every site each user visits. Google developed the Android operating system, which records what we are doing, even when we're not actively online. Indeed, Google now controls over 100 different platforms.

USER MANIPULATION

The Creepy Line is about what we *don't* know. Peter Schweizer points out that current technology builds filter bubbles, stating that: "The problem with that is that you only see what you already know. So you can't learn."

He asks:

Fred Elbel is an IT consultant and Director of Colorado Alliance for Immigration Reform (CAIRCO). He has been active on immigration issues for several decades.

The question precisely is: what's good and bad — according to whose judgment? And that's especially relevant, given that these systems serve a filtering purpose. They're denying or allowing us access to information before we see and think, so we don't even know what's going on behind the scenes. The people who are designing these systems are building a gigantic unconscious mind that will filter the world for us, and is increasingly going to tune to our desires in a manner that will benefit purposes of the people who are building the machines.

Most people don't want to believe that data are used to manipulate them. Yet former Google CEO Eric Schmidt has admitted:

> There's what I call the 'creepy line,' and the Google policy about a lot of these things is to get right up to the creepy line but not cross it.

When you search with Google, behavioral influence begins with the very first letter you type. Search suggestions entice you to search for suggested phrases. As a blatant example, the documentary shows a search for the phrase "Top Races Republican," producing a search suggestion that asked, "Did you mean: Top Racist Republican?"

But it goes much deeper than that. Epstein's extensive research reveals how search engine companies can bias results in a manner that shifts opinions of undecided voters by up to 43 percent. His studies show that election results could be *undetectably shifted by 10 percent*. This is a huge threat to the democratic process.

Security issues compound existing problems. Facebook's Cambridge Analytica breach last year resulted in at least 50 million users having their data harvested and used to manipulate their votes (and their friends' votes) in the 2016 presidential election.[1]

Google, Facebook, Twitter, and even Amazon have begun to engage in outright censorship of conservative and non-politically correct sites, blogs, and books. Shadowbanning and deplatforming are becoming more prevalent. The documentary explains how Internet Service Providers (ISPs) are exempt under Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act from liability for what users post online because the companies aren't themselves content producers. Google, Facebook, and Twitter are similarly exempt because they purportedly don't produce content. Yet when they engage in censorship and shadowbanning, they indeed have become content publishers and producers; they have crossed the "Creepy Line."

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

There are several independent and possibly concurrent solutions to the problem of Internet dominance, bias, and manipulation. Here are a few considerations:

First, Schweizer says in the film that regulation is probably necessary. But this may not be sufficient since regulation is typically about five years behind technology. Another problem with regulation is that it could freeze current technology and prevent it from adapting and improving on its own.

Second, Epstein is working with developers on three continents to create a monitoring system, similar to a network of confidants he developed in 2016 to monitor election bias. Such a system would be able to detect evidence of bias or manipulation and report it immediately.[2] Alternative search engine sites offer searches without tracking users or filtering results according to user profiles — for example, DuckDuckGo. Because of Europe's sensitivity to privacy issues, a number of alternative search engines have been developed, including Germany's Unbubble, Britain's Mojeek, France's Qwant, and Swisscows.[3] The U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement (UMCA) gives tech companies protection under Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act. In addition, Article 19.17 of the UMCA provides tech companies "immunity from lawsuits they may take to restrict material it considers to be harmful or objectionable." As a result, tech companies' right to censor will become entrenched in international law. At the time of this writing, President Trump has signed the UMCA but the House and Senate have not yet ratified the treaty. Trump could delay cancellation of NAFTA in order to provide time for Congress to change the bill.[4]

Third, Sir Tim Berners-Lee, founder of the World Wide Web, is proposing to reinvent the web with version 3.0. He has launched the Solid project at MIT, which aims to provide true data ownership and improved privacy.[5]

The Creepy Line allows viewers to become more informed about the objectionable ramifications of today's ubiquitous technology, and to understand the pressing need for viable privacy solutions. ∎

Endnotes

1. Carole Cadwalladr and Emma Graham-Harrison, "Revealed: 50 million Facebook profiles harvested for Cambridge Analytica in major data breach," March 17, 2018.

2. Jan Jekielek and Nathan Su, "'The Creepy Line' Documentary Shows Tech Giants Influencing Voters," *The Epoch Times*, September 30, 2018.

3. "European privacy search engines aim to challenge Google," *Daily Mail*, November 21, 2018.

4. Allum Bokhari, "USMCA Entrenches Tech Companies' Right To Censor," *Breitbart*, December 4, 2018.

The United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement, or USMCA. https://usmca.com/

5. C. Mitchell Shaw, "Inventor of the Web Prepares to Launch Web 3.0, Predicts Privacy Revolution," *New American*, November 25, 2018.