

# Stopping Endless Scrolling

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February 4, 2019



A few days ago I was really surprised that my girlfriend was unaware that Facebook controls which posts appear at the top of one's feed. I explained to her that it strategically feeds us more of what we have engaged with—so to engage us more. This is in contrast to the “old days,” when one would see posts in the order that “friends” were posting them. Most social media and content companies continually update their algorithms to figure out how to keep us hooked and endlessly scrolling through posts.

Many analysts say that the majority of YouTube videos watched are discovered by the suggestions that YouTube gives each time one logs into it, or suggested after watching a video. The power of its algorithms hit home the other day when I was looking up something related to teen girls and sports. YouTube employed its “read my mind trick” and up popped all sorts of “recommended videos.” This was the first time I started scrolling down all their suggestion, and when I did, I was shocked at the sheer length of the scroll. I could keep scrolling practically forever. And, in fact, the algorithm was working because more than half of the videos piqued my curiosity. Not surprising since it was curated and informed by my past searches. Examples of things that were showing up: The Story of Nadia Comaneci (along with 5 other great looking gymnastic videos) Wayne

Thiebaud the Painter videos, Priscilla Chan's Three Billion Dollar Give Away and other important causes videos, exercise videos, and mounds of movie star stuff, which I don't usually search but clearly YouTube knows that I might actually open the "How Emily Blunt met John Krasinski" video. Frankly, had I let myself, I could have spent several hours lost in frivolous curiosity.

I find it interesting that YouTube appears to give me so few recommendations for things I have looked up that are more work-related, more concentration dependent, like technical information on filmmaking. I wonder if this too is an algorithm...one that accounts for the fact that humans favor entertainment and relaxation over thought-challenging work-related links.

My husband has become a bit obsessed with the new book LikeWar: The Weaponization of Social Media. The book, painstakingly researched by two academic defense experts over 5 years, describes how social media is being used by individuals, groups, and governments to influence opinions. The authors make the interesting point that much of the power of targeted messaging comes from within our own minds. They give these two powerful examples 1) Humans have an intrinsic desire to associate with like-minded individuals, and 2) Humans like to have their preconceptions confirmed. These traits underlie the psychology that results in our compulsion to keep clicking on the next suggested link.

I fear that algorithms are defining our children and forcing them deeper into silos. When they search for something that others, as well as themselves, have previously searched for, by default they are filtered into a category and served the same information that others who were looking for these same answers received. Those filters often go deeper than just keywords, they are algorithms that take into account factors like one's profile and other searches, and ultimately knitting together a group of people with similar interests and backgrounds.

I also want to be clear that I know there are many terrific consequences of algorithmic curating. Let's say your daughter likes building Balsa Wood models and she is searching for YouTube videos on the activity. Later other similar videos will appear on YouTube for her to see. That can be a good thing. But, with so many curiosity piquing videos how do you stay on task? How do you ever unplug? Why would you ever get back to something less entertaining like writing that paper you were researching rather than going down the rabbit hole of distraction.

How do we remain conscious about what we are doing or watching when the videos and content suggested for us is done so with such personalized precision? The first step is to be aware of the endless scroll. Since that night when I felt the true abyss of the scroll, I have been more actively ignoring all videos displayed before me—especially the insane barrage of celebrity ones.

I am really excited to talk about all of this with my family tomorrow night--ie Tech Talk Tuesday.

For this TTT let's discuss the powerful algorithms at play.

Here are some questions to get the conversation started:

- As always start with a positive question about tech such as: Are there types of videos that YouTube presents you that you appreciate?
- Do you know that content suggested for you, like videos on YouTube, are designed around your searching history and interests?
- Have you been sucked into an endless scroll?
- What do you think you could do to stop the endless scroll?
- Talk about how realizing your viewing could go on forever gives you the power to decide to stop.