

"The Creepy Line" Takes On Google And Facebooks Power To Manipulate Elections (technology)

by Bad-R0nald

<https://thefederalist.com/2018/09/25/creepy-line-takes-google-facebooks-power-manipulate-elections/>

Where is the line between tech companies legitimately attempting to monetize their services through targeted advertising and outright predatory invasions of personal privacy?

What price are you willing to pay to protect your personal information online? How much power should massive corporations like Google and Facebook be allowed to have over the flow of information in a free society? Where is the line between tech companies legitimately attempting to monetize their services through targeted advertising and outright predatory invasions of personal privacy? These are the questions raised by the brilliant new documentary, which had its Washington D.C. premiere this past Wednesday, "The Creepy Line."

The film's title comes from an infamous utterance of Eric Schmitt, the former CEO of Google, during a panel discussion on privacy, during which he smugly stated the following: "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." It's not exactly a reassuring statement, especially since the only thing Schmitt went on to mention that would obviously cross this "creepy line" would be "implanting things in your brain," a seemingly high bar, at least as Schmitt noted, "until the technology gets better."

Self-satisfied and confident as Schmitt may have been in his pronouncement at the time, as is demonstrated at length throughout the film, mega-tech companies like Google not only go up to this creepy line, but cross it every single day, in a variety of ways.

The film expertly documents these unseemly practices of Big Tech, with the help of notable figures such as Peter Schweizer, Jordan B. Peterson, and Dr. Robert Epstein. The latter two have directly felt the wrath of Google's arbitrary and pseudo-Orwellian censorship practices.

Peterson, in particular, shines as a commentator throughout and helps to make the film more than just another well-made

documentary, in much the same way Shelby Foote's appearances in Ken Burns' famous documentary series "The Civil War" did for that film. Peterson's ability to not only expertly communicate complex and technical ideas but, as a psychologist, to make them relatable and compelling on an emotional level to the average person is partly what will help this film raise greater awareness of the issues at stake.

Both Peterson's and Epstein's experiences with censorship are highlighted in the film, and serve to illustrate just how transparently unfair and biased Google's censorship practices actually are. Peterson's famous episode, for example, in which he was not only suspended from YouTube, a platform on which he had amassed more than 350,000 subscribers at the time, but also had his Gmail account suddenly suspended, putting over a dozen years worth of professional and personal correspondence, contacts and notes in danger of immediate digital oblivion.

It was all for a never specified "terms of service" violation which, given the vagueness of the supposed violation and the utter farness of Peterson's content, one must assume simply meant that Peterson had been a conservative who had gotten a little more popular than Google's censorship commissars would have liked.

The deeper problem with such censorship, even beyond the issue of political or personal bias on behalf of those doing the censoring, is that private companies like Google have every legal right to remove any user's content they please and for any reason they please, as Peterson points out in the film. But what happens when a private company becomes so large and hegemonic that it could essentially erase an individual from the internet? In the 21st century, that would be almost akin to a utility company arbitrarily choosing to cut off someone's electricity.

Yet the most unsettling and, yes, genuinely "creepy" parts of the film aren't in its documentation of Google and Facebook's unethical and profit-driven harvesting of users' personal data (including the private information of children) or even its detailed examination of Big Tech's draconian and muddleheaded campaign of censorship against conservative-leaning media outlets and individuals, but in its look into how Google's search algorithms and Facebook's personally curated news feeds can alter our perceptions of the world and, ultimately, perhaps our very consciousness.

The most overt and immediately concerning example of this manipulation of human consciousness manifests itself in the way search engines and social media companies are able to directly affect, and potentially even determine, the outcomes of modern democratic elections. As the filmmakers documented, this manipulation can seem almost entirely invisible and go unnoticed by most users, as it largely takes the form of biased search results that favor particular political candidates over others.

This may initially seem like a rather minor issue, but as Epstein elucidates in the film, such algorithmic bias can actually have profound, statistically significant, and measurable effects on voters' opinions, and thus, on electoral outcomes as well.

The Harvard-trained Epstein's work, comprised of many well documented and professionally done experiments on the social and political effects of search engine manipulation, serve as a cornerstone of the film's narrative. Epstein has referred to this as the "Search Engine Manipulation Effect." The effect was based on the findings of a series of double-blind, randomized, and controlled experiments, which used more than 4,500 undecided voters of various political persuasions from two countries (The United States and India). It was led by Epstein and published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences journal.

Epstein's research found that simple manipulation of search result rankings, by adding either positive or negative results on any particular candidate, resulted in anywhere from a 20 to 60 percent swing in the proportion of voters favoring any one particular candidate. This easily gives companies like Google the ability to easily swing a modern election, most of which are decided by far slimmer margins.

While the standard response from libertarians and neoliberal free-marketeters to such deeply problematic issues is usually to simply appeal to the inherent goodness of the unimpeded free market and hope that competitors arise to challenge Google and Facebook's domination of our digital mindspace, in practice such advice is little more than feeble obfuscation that ignores the severity of the problem.

The truth is that both Google and Facebook surpassed monopoly status in their respective fields of business years ago and, unlike the more conventional monopolies of the past, this has resulted in more than just negative financial or privacy outcomes for individual consumers. In fact, given both the scope of their domination and the unique power of the technologies they have

now harnessed, the legitimacy of our system of government and even our understanding of reality may now be at risk and at the mercy of the strange, neuro-atypical, and indeed creepy individuals who control Big Tech — individuals like Mark Zuckerberg. It's a disconcerting prospect.

If there is one area where the film is wanting, it is in offering prescriptions for the problems it manages to describe so well. Then again, the filmmaker's stated position was that the film was meant to diagnose the problem with Big Tech's hegemonic control of our personal data and its arbitrary power to squash free speech, and in so doing to hopefully foster a national conversation on the issue, not to offer solutions to the deep structural problems and perverse incentives that plague the modern internet, many of which have existed almost since its inception.

Such potential solutions are indeed sorely needed, however, as the problems created by the greed and unethical practices of tech giants like Google and Facebook increasingly undermine not only our privacy and freedom of speech, but also our ability to govern ourselves as free people.

The deeper problem at play is that while politically progressive groupthink has certainly played a role, the real motivation (the drive for ever greater profits) has been incentivized by the very nature and structure of the contemporary internet. As the film wisely points out, no service is truly "free." You're either purchasing a product or you are the product.

So long as the revenues of giant search engines and social media companies are dependent solely on targeted advertising, which relies on gathering users' personal information, and in lieu of serious government regulations to protect the privacy and free speech of consumers, the dangerous abuses documented in "The Creepy Line" will likely continue unabated.

Dan DeCarlo is a freelance writer living in Washington D.C.