

The Naturalization Of Personalization

*How Facebook builds a fantasy of personalization
to discursively naturalize the neoliberal ideology
and the system of data capitalism*

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This paper reflects on the way personalization is naturalized in the external corporate discourse of Facebook. This paper critically assesses three Facebook blogs through the lenses of 'voice and style', 'modality', and 'absence', and reflects upon two reoccurring myths that circulate in the texts and contribute to the naturalization of personalization: the myth of control and the myth of individualism. The texts create a myth of control by repeatedly writing that the platform 'puts users in control' and by focusing on the functionalities the users can use to 'customize' the content they see. The texts create a myth of individualism by putting the user central in every text, by emphasizing on individual freedom, agency, and the ability to act autonomously, and by focusing on the things users can do to 'customize' and 'personalize' their News Feed. Together, the myths help to naturalize the invisible systems of data capitalism and the neoliberal ideology underpinning it. To understand how naturalization takes place in discourse, this paper examines the concepts of control and freedom, and the theoretical frames of ideology, mythology, and naturalization. It is argued that the neoliberal ideology can be seen as something held together by the fantasy of freedom and empowerment, that is among others materialized through technologies like personalization mechanisms. While we all know that our idea of freedom masks a particular form of exploitation, we still continue to follow it. The myths thus do not mask anything, but help to sustain the fantasy of personalization and naturalize the neoliberal ideology and its systems of data capitalism.

Keywords

Critical Discourse Analysis, Facebook, ideology, mythology, naturalization, personalization

Table of content

Introduction	4
1. Localizing gaps in the academic debate	7
1.1 Previous studies of Facebook’s interface	7
1.2 Previous explorations of the News Feed algorithm	8
1.3 Previous work on Facebook’s data collection strategy	9
2. Discursive naturalization of ideology	11
2.1 Control and Freedom in the data economy	12
2.2 Ideology after Marx	13
2.3 Mythology as a post-structuralist theory to critique ideology in discourse	17
2.4 Naturalization of power and ideology	19
3. Methodology	21
3.1 Analyzing ideology in discourse: a methodology	21
3.2 Corpus of analysis	24
4. Analysis of the discourse on personalization	26
4.1 The strategic framing of personalization	26
4.2 The myths that naturalize personalization	32
4.3 The naturalization of the neoliberal ideology and the system of data capitalism	35
Conclusion	38
Suggestions for further research	40
Bibliography	42
Appendix A	45
List of images	
Image 1: semiological system of mythology	18

Introduction

Twenty years ago, when the Internet was still at its early stages, personalization of the Internet was just a dream of large technology companies like Microsoft and IBM (Barrett, Maglio, and Kellem 1997). At that time the Internet was described as a place where information could circulate freely, that would spread democracy and free speech (Kellner 2003, 324), as a place where individuals could participate and were in control over the information that was available online, and as a place that would enable multinational trading in digital commodities by enabling free trade (Gates 1995; Genosko 2002, 9). This rhetoric of the Internet as a place of freedom came hand in hand with the fantasy of Internet users as empowered, liberated individuals (Gates 1995, 258–59). And now, this utopian aura that surrounded the Internet in its early days – with its fantasies like individual empowerment, equality, and liberty, and dreams of being in control – is used by Facebook to promote data-driven personalization.

Paradoxically enough, Facebook has more power to control individuals than ever. Based on an individual's historical and present activities – platform interactions, buying behavior, social connections, etc. – and contextual information about these activities, personalization mechanisms aim to predict what information will be most relevant to an individual at a specific time and place. In this data capitalist system – a system that monetizes the behavior of individuals by transforming as many aspects of their lives into data, a quantifiable, analyzable, and exchangeable good – individuals are turned into data sources (Deleuze 1992) that are divided, categorized, and compared to other data sources. Automatically and almost real-time. However, because personalization mechanisms are black boxed trade secrets, similar to patents and other kinds of intellectual property, we will never know exactly how these companies create the personalized information spaces. But we do know that the idea behind it is that the more personally relevant information on the platform is, the more time the individual will spend on the platform and the more likely it is that the individual will engage with the information, the more advertisements the platform can sell, and the more products can be sold. But it is not just about advertisements and selling products or services. Personalized news can shape what an individual believes to be true and personalized music playlists reinforce an individual's taste. In short, more and more aspects of our lives are intertwined with and shaped by mechanisms that produce personalized information spaces. And one of the most powerful players in the field is Facebook.

So far, most studies have focused on how Facebook creates the personalized News Feed, rather than on how Facebook discursively constructs personalization. One line of study focuses on how the interface and the affordances – the functional and relational aspects of the interface that frame and trigger user behavior (Hutchby 2001, 444) – are designed to invite and encourage specific usage, and gather specific data (Yoder and Stutzman 2011; Young 2011; Cirucci 2015; Bucher and Helmond 2017). A second line of study concentrates on exploring how the algorithms – precisely controlled computational series of steps that transform input into output (Goffey 2008, 16) – are designed to quantify user behavior, manage and

stimulate interactions, and predict what information is most relevant to the user and when (Christofides, Muise, and Desmarais 2009; Pariser 2011; Bucher 2012; DeVito 2016). Finally, a third line of study researches Facebook's data collection strategy (Bodle 2011; Gerlitz and Helmond 2013). However, studies that analyze how personalization is discursively naturalized – to appear as common sense, natural, and legitimate (Fairclough 1996) – by Facebook are still rare. Therefore, the aim of this study is to show how the ideology – the beliefs and fantasies for understanding our place and the place of others in the social world – underpinning personalization is naturalized in three of Facebook's external corporate blogs.

In this study I argue that the blogs about personalization not only shape the way individuals understand personalization, they also naturalize the system of data capitalism and the neoliberal ideology which underpins this system; an ideology that revolves around beliefs like free trade and fantasies like individual empowerment. To analyze how the neoliberal ideology and the system of data capitalism are naturalized in the blogs about personalization, this study reflects upon the forms of textualization used to describe personalization, upon the reoccurring fantasies, and upon the myths that circulate in the texts. Following the modernized ideology critique as introduced by psychoanalytic philosopher Slavoj Žižek (2008), I will show how Facebook connects ideological fantasies that circulate in Western society to personalization, such as the fantasies of freedom and individual empowerment. While individuals are well aware that these are fantasies, they choose to hold on to them because they are fantasies they want to believe in. Thus, while individuals may know how Facebook capitalizes their behavior and seduces them to keep using the platform, they ignore this knowledge by continuing to use the platform. To analyze how Facebook uses and strengthens these fantasies to naturalize personalization, the concept of mythology as introduced by literary theorist and philosopher Roland Barthes (1991) provides a helpful lens. Myths are depoliticized forms of speech; while they are unnatural, man-made, motivated forms of speech, they appear to be natural, pure, and innocent (Barthes 1991a, 143). So while myths are ideologically motivated, they will not be experienced as such because myths naturalize. In other words, Facebook uses fantasies that are upheld by individuals to build myths that, in turn, contribute to the naturalization of personalization.

The research question that leads this study is, 'How is personalization naturalized in the external corporate discourse of Facebook?'. Supporting this question are two sub-questions. The first sub-question, 'How is personalization described in the external corporate discourse of Facebook?', will be answered via a methodology inspired by Norman Fairclough's approach to the Critical Discourse Analysis (1995). By analyzing the texts through the lenses of 'voice and style', 'modality', and 'absence', I will describe and interpret the discursive frames used to construe personalization. The second sub-question, 'Which myths circulate in Facebook's external corporate discourse on personalization?', will be answered via a methodology inspired by Roland Barthes' theory of mythology and Slavoj Žižek's approach to ideology critique.

My argument proceeds as follows. In the first chapter I will set out the academic debate surrounding Facebook's personalization strategy and clarify how this paper contributes to the academic debate. In the

second chapter I will introduce the framework for analysis by discussing the background concepts of control and freedom, and the theoretical frames of ideology, mythology, and naturalization. This analytical framework forms the basis of the methodology of study, which is an approach to the Critical Discourse Analysis as introduced by Norman Fairclough (1995). This will be the focus of the third chapter. And in the fourth chapter, I will discuss my analysis of the texts and answer the research questions of this study. As I will show in this chapter, Facebook frames personalization in such a strategic way that the neoliberal ideology and data capitalist motivations of the company are naturalized, and personalization is seen as common sense. By focusing on the things the user can do, and by not discussing crucial elements of personalization such as the algorithms and data, the authors subtly create myths of individual empowerment and control and build a fantasy of personalization as something good and desirable, something that empowers individuals and puts them in control.

1. Localizing gaps in the academic debate

In this chapter I will examine the academic debate on Facebook's personalization strategy and localize gaps in the debate. While studies from a computer science perspective have focused on Facebook's personalization mechanisms and techniques (for example: Guy 2015; Li, Jiang, and Li 2016), and studies from a political science perspective have focused on the role Facebook plays on democracy and the formation of political identity (for example: Marichal 2016), this chapter examines the debate within the field of new media studies. Within this field, the academic debate has mainly focused on the interface, algorithms, and data. In this chapter I will discuss some key contributions to the debate and clarify how this paper contributes to the academic debate.

