Julien Ruey - discussant
Plan of the discussion

1) Short discussion of the paper itself
2) Discussion about the necessity to let the users aware of the algorithms shaping their (personalized) experience
   A) Some real life implications
   B) Short introduction about the legal perspective
   C) What’s your opinion? As users? As potential future social media developers/engineers? As citizens? As social media researchers?
Discussion about the paper

- **Title:** “I always assumed that I wasn’t really that close to [her]”: Reasoning about invisible algorithms in the news feed.

- **Authors:** Motahhare Eslami, Aimee Rickmany, Kristen Vaccaro, Amirhossein Aleyasen, Andy Vuong, Karrie Karahalios, Kevin Hamilton, Christian Sandvigz

- **Date:** 2015

- **DOI:** [http://dx.doi.org/10.1145/2702123.2702556](http://dx.doi.org/10.1145/2702123.2702556)
Pros:

- Very interesting way of assessing user awareness: concrete, experimental design seems not to hard to reproduce
- Qualitative approach is good to have deeper understanding of reactions and behaviour adaptation
- Corroborates other works related to user awareness and imagined audience:
  - Users rely on self-imagined clues to assess the algo’s mechanism
  - They rely on imagined audience and mental representation of technologies to adapt their behaviour
  - They’re not very good at evaluating their real audience
  - They have better user experience when they actively consume medias
  - Algos’ personalization do not always accurately represent individual’s preferences
Cons (some related to qualitative methods in general):

- Sample size and composition: « small » (only 40 participants), although they claim to have followed a rigorous recruitment strategy aiming at diversity and representativeness, it’s not clear how they end up with 24 participants from the academic world…

- No controls for socio-demographic variables when comparing users

- No controls for scale of differences between algos and expectations when assessing reactions
1) What did you think of the paper?

2) How do you see the « active consumption is better » argument?

3) Knowing it’s also encouraged by Facebook?

  Facebook said they found that passive consumption of news feed negatively impacts emotional state whereas active consumption is better for emotional health.
“It’s kind of intense, it’s kind of waking up in ‘the Matrix’ in a way. I mean you have what you think as your reality of like what they choose to show you. […] So you think about how much, kind of, control they have...”
Would you like to be more aware of Facebook (and/or other algos) personalizing your online experience?
In their opinion, missing a public story was due to their own actions, rather than to those of Facebook. Importantly, these participants felt that they missed friends’ stories because they were scrolling too quickly or visiting Facebook too infrequently.
Nowadays, there are many real life situations where algos produce individual decisions based on users’ profiles (abstract representation of an individual’s typical treats, behaviours and preferences produced after processing some collective and individual data)

Users rely heavily on recommendations and representations of reality to adapt their behaviour

Social norms and perception: The filtered behaviours you observe on your news feed might make you think it’s how everybody acts and you may act certain way accordingly
Algos and awareness: Some real life implications (2)

- When mistake are made, who’s to blame?
  - Recent example: CFF ticket proposals in the app where found to be 3-5 chf more expensive than other options for the same trajectory

A short intro of the legal perspective

- Profiling people and making decision accordingly is considered as personal data treatment.

- Personal data treatment is, in principle, forbidden (GDPR and LPD), unless the case fall under one of these general exceptions:
  1) A formal legal act explicitly mentions it’s authorized
  2) Consent has been given (terms of use = contract btw parties, private law = only applies to the involved parties)
     - Consent must be a) free (free will, not constrained) and b) informed!
     - Example of cases actually filed against facebook (is it free and informed?)
  3) A predominant interest
     - Defined after balance of weighed interests involved has been made (case by case, high importance jurisprudence (precedent judgements))
     - --> i.e., PI and economic interests of facebook vs interests of users
« (...) it is high time for interaction designers to bring their own approaches to the conversation. Arguments for algorithm transparency by ethicists or journalists may strike more pragmatic developers as unrealistic, and product satisfaction or popularity as a primary standard for evaluating success will strike others as inadequate for ensuring sound civic roles for these powerful platforms. »

What’s your opinion? Any solutions?

- As users?
- As potential future social media developers/engineers?
- As citizens?
- As social media researchers?
RED OR BLUE PILL?
Would you like to be more aware of facebook (and/or other algos) personalizing your online experience?