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Intellectual Freedom

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Deceptive Indoctrination: Censorship and the Freedom to Explore

Does this seem familiar? You are on a short timeline and need information on (fill in the blank). You search your favorite spots— Internet, vendor product databases, repositories, etc.— and get thousands if not millions of matches. Are you as tired of plowing through so many matches or just going through the first 20 and feeling like you are missing the most important resource as I am? The private sector is coming to our aid with tools that pre-screen what is displayed for us. They package journals, books, magazines, newspapers, videos, photographs, and more, into topic-specific product lines to make our search experience more precise. They contract with competitors and vie for major publishers in order to provide us with access across product lines. Based on our past searches, profiles, and friends' searches, their engines are refined to return results that both match words and suggest additional or similar terms or for more precise groupings. Many provide alerts that let us know when new items come into their system on the topics that our profile indicates will interest us. Information management companies work with publishers and vendors to find the most cost effective way to bring products to market. They may even pass on savings to us by offering special deals in their pre-packages. So what do we trade for this convenience of having someone/something preselect our choices and how does this trade impact our future options?

Most of us are aware that the major search engines like Google, Bing, Yahoo, and metasearch engines like VROOSH, dogpile and *MetaCrawler* have means to adjust what we see. Our search results reflect marketing deci-

sions, our location, and our search history patterns. Unless we decide to "go private" with options like DuckDuckGo, and the privacy tools in our various online accounts, we allow search engines to use our private information to help screen what we see. Similar pre-filtering settings are in the discovery products provided in the library/information markets. In some cases this can be helpful. If we just need quick lookups, having someone/something do some pre-picks for us makes our lives a bit easier. But what if we actually want to find information beyond the movie trailer or nearby restaurant? What if we are looking for information to shape our opinion or counter a controversial argument? Are the adjustments made to our search requests helpful?

In their quest to be the most helpful product, vendors provide search mechanisms that may make false assumptions and incorrectly limit the search parameters. Their software behaves in much the same way as a novice information professional. The novice thinks she knows what we are looking for based on her neophyte experiences, but she does not ask the extra questions that bring out the more precise information we actually need. The novice has provided some results but misses others, and we do not know what we are NOT seeing unless we compare results with others. If, for example, our profile is business, the algorithm returns matches for our topic that are tagged as business content but not those tagged as science or the arts. It seems logical, but how often have you found relevant information and a fresh viewpoint by going beyond the main tag? Some of the most creative ideas result from accidentally finding information in unexpected places. Although sophisticated search tools provide efficiencies for us, they also silently exclude information. While giving the appearance of showing all of the "best" results, they create information blinders through suppositions based on market analysis and past queries, contracts for specific content, and, in some cases, paid ranking bias.

With so many information retrieval products on the market, it seems logical to think the volume of creative works we can pick from has grown too. But look more closely; content lines are melding among the major players. Each is selling search *discovery* products and *recommendation technologies* that use similar algorithms. Each offers single search *discovery* software to provide a conduit for us to gain easy access to other vendors' collections through mergers and contractual arrangements with former competitors. Unlike the open Internet, each of these vendors has assembled content, i.e., their staff has preselected content they predict will be attractive to their customers. They compile and index it to sell. This contractual sharing may seem expansive, but it is simply connecting pre-selected works with other similar products and in many cases, overlapping selections. Instead of expanding choice, the discovery product is inadvertently stifling choice by again segregating results based on what they project will be used the most.

As with any selection process, bias will occur in the content selected; decisions will be made based on economics. This is not a condemnation, it is simply an awareness that must be taken into consideration when looking at the scope of what will be accessed. Pre-selection benefits (1) the vendors by giving them a competitive, marketable product; (2) the publishing houses by providing consistent revenue; (3) the libraries by limiting the need for using staff time to identify and to buy individual purchases; and (4) the users by giving them a more manageable results list. The disadvantages are a bit more subtle. The large operations become information gatekeepers. Larger companies that provide us with packaged access are less likely to seek out small enterprises that are more likely to publish or create works that are counter to the current trends, and artists and writers who wish to express ideas that do not reflect or that challenge the accepted norm. The possibility of vendors having a healthy ROI (return on investment) is less likely when they contract with the lesser known creators and operations. This exclusion does make economic sense for the larger operations, but has a negative impact on smaller ventures. The smaller enterprises lose out on a stable revenue stream and the recognition that comes with inclusion in the recognized product line. Excluding these smaller enterprises, means that most of us miss innovative approaches and a broader spectrum of contrasting viewpoints because we stop our search at the larger product line. The sheer volume of information retrieved using these products gives us the illusion that all views must be included. We either forget to look further, or do not think we have the time to devote to additional hunting. Pre-selection by vendors and libraries and our perceived time constraints have subtly limited our options for gathering information from a wider spectrum of opinions, research, and other creative endeavors on the search topic.