1.1 Previous studies of Facebook's interface

Within the field of new media studies, a popular way to analyze a platform's interface is via an analysis of its affordances. For example, Angela M. Cirucci (2015) and Christian Yoder and Fred Stutzman (2011) analyze how Facebook's affordances compel users to perceive social interactions and identification in new ways, Kirsty Young (2011) focuses on the ways the platforms' affordances stimulate social interactions, and Taina Bucher and Anne Helmond (2017) scrutinize the affordances of several social media platforms, such as Facebook's Like button. However, these studies do not focus specifically on the role of the affordances on Facebook's personalization strategy.

Even though Korinna Patelis does not scrutinize Facebook's affordances, her take on Facebook's interface is one that should be examined further. From a software studies perspective she analyzes how the interface creates myths of freedom and control and how the platform asserts power by analyzing the platform "as a systematic organized set of discourses, and not as a transparent tool" (Patelis 2013, 2). According to Patelis, the interface constitutes a myth of personal freedom and control by integrating online commerce and communication as if "free speech and free trade are two sides of the same coin" (Ibid.). Patelis argues that the personalization of commerce and communication, and thus the commodification and industrialization of personal data, are so fully integrated in the platform that it is naturalized. Because this naturalization of information is represented as personalization, it creates a sense of user control. This illusion of control is fueled by 'endless tabs' representing the promise of customization and via the things users can do, like searching, uploading, sharing, liking, et cetera. So for Patelis, the interface of Facebook creates a myth of freedom by enabling free speech and free trade, and a myth of control by providing users a variety of ways they can 'customize' their News Feed and enabling users to do various things on the platform. However, Patelis only briefly touches upon the concepts of mythology, freedom, and control. Also, for me, the analysis of the interface is missing an analysis of the affordances and does not display sufficient analytical

depth. Because I believe that these concepts do provide the frames to analyze Facebook's interface more critically, this exploration should be seen as an inspiration for further research.

1.2 Previous explorations of the News Feed algorithm

Academics that tried to make sense of Facebook's algorithm have analyzed how the News Feed algorithm stimulates social actions, how it mediates and structures visibility, and how Facebook's algorithms are understood and experienced by users. For example, Emily Christofides, Amy Muise, and Serge Desmarais (2009) explored how the News Feed algorithm stimulates users' to participate on the platform and disclose information about themselves. The algorithm rewards social interactions by considering posts with a lot of interaction as popular and rewarding popular posts by putting it on the News Feed of a larger group of friends (Christofides, Muise, and Desmarais 2009, 342). Because people have a desire for visibility, Christofides et al. argue that Facebook users are more likely to disclose information on the platform than they are in general (Ibid., 343). Thus, the disclosure of private information is inevitably connected to a desire for visibility and popularity. And the more private information users disclose, the more personalized their News Feed can become.

Taina Bucher also analyzed how the News Feed algorithm mediates and structures visibility (Bucher 2012). At that time, the News Feed algorithm was called 'EdgeRank'. According to Bucher, every interaction with an object (e.g. news, video, friend etc.) creates something Facebook called an 'Edge'. The rank of an Edge is determined by multiple components. Bucher defined three: affinity (the nature of the relationship between the user and the creator of the item), weight (the popularity of the item) and time decay (the recency or freshness of the Edge). However, in the meantime the News Feed algorithm has become more complex. In August 2013, Matt McGee interviewed Lars Backstrom, a Facebook Engineer of the News Feed, who declared that although the three elements described by Bucher are still factors in the News Feed Ranking, in total there are around "100.000 individual weights in the model that produces News Feed" (McGee 2013). In other words, the News Feed algorithm has become a lot more sophisticated than EdgeRank was.

More recently, social scientist Michael A. DeVito (2016) explored how Facebook's algorithm works by analyzing how Facebook envisions its algorithms. Via a material culture analysis of Newsroom posts, Notes blogs, and patent filings, DeVito defined nine 'algorithmic values': friend relationships, explicitly expressed user interests, prior user engagement, implicitly expressed user preferences, post age, platform priorities, page relationships, negatively expressed preferences, and content quality. However, DeVito also argues that while data collection is not explicitly mentioned in the texts, this appears to be a core value of Facebook (DeVito 2016, 15).

While these 'algorithmic values' provide new insight into the News Feed Ranking, it might be questionable whether this helps us to understand how Facebook's personalization strategy influences

society. Therefore, others explored the effects of Facebook's News Feed algorithm and argued that the algorithm creates 'filter bubbles' or 'echo chambers'. For instance, Eli Pariser (2011) criticized the way personalization algorithms shape the experience of users. Pariser argues that the algorithm determines based on behavioral data and preferences of an individual what items are shown on the News Feed, and thus, what information the individual sees and what not. In this sense, personalization has been criticized to shape and reinforce an individual's preferences, knowledge, and ideas because it excludes information that contradicts with an individual's preferences.

Another line of research focuses on users' understanding of and experiences with Facebook's algorithms in everyday life. For instance, Emilee Rader and Rebecca Gray (2015) explored how individuals make sense of the influence of Facebook's algorithms and how this awareness impacts their interaction on the platform. In their paper they conclude that users' beliefs of how the algorithm works varies widely, "from believing the News Feed shows all possible posts from their Friends, to automated filtering by an algorithm" (Rader and Gray 2015, 180). While the ways users understand the algorithm varies, their belief does guide their behavior. As Christofides et al. (2009) also conclude, users change their behavior according to how they believe the algorithm works. This belief of what algorithms are, what they should be, and how they function is something Bucher (2017) calls the 'algorithmic imaginary'. Bucher researched the algorithmic imaginary of Facebook by asking people that Tweeted about Facebook's algorithm about their experience with the algorithm. Also this study shows that most participants "experimented or played around" (Bucher 2017, 37) with the algorithm because they want their posts to have 'maximum reach' and to receive Likes and comments. However, while users might be largely aware how the algorithm influences the reach of their posts, a recent study among college students showed that students are largely unaware of whether and how Facebook personalizes the news they see on their News Feed (Powers 2017).

1.3 Previous work on Facebook's data collection strategy

New media scholars have also researched how Facebook collects the data that helps to create the personalized News Feed. For example, Robert Bodle (2011) analyzed how Facebook's Open Application Programming Interfaces (Open API's) collect data via widgets, mashups, social games, applications, and social plugins. Bodle writes how Open API's build a 'software ecosystem' around the platform that is used to brand the platform, drive traffic, and collect data that allows Facebook to create targeted advertisements, and how this undermines privacy, data security, transparency, and user autonomy.

Carolin Gerlitz and Anne Helmond (2013) focused on how Open API's extend Facebook's personalization strategy via social plugins that can be installed on websites and platforms. Like and Share buttons allow Facebook users to engage with content on websites; it enables website visitors to directly share content on their Facebook Wall, Like the item, or Like the company page of the website. The social login allows Facebook users to access other platforms via their Facebook account. However, Gerlitz and

Helmond argue that these social plugins are developed to enable data flows between Facebook and external websites, to build connections between the platform and external sites, and to advance Facebook as “one of the central hubs of the web” (Gerlitz and Helmond 2013, 1349). The social plugins insert cookies in the visitor’s browser, which enables Facebook to access browsing behavior and add this data to the data profiles of users. This data could provide Facebook insights into things the company did not know before, like the political preferences, sexual orientation, and religious beliefs. In this way, the social plugins help Facebook to get access to valuable data that helps Facebook to provide better personalized recommendations to its users.

In this chapter I have set out the academic debate around Facebook’s personalization strategy by assessing a variety of studies that analyzed Facebook’s interface, algorithms, and data. Although the discursive strategies of Facebook have been analyzed by media scholars, the focus tends to be on how the personalization mechanism *works*. Although this helps to get a basic understanding of how Facebook creates the personalized News Feed, we will never fully understand how the personalization mechanism works. And even *if* it would be possible to understand exactly how Facebook creates these custom-tailored information spaces, what would that tell us? And would knowledge change people’s behavior on the platform, or would people stop using Facebook? No, I don’t believe this to be true. At least, it did not change my behavior. To understand why individuals keep using Facebook, and other platforms that rely on data-driven personalization, it is necessary to study the beliefs, fantasies, and desires connected to personalization. This perspective allows me analyze the ideology underpinning Facebook’s personalization strategy, reflect on the ways it is naturalized in Facebook’s external blogs about personalization, and provide insight into why individuals keep using Facebook – even if they know about Facebook’s personalization strategy.

2. Discursive naturalization of ideology

In this chapter I shall present the analytical frames used in this paper to study how personalization is naturalized by Facebook: the dichotomy of control and freedom, and the theoretical frames of ideology, mythology, and naturalization. This chapter focuses on clarifying the analytical frames that guide the analysis in chapter four. This chapter is set out as follows. First, I will discuss the dichotomy of control and freedom by discussing how the era of Big Data has brought new ways to control individuals and, paradoxically, is presented as something that brings freedom to individuals and puts them in control. Then, I will provide an ideological critique by examining the concepts of ‘enlightened false consciousness’ and the ‘cynical subject’, and explore the fantasies of the neoliberal ideology underpinning the data economy. Subsequently, I will discuss the theory of mythology and explore how myths work in discourse, and discuss how they contribute to the naturalization of personalization. Finally, I will discuss the theory of naturalization by examining the concepts of ‘common sense’ and ‘naturalistic illusion’, and touch upon its interconnectedness with the theories of ideology and mythology, and its relevance to personalization in the data economy.

Before continuing on to the key concepts and theories, it is helpful to get an understanding of the concept of *discourse* and how relations of power are established and strengthened through discourse. Discourse refers to the structuring of knowledge and social practice. As Marianne Jørgensen and Louise Phillips write, there is “the general idea that language is structured according to different patterns that people’s utterances follow when they take part in different domains of social life [...]” (2002, 1). These patterns of utterances shine through language, which includes all spoken or written language use, but also other kinds of semiotic activity such as images and non-verbal communication. They are imbedded in a social, cultural, and historical context. So the meaning is not fixed, but differs per time, place, and context. While discourses are socially constitutive, they are also socially shaped themselves (Fairclough and Wodak 1997, 258). Discourses play a large role in construing (i.e., representing), constituting (i.e., establishing), and distributing relations of power and ideology, and thereby, the construction of the social world. The idea that discourses distribute relations of power and ideology stems from Michel Foucault, whose aim was to denaturalize political processes and the power certain groups had over others. In other words, the poststructuralist approach critiques the supremacy of discourse and tries to show how ideologies are naturalized in discourse. However, while Foucauldian discourse analysis depart from the idea of disciplinary power, this has shifted to the *power to control*, the power to capitalize data. In the following section will show that individuals are not subjects anymore, as Foucault argued, but *dividuals*: databanks that separate aspects of individuals into computer files.

2.1 Control and Freedom in the data economy

While the era of Big Data has brought new business opportunities, it also brought new ways to control people. For media theorist Wendy Hui Kyong Chun (2008) technologies mask the politics embedded in them, and specifically, the forms of control they enable. Chun refers to Gilles Deleuze his influential work “Postscript on the Societies of Control” (1992) in which he states that we are moving from disciplinary societies, as described by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*, to control societies. “Disciplinary power operated through visible yet unverifiable apparatuses of power that sought to fabricate individuals through isolation and constant examination – it was a power over life” (Chun 2008, 6–7). With the use of the metaphor of the Panopticon, Foucault explains the disciplinary power as something that is invisible but all-consuming. The Panopticon was a design for an architectural figure designed by Jeremy Bentham. It was a peripheral building with cells on the outer side and a tower pierced with windows that were covered by blinds in the middle (Foucault 2014, 656). Because the supervisor was able to observe all inmates without being seen by them, inmates were never certain when they were being watched. As a result, Foucault argues, inmates behaved as if they were always being watched (Foucault 2014). In other words, when people know someone *could* be watching their behavior, they supervise themselves.

In “Postscript on the Societies of Control” Deleuze (1992) claims that disciplinary societies as described by Foucault have shifted to control societies in which citizens are turned into data sources. In the control society, it is all about *datafication*: the quantification of information. In personalization mechanisms this data is used to analyze behavior and preferences, make predictions and optimize platforms and targeted advertisements. Deleuze criticizes the fact that without people knowing information is collected of them through new technologies and transformed into quantifiable data. “Individuals have become ‘dividuals,’ and masses, samples, data, markets, or ‘banks’” (Deleuze 1992, 5). Dividuals are objectified individuals within the data capitalist system; they are databanks that can be divided into small files and reorganized in endless ways for endless purposes. This dividuality makes this system so easy to control. What starts with information about individuals is separated from them and recombined in ways out of their control; the individual who once was the producer of the data is completely alienated from the databanks. And in the society of control, the ones with access to the databanks have all the power to control because they are able to capitalize the dividuals. Because in the control society the language is digital, the control is invisible. Whereas for the Panopticon visibility was key – people never knew if they were actually being watched, but they were constantly reminded that they could be – on the Internet, control is invisible. So not only do the people that have access to the databanks have all the power to control, the people that are being controlled cannot even see what data is collected of them. The fact that this system of control is invisible to the individuals, the data sources, makes it very powerful. There are no icons that show people that they could be watched, tracked, and analyzed at any moment.

However, I believe most people know their lives are tactfully datafied and monetized, and that, in the data economy, they are nothing more than a data source. What matters is that nowadays, the control

society is ubiquitous, accepted, and even normal. And this acceptance of control has everything to do with the fantasy of freedom. So what does 'freedom' mean? Chun writes that freedom implies freedom of movement, free love, and free speech (Chun 2008, 10). As true as that may be, the concept of freedom – the ability to think and act autonomously – is a fantasy itself. An individuals' thoughts and actions are shaped by his or her environment. More specifically, on Facebook an individuals' actions are shaped by the platform – the interface and its affordances, the algorithms, and the data – but also by the behavior of others (e.g., the kind of posts shared by 'friends', the posts they 'Like', etc.). However, Facebook might give individuals a *sense* of freedom. They may feel like they can freely share their thoughts and insights of their life with their 'friends'. They may experience the freedom to stay in touch with long-distance friends more easily. They might even believe the platform empowers them to be whoever they want to be. Some would call this an 'illusion of freedom' (Stivers 2009), but it is not just an illusion. It is an illusion individuals *want* to believe in. Therefore, I prefer to call this a 'fantasy of freedom'. A fantasy that is deeply embedded in Western culture. That is why it makes sense that companies like Facebook use this fantasy to endorse personalization – how paradoxical it may actually be.

In this section I have set out the dichotomy of control and freedom, and discussed how Facebook's personalization technology can be understood as a control technology that turns individuals into individuals. I have also discussed that the notion of control is oftentimes joined with the contradicting notion of freedom. As I will show in chapter 4, Facebook highlights the ways its personalized News Feed provides means of freedom and masks the controlling side of its personalization strategy. However, to be able to examine how Facebook uses this dichotomy of control and freedom, it is necessary to look more closely at the theory of ideology.

2.2 Ideology after Marx

Ideology is a complex and contested theory that can be understood in various ways, but in this paper, ideology refers to a fundamental set of beliefs or fantasies for understanding our place and the place of others in the social world, which exist in and is distributed by discourse. These beliefs are taken for granted, thus ideology is characterized as something that is common sense. As Teun van Dijk writes, it is only possible to establish a theory of ideology by reducing its complexity (1998, viii). Therefore, this definition of ideology should not be seen as adequate and complete, but as a definition of ideology that contributes to get an understanding of how personalization is naturalized by discourse.

A lot of ideology studies that depart from the ideology critique introduced in 1970 by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels in the book *The German Ideology* (2000),¹ pay attention to the notion of *false*

¹ Traditional accounts of ideology critique are based on ideas of Karl Marx, whose statements about ideology are most clear in the book he wrote with Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology* (2000), which was first published in 1970. Marx and Engels

consciousness.² This concept refers to the idea that ideologies of a group do not reflect on their socioeconomic interests, but on the interests of the ruling class or the elites, the company they work for, or more specific, the owners or manager of the company. “Such a ‘false’ or misguided ideology may be the result of a mixture of ignorance, indifference, manipulation, compliance or concern for short-term interests (e.g. not to lose one’s job, getting a pay-rise) at the expense of long-term, structural interests [...]” (van Dijk 1998, 96). When an individual has the safety of job security and income, they adopt to ideologies of dominant groups in society and forms of liberal individualism, while these ideologies are not in their specific interest (Ibid.). However, post-structuralists criticized these traditional Marxists accounts of ideology because it implies an illusory representation of reality, while it is reality that should be conceived as ideological. The notion of false consciousness also implies that there are wrong, incomplete, biased, or misguided factual beliefs, which presupposes that there is ‘true’ knowledge (van Dijk 1998, 97). Furthermore, the notion reduces the problem of domination to ideas that people ‘don’t know what they are doing’ and suggests that people are naïve and ignorant, oppressed by power structures. Philosopher and cultural theorist Peter Sloterdijk criticizes this notion in his book *Critique of Cynical Reason* (2001) by arguing that people can be well aware of the ideologies that are not in their interest, but still choose to not renounce it. He calls people like this ‘cynical subjects’. The cynical subject is aware of the ideological mask and the social reality, and it takes the particular interest behind the ideological universality into account, but consciously insists upon the mask. This is not a form of naïveté, Sloterdijk writes. For Sloterdijk, the cynical subject is a miserable and intellectual creature, that doubts his or her activities but knows exactly what he or she is doing. “They know what they are doing, but they do it because, in the short run, the force of circumstances and the instinct for self-preservation are speaking the same language, and they are telling them that it has to be so” (Sloterdijk 2001, 5). Even though the subject does not agree with the particular interest that is covered, for instance the monetization of the individual’s data, the individual does not act upon it and decides to still use the technology because it is beneficial for him or her in the short run.³ Sloterdijk explains this kind of cynicism as *enlightened false consciousness* (Ibid.).

write that ideologies function as the superstructure of a civilization. The idealistic superstructure includes the dominant ideologies – ideas, thoughts, beliefs, conceptions, and “all products of consciousness” – of a society (Ibid., 60), and more specifically, those of the ruling class. These ideas are legitimized and the base obfuscated in order to keep the social classes as they are. The base includes ‘means of production’ (e.g. materialities like tools, machines, land, etc.) and ‘relations of production’ (e.g. bourgeoisie, capital, commodities, etc.). In order to reveal the superstructure, Marx and Engels focus on the base, the material activities and conditions of ideologies, such as the division of labor, the separation of town and country, and the conflicting interests (Ibid., 63).