To streamline our research process, vendors also pair *recommendation technologies* with the discovery software. Using recommendations is quite enticing. It is marketed to information professionals as a way to promote interest in research by providing immediate gratification, instant results. Does this *help* really benefit? Yes, it does improve the research process by leading us to supporting and similar works, but, let us take a closer look. We search a topic and the software pulls items from the various resources to match those words, synonyms, audio clips, or images. The items are then "polled" for ranking according to the software vendor's and librarians' parameters. The results are displayed and we select from the list. We may go beyond the first page, but that is unlikely. We see the *helper* links showing that a number of people who looked at this item also looked at these items, or the author of this work also used these references. Instead of doing additional self-screening and selection from the main list, we go to what others have accessed. It is easy. Who can resist a shortcut? Who does not want to be part of the *in-crowd*? The result? Like-minded persons choosing items that

reinforce a generic thought rather than bringing in the new and different possibilities for consideration. The *like minds* choice suggests a subtle form of coercion by curtailing individual choice in favor of supporting the "preferred" selections. It discourages personal discovery and independent research. By providing *helper* links to what others who looked at a similar result list on the topic also accessed, the vendor is distracting us from personal exploration. These helper programs are limiting the knowledge gained by channeling us to a prescribed, shared result. The software is stifling our possibilities for reflecting on the wide variety of viewpoints needed to induce our individual, innovative thought. The cycle continues as we access the same links and follow each other's choices. The range of information we see spirals downward, narrowing with each rendition.

Libraries and information centers contribute to and reinforce this segregation as they review their *bottom line.* The standard packages of vendor products tend to be the most economical to license/purchase. The information professionals see statistics showing that users are accessing that product. "It must be a *good buy*, look at the usage statistics!" Libraries, in an attempt to stay competitive and to provide equal access to information, purchase the same vendor products. Communities are being provided access to the same packaged information, causing the coverage to narrow and become standard, communal, and mainstream. We see the same information as "everyone else." By selecting the same book, article, audio, image as others, we inadvertently participate in an economic boom for the mainstream author, publisher, and vendor while limiting the potential livelihood for the less well connected creative voices not included in these packages. The item(s) we select gain value through usage. The more often an item is accessed, the greater its economic value, and the greater the reputation of the creator, publisher, and vendor. This recognition sparks future contracts/licensing to the same circle of participants instead of branching out to the less well known artists, authors, and publishing houses. The circle of ideas grows smaller. The cultural richness created through our exposure to a wide variety of opinions and expressions is lost, a casualty created by the few who are trying to be overly helpful. The *recommendations* hinder, instead of encourage, innovative thinking. By not learning the skills to go beyond the basics, by not exposing ourselves to the creative approaches found in works that are less known and not yet economically viable because the exposure and usage have not yet reached a *critical mass,* we deny ourselves the benefit of learning about the unusual. We miss information beyond the *mainstream* to shape our opinion or counter a controversial argument. This consequence necessitates that the information professional take responsibility to work toward lessening the censoring impact these conditions have on individual discovery. Possible avenues include: (1) rewarding vendors who expand their product lines to include more obscure creative enterprises; (2) teaching fellow

users to move beyond the simple, basic products by explaining the restrictions inherent in any search process; (3) adjusting/updating profiles that vary with our needs; and (4) encouraging using what others have used only as a starting point. Stress the fun of trading the easy for the more serendipitous and adventurous multi-faceted world of expressions and ideas beyond those most common and easily acquired.

Our vendor products have moved from research tools that promote new thinking to an economic entity that encourages us to link to the familiar, to be one of the *in-crowd*, the knowledge *elite*. These products are helpful to some degree; they provide an efficient way to gain a base and shared knowledge of the popular and the prolific. Individual creativity and personal development come from exposure to the new and different.

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