² The majority of studies that work from the ideology critique as introduced by Marx and Engels pay attention to ideologies in relation to power, class, political economy, culture, and later also gender. Since the early 1990’s more and more studies also pay attention to the cognitive and discursive dimensions of ideologies. For instance, like most academics that have analyzed the discursive dimensions of ideology, Teun van Dijk argues that ideology is expressed and reproduced by discourse. Therefore, he analyzes how ideology shapes text and speech, and how it is formed, acquired, or changed by discourse by paying attention to the cognitive and discursive dimensions of ideologies (van Dijk 1998, viii).

³ Chun argues that “[t]hose who know of, but are not concerned with, tracking believe they can ‘survive the light’ because they either consider the likelihood of exposure negligible, or think the standards for public interactions online [are] different, or want their misdemeanors to be spectacular. Regardless, visibility fails to produce automatically disciplined subjects (if it ever

Cynicism is *enlightened false consciousness*. It is that modernized, unhappy consciousness, on which enlightenment has labored both successfully and in vain. It has learned its lessons in enlightenment, but it has not, and probably was not able to, put them into practice. Well-off and miserable at the same time, this consciousness no longer feels affected by any critique of ideology; its falseness is already reflexively buffered (Sloterdijk 2001, 5).

Because of this modernization of false consciousness, unveiling ideologies will no longer do since its falseness is already reflexively buffered. The cynical subject is able to rationalize ideologies because of the Enlightenment's failure to fulfil its promises of freedom and liberty. With this cynical attitude of suspicion, "one becomes immune and desensitised to information that reveals dubious and unethical practices" (Gao 2016, 55). The cynical subject is conscious of ideology's role of manipulation and even expects it, and therefore he or she might not act upon this enlightened false consciousness. "Cynical distance is just one way – one of many ways – to blind ourselves to the structuring power of ideological fantasy: even if we do not take things seriously, even if we keep an ironical distance, *we are still doing them*" (Žižek 2008, 30). This is the paradox of contemporary cynicism of ideology: while we are aware of the ideological fantasy, we choose to not act upon this knowledge.

Ideological fantasy of freedom

So why do individuals not act upon the enlightened false consciousness? Psychoanalytic philosopher Slavoj Žižek's revitalization of ideology critique, and political philosopher Jodi Dean's vision on his critique, provides a helpful lens to answer this question, because Žižek links Marx's ideology critique to Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory of the subconscious.⁴ To understand how ideology works and why people do not act upon the enlightened false consciousness, Žižek introduced the concept of the *ideological fantasy*. According to Dean, actions produce social reality (the beliefs and appearances that matter) (Dean 2002, 8). This social reality is sustained and structured by the 'as if', by underlying (unconscious) fantasies of what things are like (Žižek 2008, 30), such as the fantasy that personalization empowers individuals to find information more easily. For Žižek, ideology is "a bunch of inconsistencies held together by a fantasy and materialized through everyday actions, practices, technologies, and institutions" (Ibid., 8). In this way, the neoliberal ideology can be seen as something held together by the fantasy of freedom and empowerment, that is among others

did)" (Chun 2008, 85). According to Chun, the Internet fails to discipline because there is no panoptic gaze like there was in the Panopticon, because an individual does not directly feel the repercussions of his or her online activities, and because users are not adequately isolated (Ibid.). Because the Internet fails to discipline, people that know about the ways they could be surveilled and controlled do not act upon this knowledge, because it is not in their immediate benefit to do so. However, individuals may have other reasons to not act upon their knowledge. First, because in Western societies many parts of life are already datified, it almost impossible to escape from the control society. Second, for individuals it might feel as if they benefit from the control society. For example, individuals might feel like Facebook's News Feed actually helps them to get easy access to the information they are interested in.

⁴ Žižek understands ideology as an underlying process, as something that influences our actions subconsciously. Following the psychoanalytic tradition of Lacan, people are seen as irrational creatures that act based on their subconscious, but that have the desire to act rationally, to be in full control over thoughts and actions. Therefore, for Žižek the concept of 'fantasy' relates to the fantasy of the self: our fantasy to be rational, coherent individuals that act based on their consciousness.

materialized through technologies like personalization mechanisms. We all know that our idea of freedom masks a particular form of exploitation, but we still continue to follow this idea of freedom (Ibid., 30). We all know that in the data economy we are all producing data that produce power relations. We are well aware that large businesses are built on data produced by us and that we do not enjoy the same benefits as the companies do. We know very well that personalization mechanisms do not give us the power and freedom to get access to all information available, they do not empower us. But we still *act as if* they do, because we *want* to keep up the fantasy of freedom and empowerment, and maybe we even *need* fantasies like this. Therefore, the focus of ideological analysis should not be on the level of knowledge, but on the level of fantasy that sustains belief and informs action.

Neoliberalism and the data economy

Examples of ideology include neoliberal ideology, communist ideology, bourgeois ideology, and leftist ideology. They all come with their own set of beliefs and systems that materialize this set of beliefs. The neoliberal ideology is built on beliefs of freedom, and places the ethos of competitiveness at the center of social life. According to Dean, “neoliberalism holds that human freedom is best achieved through the operation of markets” (2008b, 48). The primary role of the state is to secure existing markets and create markets in new domains, and the individual is supposed to benefit from this free market system. The ideological fantasy of the free market is central to neoliberalism: to make sure everyone will benefit, the market has to be free. Nowadays, the neoliberal ideology gives rise to different forms of capitalism,⁵ that can be divided into different categories, such as communicative capitalism, which is built on fantasies like democracy (Dean 2008a), and data capitalism, which is built on fantasies such as free trade (Dean 2008b). In other words, the neoliberalism’s fantasy of free trade has contributed the establishment and reinforcement of the data economy.

One of the products of the data economy is personalization. “This ability to capture our behavior (in the form of clicks, location, etc.) in real-time and to store it for future, personalized, use is one of the key features of the emerging data-centric capitalism. Its promise is the ultimate and total personalization of our everyday experience based on the preferences that are captured in our ‘profiles’” (Morozov 2015). This ‘promise’ of personalization described by Evgeny Morozov plays with the desire we have of a world in which the individual is central. The neoliberal ideology in the data economy is not only built on the fantasy of free trade, but also on the fantasy of control and the fantasy of individualism; on the dream to capture our behavior and personalize our social world with the aim to create a world that is specially created for the individual, a world in which the individual is central. This fantasy is closely related to the techno-utopian fantasy of individual empowerment, which ties in with the desire of freedom. For instance, in the book *Tantalisingly Close*, Imar de Vries shows how the telephone materialized the desire for ‘freedom of

⁵ The system that materializes an ideology is something Marx and Engels described as the ‘mode of production’. In the capitalist mode of production a small division of society, the elite, or the ‘bourgeoisie’, profits off the labor of the working class, the ‘proletariat’ (Marx and Engels 2000, 117).

expression' of the mind and the 'freedom to connect' with people and share knowledge, opinions, and desires (2012, 128, 138). Now, in the data economy, we see the same utopian fantasies. In section 4.2 I will show how fantasies of individual empowerment, freedom, and being in control are captivated in Facebook's external corporate discourse on personalization.

However, the fantasies of the neoliberal ideology cover the inequalities that the system of data capitalism gives rise to. While the idea is that personalization unlocks access to information and knowledge, and empowers individuals, we know this is a fantasy. It is a fantasy that is not only upheld by the companies and institutions with the most interest in the technologies being a success, it is also upheld by us, the consumers. We are well aware of the neoliberal ideology and data capitalist motivations underpinning these technologies and discourses. We know that these technologies do not empower us, and maybe even disempower us. But we act as if they do by still using the technologies. We ignore our knowledge, because we *want* to keep up the fantasy of freedom and empowerment, and because we *need* fantasies like these to make life easier, more enjoyable, and less complicated.

In this section I have explored the power of ideology by discussing the concepts of enlightened false consciousness and ideological fantasy. These insights support the analysis of the *cues* hidden in the texts, which I will explain in section 2.5, and the underlying network of fantasies, which eventually helps me to substantiate how personalization is naturalized in Facebook's blogs about personalization. In other words, this understanding of ideology allows me to show how ideology takes place in text, and, to put it more precisely, to show which ideological fantasies are emphasized by the authors.

2.3 Mythology as a post-structuralist theory to critique ideology in discourse

Literary theorist and philosopher Roland Barthes' definition of *mythology* is helpful to understand how these fantasies circulate in discourse and how the underlying system of data capitalism is naturalized in discourse. In the essays "Mythologies" and "Myth Today", Barthes (1991b) tries to show how meaning in everything around him – from high culture to popular culture and everyday life – is constructed. He calls these constructions myths. As Barthes mentions at the start of his essay "Myth Today", a myth is a system of communication, it is a message. According to Barthes, everything conveyed by a discourse can be a myth. This can be an oral message, modes of writing, or representations in text, but also photography, movies, sport, shows, publicity, and so on. However, myths are *depoliticized forms of speech*; while they are unnatural, man-made, ideologically motivated forms of speech, they appear to be natural and innocent (Barthes 1991a, 143). So while myths are ideologically motivated, they will not be experienced as such.

Barthes' concept of myth is based on Marx's ideas on power and ideology, on a science that studies the life of signs within society, semiology, and on the Lacanian tradition of the subconscious. The science of semiology was introduced by Ferdinand de Saussure to study meaning-making through language in order to

find the underlying structure of a natural phenomenon; the system underneath all the utterances. For De Saussure, *langue* (“language”) are the abstract, systematic rules and conventions of a signifying system, and *parole* (“speech”) is the daily language use, speech, and individual accidental utterances based on *langue* (De Saussure 1966, 9). Language is a system of signs that expresses ideas (1966, 16). Each sign within the system of language unites two elements: the signifier (the sound-image) and the signified (the concept, the connotation). These two elements are united, and therefore each recalls the other. This does not mean that this bond is fixed. Not for everyone the signifier and the signified are the same. For example, in Dutch we call a tree ‘boom’, and in French they call a tree ‘arbre’, so when we all see the same tree, we still have another sound-image. Also when I ask a group of people to think of a tree, the conception they see of a tree will vary. However, the linguistic sign is always arbitrary and unmotivated. It is unmotivated in the sense that an individual does not have the power to change a sign once it is established in a ‘linguistic community’, but at the same time a sign is arbitrary in the sense that that the signifier has no natural connection to the signified (De Saussure 1966, 68–69).

So in language, a sign is arbitrary and unmotivated. But a myth is motivated, because in mythology, a second level of signification is added to the sign. The semiological system of language as introduced by De Saussure forms the base of a second-order semiological system. Barthes calls the sign from the first level of signification, the level of language, the *language-object*, and he calls the sign of the second level of signification, the level of myth, *metalanguage*, “because it is a second language, in which one speaks about the first” (1991a, 114). In myth, the language-object becomes the signifier, and a signified is added to the sign. The signified that is added is motivated and thus, unnatural. In other words, the myth arises at the level of connotation. However, the public will not notice that myths are ideologically motivated, or constructed, because myths naturalize; they take place on the level of connotation, the subconscious. The first level of signification is masked by the myth; it is hollowed out and filled with new connotations. The myth has no relation to the actual meaning of the first level of signification, the context is lost and the history forgotten. This is always done with certain motivations, and introduced by groups or institutions with power. However, myths live within the discourse. So for something to become a myth, the myth needs to be adopted by the linguistic community. Nonetheless, when powerful new media companies constantly use the same myths to portray personalization as common sense, they contribute to the naturalization of the neoliberal ideology underpinning the system of data capitalism, and thus, to the naturalization of personalization itself.

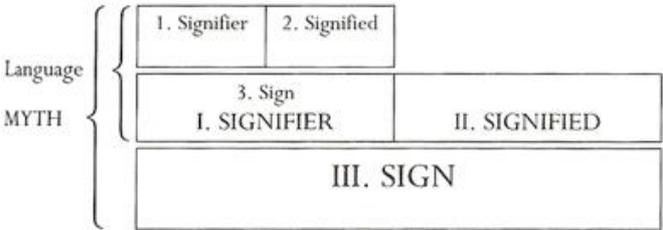


Image 1: semiological system of mythology (Barthes 1991b)

In this section I have discussed the theory of mythology and explained how myths contribute to the naturalization of personalization. So how is this theory productive for the analysis? An analysis of myths will

show how personalization is naturalized in the texts and tell something about the ideological motivations of the authors. But how do you analyze something that is naturalized, that appears as common sense? Because myths have a paradoxical character – by putting emphasis on one intended meaning, myth repress other possible meanings – analyzing the repressed meanings will help me to analyze the myths that circulate in the texts about personalization. That is why in the first part of the analysis, I will look at the absences of the text.

2.4 Naturalization of power and ideology

As described in the previous section, myths naturalize their ideological underpinnings. They appear as ‘common sense’, as natural, and are thus not easily recognized as myths. The question that remains is: what is naturalization? The contested notion of naturalization stems from Marx’s critique on the capitalist society (Marx 2000). Naturalization takes place when a discourse becomes dominant through repeated use by groups or institutions with power, and it becomes ‘common sense’, natural and legitimate, because it simply is the way of understanding. In other words, when groups or institutions with power repeatedly construct personalization in a certain way, with the use of certain myths, the ideology hidden in the text becomes common sense.⁶ When it becomes common sense, or naturalized, the ideology is the most powerful, because it is invisible and people are not consciously aware of the implicit assumptions and expectations they have. So when ideologies are brought into the discourse as the background assumptions that unconsciously shape the way a text producer textualizes the world, and unconsciously shape the way a reader interprets the texts, they are the most powerful. However, these ideologies are always hidden in text through cues. These cues shape a particular interpretation of the text, Fairclough argues (1996, 85). Therefore, an analysis of ideology on the level of text explores these cues.

To Fairclough, ideological common sense assumptions can contribute, in varying degrees, to sustaining unequal power relations. These assumptions can manifest itself in discourse types: conventions, norms, and codes of practice underlying discourse. When a discourse type dominates and is “more or less entirely suppressed or contained” (Ibid., 91), it will be seen as one among other ways of seeing things, as normal, as “*natural*, and legitimate because it is simply *the* way of conducting oneself” (Ibid.). This is what Fairclough calls the naturalization of a discourse type. Naturalization can be seen as the ultimate form of common sense; ideologies become ideological common sense to the level that the discourse types that embody them fully naturalize the ideologies. As Fairclough argues, what becomes common sense is largely determined by the ones that exercise power and domination in a society or social institution (Ibid., 92). In

⁶ One of the key authors on ‘common sense’ is Antonio Gramsci. In the *Prison Notebooks*, which was first published in 1971, he writes about the relationship between ideology and common sense, and describes ideology as an implicit philosophy on the activities of everyday social life, which is backgrounded and seen as common sense (Gramsci 1999). For Gramsci, the relationship between ideology and common sense is a form of practical activity in which a “philosophy is contained as an implicit theoretical ‘premiss’, and ‘a conception of the world that is implicitly manifest in art, in law, in economic activity and in all manifestations of individual and collective life’” (Fairclough 1996, 84).

that way, common sense can service in sustaining unequal relations of power (Ibid., 84). But when a discourse type becomes naturalized, it appears to lose its ideological character. It is perceived to be non-ideological and neutral in struggles for power, and because of that it is placed outside ideology. “The apparent emptying of the ideological content of discourses is, paradoxically, a fundamental ideological effect: ideology works through disguising its nature, pretending to be what it isn't” (Ibid.). In other words, the naturalization of a discourse type and the emptying of the ideological content, is fundamental to the ideological effect.

This is exactly what happens in a myth: the first layer of signification is hollowed out and filled with new connotations. However, the myth still appears to be natural, because the myth disguises the ideology. What happens is something Stuart Hall defines as a ‘naturalistic illusion’: something appears to “reproduce the actual trace of reality” (1982, 76), which is an illusion; a naturalistic illusion. However, it actually is not naturalistic but naturalized: “not grounded in nature but producing nature as a sort of guarantee of its truth” (Ibid., 75). So when an ideology is naturalized in discourse, it appears not only as common sense, but as truth. This is why ideology is the most powerful when it is naturalized. When personalization is naturalized in discourse via myths based on the desire for freedom and control, and fantasies like individual empowerment, these myths appear to be common sense and true, as ‘simple the way of understanding’ (Fairclough 1996, 91). And because these myths naturalize, the underlying system of data capitalism and its controlling, exploitative, and manipulative power is masked.

In this chapter I introduced the analytical frames of this paper. In the first section I discussed why individuals choose to hold on to the fantasy of freedom and to keep using technologies and platforms like Facebook that rely on personalization mechanisms, while they know they are essentially control technologies that turn individuals into individuals, i.e., databanks that can be divided into small files and reorganized in endless ways for endless purposes. However, with the help of ideology critique provided by Slavoj Žižek, I argued in the second section that most individuals are aware of the ways personalization mechanisms tactfully datafy and monetize their behavior. But while they are aware of the controlling side of personalization, they choose to renounce their knowledge and by continuing to use the technologies. Individuals are aware of the ideological fantasies that are connected to technologies, but they decide to hold on to those fantasies and act as if they are true. In the third section I have discussed how these fantasies circulate in discourse and how the underlying system of data capitalism is naturalized by introducing the theory of myth. Following the ideology critique provided by Roland Barthes, I have argued that myths are depoliticized forms of speech; while they are ideologically motivated forms of speech, they appear to be natural. In the fourth section I have argued how it is possible that these myths appear to be natural by discussing the theory of naturalization. By continuously constructing personalization in a certain way, with the use of myths, the ideology hidden in the text becomes naturalized: common sense and invisible. And when the ideology is naturalized, the ideology is the most powerful.

3. Methodology

This chapter introduces and justifies the research methodology. To answer the research questions of this paper, I will analyze three texts following a methodology that is inspired by Norman Fairclough's approach to the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and the analytical frames discussed in the previous chapter; the dichotomy of control and freedom, and the theories of ideology, mythology, and naturalization. I have selected Fairclough's approach to the CDA, because it focuses on studying language in relation to power and ideology. Central to this approach is that the discourse has an active role in constructing or shaping the social world, but at the same time is shaped by social practices and structures. Therefore, the aim is to analyze how texts work within sociocultural practice (Fairclough 1995, 7) and to discuss the relation to social and political issues, problems, and controversies surrounding a topic. This combination makes it possible to analyze ideology. The second concept that is of importance to Fairclough is power: power asymmetries and relations of domination. "Power is conceptualized both in terms of asymmetries between participants in discourse events, and in terms of unequal capacity to control how texts are produced, distributed and consumed (and hence the shapes of texts) in particular sociocultural context" (Fairclough 1995, 1–2). That is why a CDA following Fairclough's approach needs to analyze how the power relations between participants are constructed. However, although Fairclough has discussed the CDA extensively, there is not one way to execute a CDA following Fairclough's approach. Therefore, I have selected elements of his approach that, together with the theoretical frames, provide the perspectives needed to answer the research questions.

As argued in the previous chapter, it is not the goal to unveil ideologies, but to understand how they work. By analyzing the discursive frames and reflecting upon the reoccurring fantasies and myths that endorse the belief in personalization, I will explore how the ideological underpinnings circulate through Facebook's external corporate discourse on personalization, and how it naturalizes the system of data capitalism. To clarify how the analysis takes place, I will first set out the methodology of this paper and the methodological restrictions, and then introduce the texts selected for the analysis.

3.1 Analyzing ideology in discourse: a methodology

The methodology refers to the exact steps taken in the research and links to the method and analytical framework. The methodology consists of two parts. The first part focusses on answering the first sub-question following four elements of the Critical Discourse Analysis as introduced by Fairclough. The second part focusses on answering the second sub-question following Barthes' theory of mythology and Žižek's approach on ideology critique. While Fairclough's approach to the Foucauldian discourse analysis is helpful to explore power relations on the level of the surface text, the addition of the Barthesian theory of mythology allows me to explore the underlying beliefs and intended connotations, and Žižek's ideology critique enables

me to reflect upon the underlying fantasies and desires. In other words, this methodology makes it possible to analyze on the level of text and explore the underlying network of fantasies and desires.

Part one

To answer the first sub-question, 'How is personalization described in the external corporate discourse of Facebook?', the discursive frames used to construe personalization will be described and interpreted. Following the first and second phase of Fairclough's method, the descriptive phase and the interpretative phase, I will describe three elements of the discourse: voice and style, mode, and absence (Fairclough 1995, 2004). These three elements should not be seen as three-step methodology towards a complete analysis of the texts, but as three different perspectives that help to answer the sub-question.

1. Voice and style

'Voice' and 'style' are two elements that relate to each other. 'Voice' discusses the participants and how they are constructed, and 'style' refers to how the relations of participants are constructed. 'Voice' refers to the perspective of the speaker who aims to persuade others (the audience), and to the perspective of the audience as described by the speaker. Thus, by analyzing the texts through the lens of voice and style, I can analyze the power relations hidden in the texts by focusing on how the relations of the participants are constructed by the author, and to show how the authors subtly try to convince the audience of Facebook's intentions.

For instance, the speaker can identify as an 'I', which positions the speaker as an individual, or a member of a 'we-community'. As a member of a community, the reader can speak about an 'inclusive we-community' (for example, on behalf of those who feel powerless, or on behalf of *our* nation) or about an 'exclusive we-community' the speaker is part of (for example, 'we', the people, against them, the authorities). 'Style' focuses on how the relations of participants are constructed. For instance, by the use of 'you', the speaker creates a generic 'you-community', which is a more generic group of people like a group of users.

2. Modality

Texts also represent certain values that are embedded in ideology, attitudes, and power relations (Sulkunen and Törrönen 1997, 43). For Fairclough, 'modality' is about how the text represents the world in a certain way by expressing attitudes, judgements, and stances, and about how the text tries to 'seduce' the audience via these representations.⁷ Hence, this perspective allows me to analyze the texts by focusing on both the explicit forms of textualization (the words and utterances

⁷ Fairclough's approach to modality should not be confused with the media studies concept of modality, which involves the different ways information is presented and how that calls for certain ways of encoding, for example the modalities aural and linguistic, or visual modalities like graphics, language or film.

used) and the implicit meanings of text (the connotations of the words, the assumptions made, and the assumed values, for example, implicit relations of power and authority), which tells me something about the beliefs hidden in the text, and thus, the ideology underpinning the texts. The linguistic modality of the words and expressions used by the participants is analyzed by looking at the statements, demands, and offers the speaker makes and the questions the speaker asks, and by looking at the 'modal verbs' ('can, will, may, must, would, should', etc.).

3. Absence

While the first two elements are most concerned with the presences of text, this element looks at the choices the author has (consciously or sub-consciously) made about what is excluded from the text. What is absent or omitted from text can tell something about how an ideological argument is constructed, because the absences help the author to frame the story in a particular way. Thus, an analysis of the absences helps me to analyze the myths that circulate in the texts in the second part of the analysis. In line with the post-structuralist tradition, the absences will be analyzed by looking at the paradoxes and ambiguities in the texts. In other words, what connotations are highlighted in the texts and what connotations are repressed? What might have been expected to be in the text but is missing from it; what aspects are absent, unsaid, missing, or avoided?

Part two

The analysis of these discursive elements help to answer the second sub-question, 'Which myths circulate in Facebook's external corporate discourse on personalization?' because it helps to understand how a specific ideological argument is constructed. To answer this sub-question, I will analyze the reoccurring opinions, beliefs, values, and fantasies in the discourse, reflect on the absences of the texts, and relate the texts to wider social and historical processes. The methodology to answer this question is based on Barthes' theory of mythology and Žižek's approach to ideology critique. Since Barthes' connects De Saussure's endeavor to the Marxist notion of power, and Žižek connects the Marxist ideology critique to Lacan, this results in an analysis of ideological power relations hidden in text by critically reflecting on the surface text and the underlying network of beliefs, fantasies, and desires. Together, this allows me to critically reflect upon the ideological underpinnings of the texts.

Barthes aims to show how elements of a text carry different meanings simultaneously; on the level of mythology and on the level of signification. Therefore, it is my goal to recognize the myths, analyze how a plurality of meanings are presented in the texts, and to critically reflect upon the way it naturalizes certain ideological beliefs. Because these myths naturalize, the first sub-question will be used to recognize the reoccurring beliefs, which will help to recognize the myths. When these myths are defined, I will reflect on them by looking at the different meanings that are triggered and the meanings that are repressed. Because the production of meaning is always a synergy between the producer of the text, the text, and the reader,

the meanings should be seen as my interpretations of the text. However, these interpretations are steered by the producer of the text, because that is exactly what myths do: steer the interpreted meaning and naturalize the fact that it is a constructed, unnatural, meaning.

Methodological restrictions

My formulations are nothing more than my interpretations of the texts. It is a subjective methodology, based on subjective notions of ideology and naturalization. These interpretations are not false, but others will interpret these texts differently. Especially the analysis of the absences is highly subjective. While the first two elements of analysis (voice and style, and mode) are guided by the texts, the analysis of absences is fully my interpretation of the texts, which is framed by the analytical framework presented in this paper. It is a selection of things I expected to be in the text, and should not be considered to be the truth, or more truthful than what is included in the text.

Also it is important to note that this analysis does not say anything about the broader discourse, it says something about how ideology works in these texts. To get a broader understanding on how late capitalist systems of control are naturalized in discourse on personalization, further research is necessary. For instance, an analysis of texts about personalization by other large new media companies whose business model is based on (data) personalization. Although this will still not tell us anything about the entire discourse, it can tell us something about the reoccurring techno-utopian fantasies surrounding personalization and the myths that are used to naturalize the data capitalist system underpinning it.

3.2 Corpus of analysis

To understand how new media companies naturalize practices of personalization, this paper analyzes blogs about personalization by Facebook, because the personalized recommendations of Facebook influence the lives of people around the world daily.⁸ Because these texts are shared via the company's Newsroom, a website that is used to share news and press statements by Facebook's communication department, we can expect them to texts that are used by media like technology blogs and magazines that reach a large audience. And because this genre of text (promotional discourse, see: Fairclough 1993, 124) is highly rhetoric – blogs are written with the aim to subtly convince or seduce the reader – these texts are a good object of study for a Critical Discourse Analysis. To select the texts for analysis, I entered the search queries 'personal' and 'custom' on Facebook's external blog called 'Newsroom'. I selected the blogs published over the last two years about Facebook's personalization strategy in general or about a part of Facebook's personalization

⁸ Because of the scope of this study, the focus is on the analysis of the external corporate discourse, not on the mechanisms. However, the architecture of the personalized platforms does contribute to the naturalization of personalization.

mechanism. After reading the blogs that met the requirements, I selected three texts that fit in best with the analytical framework of this paper.

1. **“A New Way to Control the Ads You See on Facebook, and an Update on Ad Blocking”, published on August 9, 2016** (Bosworth 2016).

In this text, the author introduces the redesign of the advertisements. This redesign makes the use of ad-blocking software impossible, because advertisements (called ‘suggested posts’) are now fully embedded in the News Feed. This text also introduces the feature that allows users to give the platform feedback via the possibility to ‘save’ or ‘hide’ an advertisement, or mark it as ‘useful’.

2. **“Building a Better News Feed for You”, published on June 29, 2016** (Mosseri 2016)

Adam Mosseri shares in this blog the ‘News Feed Values’ that underpin all developments of the News Feed. He discusses five values: 1) friends and family come first, 2) a platform for all ideas, 3) authentic communication, 4) you control your experience, and 5) constant iteration.

3. **“Updated Controls for News Feed”, published on July 5, 2015** (Frantz 2015).

In this blog Facebook introduces the redesign of ‘News Feed Preferences’, which is promoted as something that allows users to ‘prioritize stories’ via various features. For instance, users can ‘discover’ pages, ‘unfollow’ friends and pages, and ‘prioritize’ friends.

These blogs are about personalization in general or about an element of Facebook’s personalization mechanism, written in the past two years. Because they are all blogs, it is reasonable to assume these texts are strategically written by marketing communication experts. Therefore, some topics are expected to be absent from the texts. However, the field in which these texts are written is one with a lot of political attention to Big Data, security and privacy. On the one hand, this has pushed the popularity of Big Data even further, but on the other hand, it has raised awareness of the privacy risks of Big Data. Authorities around the world are searching for ways to protect the online privacy of its citizens and for ways to use the data collected by new media companies to improve national safety. With this in mind, I will analyze the texts in the next chapter, following the methodology discussed in the previous section. For the transcripts of the blogs and videos embedded in the blogs, see Appendix A.

4. Analysis of the discourse on personalization

In this chapter, I will analyze the discourse on personalization by critically reflecting on three blogs about personalization published by Facebook. The aim of this chapter is to illustrate how the analytical frames set out in chapter two take place in the texts about personalization. Following the methodology described in the previous chapter, the first section aims to answer the first sub-question by describing and reflecting on the discourse via the lenses of ‘voice and style’, ‘modality’ and ‘absence’. The second section of this chapter aims to answer the second sub-question by reflecting on the myths that create a feeling of ‘naturalness’ or ‘common sense’. In the third section I will conclude how the neoliberal ideology and data capitalist system underpinning personalization is naturalized in the texts.

4.1 The strategic framing of personalization

The aim of this section is to answer the first sub-question: How is personalization described in the external corporate discourse of Facebook? In the examples I have made some expressions italic that are relevant to that specific analytical perspective on the texts. For an overview of the texts, see appendix A.

Voice and style

The main social actors are: the users of Facebook (‘you’ and ‘we’), employees of Facebook (‘we’), the platform Facebook, users of the Internet, and people in general. The authors of the texts ‘voice’ themselves as both employees of Facebook and users of Facebook. Most of the time, the authors create an ‘inclusive we-community’ by using ‘we’ and ‘our’ to refer to the employees of Facebook, including the management. But sometimes, the authors use ‘we’ and ‘our’ to strategically place themselves in the same group as the user. The authors create a ‘you-community’ to emphasize the positives; to write about the things the user *can* do on the platform and to convince the reader that everything Facebook does, is with the best interest of the user in mind.

Because the texts are blogs, written by marketing communication experts, the perspectives and interests attributed to the ‘you-community’ (the users of the platform) are aimed to persuade the reader. In these texts, the ‘you’ perspective is aimed to convince Facebook users that advertisements on Facebook are in their best interest, and that the user is in full control of the advertisements he or she sees. For example, Adam Mosseri accentuates the agency of the user. “Ultimately, *you* know what’s most meaningful to *you* — and that’s why we’ve developed controls so *you* can customize what *you* see” (see Appendix A, emphasis added). Mosseri creates an illusion of freedom by implying that that the user knows better what is meaningful to them than the personalization mechanism of Facebook, and by writing that the user now has the ‘controls’ to customize the content that is shown in their News Feed. By using phrases like ‘you can control, ‘you can

choose', 'you can remove', 'you can hide', and 'you can customize', the authors highlight the things the user *can* do, which, again, accentuates the agency of the user.

The inclusive we-community (the employees) is positioned as a group that has the best interest of the user at heart, and as a group that *knows* the user, and knows what the user wants and needs. The author reinforces this positioning of the inclusive we-community by selectively using 'we' and 'our' to refer to the author and employees of Facebook as part of the users' group. For example, when Andrew Bosworth (2016) writes about 'bad advertisements', he suddenly refers to we, 'users of the internet' instead of we, 'employees of Facebook'. "*We've all experienced a lot of bad ads: ads that obscure the content we're trying to read, ads that slow down load times or ads that try to sell us things we have no interest in buying. Bad ads are disruptive and a waste of our time*" (see Appendix A, emphasis added). By using 'we', 'us', and 'our' to refer to the negative aspects of Internet advertisements, the author places himself outside of the group of employees, and on the side of the reader, the user of Facebook, and Internet users in general. By doing this, the author places great emphasis upon the potential worries and dislikes of users, and also implicitly states that Facebook does not deliver bad or aggressive advertisements that obscure other content and slow down load times. Let me consider a few examples (emphasis added):

1. "[...] *we're expanding the tools we give people to control their advertising experience*" (Bosworth 2016).
2. "*Our top priority is keeping you connected to the people, places and things you want to be connected to — starting with the people you are friends with on Facebook*" (Mosseri 2016).

Example one and two frame the employees of Facebook - the creators of the platform - almost as altruistic, philanthropic individuals that have the best interests of the users at heart and that work for Facebook because they want to make the world a better place. By writing about the 'tools they *give* to users', the 'ad-preference'-functionality is framed as a gift users should appreciate they *graciously* received from people working for Facebook. The second example shows how personalization is framed as something users *want*. By writing that connecting users is Facebook's 'top priority', the author mystifies the data capitalist motivations of the company.

The relationship between the different groups of social actors, being the employees of Facebook and the users, is almost framed as a relationship between a mother that takes care of her daughter, or as a big brother that watches over his little sister. By writing that it is Facebook's top priority to help users to connect to the people, places, and things they want, the authors create a very strong bond between the company and the user. It positions Facebook as a company that selflessly listens to what the users want; as a company that has no alternative motivations to help people stay connected.

Modality

Looking at the forms of textualization, a couple of things stand out. In this section I will discuss multiple examples to show how the authors strategically use expressions and forms of textualization, and to show the value assumptions of the authors.

3. *“Our success is built on getting people the stories that matter to them most. If you could look through thousands of stories every day and choose the 10 that were most important to you, which would they be? The answer should be your News Feed. It is subjective, personal, and unique — and defines the spirit of what we hope to achieve”* (Mosseri 2016).

Example three is the introduction to Facebook’s ‘News Feed Values’, which starts with a strong statement. The author not only claims the success of Facebook, but also that its success is based on personalization, and that Facebook knows exactly what stories are most meaningful to users. In this first sentence, the author does not write ‘the stories that matter the most to *you*’, he writes about the stories that matter most to ‘them’, referring to ‘people’ in general. This more impersonal way to refer to users is used by the author to speak with authority, and to emphasize the influence of the company on all people in the world, including people that do not use Facebook. The sentence that follows implies that users of Facebook need its personalization mechanism, because it would be impossible to go through ‘thousands of *stories* every day’. At the same time, by pointing out that it would be impossible to manually go through all available stories, the author implicitly says that the only way to solve the problem of information overload, is by using technology. The following sentence, (“the answer should be your News Feed”) makes sure the statement the author wants to make is clear: Facebook’s News Feed algorithm is ‘the only way’ users are sure they see the items that are most ‘important’ to them. This also implies that users should trust Facebook that the News Feed algorithm makes the right decisions. The final sentence emphasizes this by ending with a statement of fact, a statement about what is, (“*it is subjective, personal, and unique*”) that is then refined by mentioning that it is just a dream of Facebook, something the company ‘hopes’ to achieve. So in these four sentences the author tries to steer the meaning-making process of the reader by beginning and ending with statements of fact, and refining or mystifying these statements by using the modal verbs ‘could’, ‘would’, and ‘should’ in the middle.

In the example above personalization is positioned as something good and desirable, as something that helps users to find the stories most important to them. However, this is only implicitly expressed. Throughout all texts analyzed this is implicitly expressed via utterances such as “Now you can find *personally relevant* ads that speak directly to the topics you care about” (Bosworth 2016), “[...] we’ll continue building easy-to-use and powerful tools to give you the most *personalized experience*” (Mosseri 2016), and “The goal of News Feed is to show you the stories that *matter most* to you” (Frantz 2015). Throughout the texts, the authors make the assumption that users do not want to miss out on information about their friends or pages

they like, and that users want a personalized information space with personalized advertisements. In other words, personalization is positioned as something everyone should want, because it is in their benefit.

To analyze other assumed values embedded in the texts, I would like to discuss two examples that illustrate the assumed value of individual empowerment: the value of being free, liberated, and empowered individuals. Both are transcripts of videos embedded in the blogs (emphasis added):

4. “We’re always working to make News Feed a *personalized* stream. *Delivering* the Top Stories from the people and pages *you connect to* on Facebook. But ultimately, *you know what matters most to you*. So we’re expanding your News Feed preferences in order to give you *more control*. With one of the *new updates* to News Feed preferences, *you can choose* the people and preferences you see first. Whether it’s friends or family, or your favorite band, they will be right at the top of your News Feed so you won’t miss their posts. *You can always change* who you see first in your preferences. And of course, the rest of your News Feed will still be there to keep you up to date. Now you can *better customize* your News Feed. *Giving* you control of the stories you care about most” (Frantz 2015).
5. “With Facebook’s new Ad Preferences, you can *easily customize* the ads you see in the News Feed. Simply click the chevron in the top right corner, tap on ‘why am I seeing this?’, and you can learn why this particular ad is appearing in your feed. And by tapping on ‘manage your ad preferences’ you can *take control* over your ads-experiences. And you can even *choose* which interest you’d like to see ads about. Now you can find personally relevant ads that speak directly to the topics you care about. Ad Preferences. On Facebook” (Bosworth 2016).

Notice the implicit value-content of example four and five. Both authors say that users are able to ‘control’ their News Feed, able to ‘always change’, ‘manage’ and ‘easily customize’ their preferences and ‘choose’ what they see first. The use of words like these implies that being in control, being self-autonomous, and being able to make decisions is desirable, something all users should want. And as explained earlier, by writing ‘you *can* choose’, ‘you *can* better customize’, and ‘you *can* take control’, the authors accentuate the agency of the user by writing that the user is in control; the user ultimately decides whether he or she wants to use this functionality. This assumes that this is something the user finds important; to be able to influence things, to be autonomous. This value assumption is also triggered by the repeated use of ‘you’. To be precise, the word ‘you’ or ‘your’ is used in example four eighteen times, and in example five eleven times. This is over twelve percent of all words used in the videos. I believe this repeated use of the personal pronoun ‘you’ is used to enhance the self and to minimize the role of Facebook. This repeated use of ‘you’, combined with the emphasis on the things users can do, triggers the value of individual empowerment.

This repetition of 'you' and the things a user can do to take 'control' is carried out throughout the texts analyzed. It is a mantra that is subtly repeated in between the lines, almost like an enchantment. Throughout the texts the same forms of textualization are used; a variety of words with similar meanings and connotations are used in the same conglomerations. Throughout the texts the mantra that the user is in control is repeated via utterances similar to "we want to give you more ways to control what you see" (Frantz 2015) and "you control your experience" (Mosseri 2016). By repeating the message that the user is in control in a variety of ways, the reader subconsciously evaluates the message as important and is more likely to remember it.

Absence

Because the texts analyzed are all strategically written, some topics are expected to be absent from the texts. Because the algorithms are trade secrets and crucial to Facebook's business model, it is expected that the company will not disclose too much information about its algorithms. However, it is striking that the word 'algorithm' does not occur in the texts at all. Also the word 'data' has only been mentioned once. These two elements are crucial parts of Facebook's personalization mechanism – for academics it would be unthinkable to write an article about Facebook's personalization mechanism without discussing the algorithms or data. So when Facebook does not discuss the algorithms and data in its texts about personalization, this is remarkable.

By not writing about algorithms and data, the texts repress the idea that users are not individuals but dividuals, and that the personalization mechanism is actually a control mechanism. While the texts focus on the things users can do on the platform and strategically overlook the technological elements, everything users can do is controlled via technology – every element of Facebook's personalization mechanism is designed and aligned in order to create personalized information spaces. The algorithms and data are core elements of this mechanism. As explained section 2.1, the personalization mechanism is a control mechanism that transforms individuals into dividuals: analogue databanks that can be divided into small data files and reorganized infinitely by algorithms. This dividuality makes the mechanism so easy to control. What starts with information about individuals is separated from them and recombined in ways out of their control. Facebook is in control of this data and decides how it can best serve its business model and underlying strategies. As argued in chapter three, I believe a lot of users are aware of the ways they are being controlled by Facebook and how the personalization mechanism enables this. However, they keep using the platform because they feel like it is beneficial in the short run. They consciously keep up the fantasy of personalization as something good because they want to. However, this fantasy is also pushed by Facebook. The texts reinforce the fantasy of personalization by writing about the things users can do on the platform, by framing personalization as something that helps users, and by deliberately not writing about the control mechanism and data capitalist system underpinning it. By upholding the fantasy of personalization the texts contribute to the enlightened false consciousness of users: they know their information is capitalized and they are being

controlled instead of in control, but they insist upon the fantasy of personalization as something good because they think it is in their best interest, and because Facebook makes them believe so.

I also believe that words like ‘algorithm’ and ‘data’ are not discussed because they might evoke connotations such as ‘impersonal’ and ‘automatic’, and this is the opposite of what Facebook wants. Facebook wants their users to feel like their News Feed is designed especially for them. However, because an analysis of the connotations and emotions attached to words like these is beyond the scope of this research, these are only my interpretations. Further research is necessary to provide insights into the communication strategy of Facebook.

The aim of this section was to answer the first sub-question, ‘How is personalization described in the external corporate discourse of Facebook?’. To answer this question, I have reflected upon the texts via the lenses of ‘voice and style’, ‘modality’, and ‘absence’. It is clear that some perspectives on personalization are highly emphasized, and some are absent. For instance, the authors create a ‘you-community’ to emphasize the positives; to write about the things the user *can* do on the platform, and to convince the reader that everything the company does is to *help* the user. This repetition of ‘you’ and the things a user can do to take ‘control’ is carried out throughout the texts like a mantra that is subtly repeated in between the lines, aimed to enhance chances of the user remembering this message. The analysis of the modes of textualization has shown how the authors strategically form their sentences and choose their words. Strong statements are refined and mystified by using modal verbs like ‘could’, ‘would’ and ‘should’, and by writing about the things the user *can* do the authors accentuate the agency of the user. This and the repeated use of ‘you’ implicates that Facebook assumes users value to be autonomous and to be able to influence things. Furthermore, when the authors write about negative aspects of the Internet and technology in general, they strategically place themselves next to the user by writing about ‘we’, the users of the Internet whose time is wasted by bad advertisements. When the authors write about Facebook’s personalized News Feed, the authors make it more personal by writing about ‘you’, the user who, according to the authors, benefits from the platform and the personalization mechanism. Throughout the texts personalization is implicitly expressed as something good and desired, something assumed all users want because it is beneficial for them. Therefore, when the authors write about personalization, only the positive aspects are mentioned and words with positive connotations are used. For example, the authors write about the ‘updates’ that are developed to ‘give people even more control’ and to ‘give people a better experience’, and about the ‘stories’ on an individuals’ News Feed. However, while in the academic debate it would be unthinkable to write about personalization without discussing algorithms and data – since they are crucial elements to personalization – the word ‘algorithm’ is completely absent from the texts and the word ‘data’ is only mentioned once. So the texts frame personalization strategically in a way that highlights the positive aspects of personalization, represses the negative aspects, and centralizes the role of the user.

4.2 The myths that naturalize personalization

The elements of discourse discussed in the previous section have provided insights into the opinions, beliefs, and values. For instance, the assumed values discussed in the section ‘modality’ (being in control, being self-autonomous, and being able to make decisions) tell us something about the underpinning fantasy: the fantasy of freedom and individual empowerment. And this tells us something about the forms of mythical speech that reoccur in the texts. By reflecting upon two reoccurring myths that circulate in the discourse and contribute to the naturalization of personalization via various examples, this section answers the second sub-question: Which myths circulate in Facebook’s external corporate discourse on personalization?

The myth of control

The texts create a myth of control by repeatedly writing that the platform puts users in control (for example: “we’re expanding the tools we give people to control their advertising experience” and “we’re putting control in people’s hands”) and by focusing on the functionalities the users can use to ‘customize’ the content they see. For instance, the text about Facebook’s ‘News Feed Values’ includes a paragraph that addresses this myth of control:

6. “YOU CONTROL YOUR EXPERIENCE

Ultimately, you know what’s most meaningful to you — and that’s why we’ve developed controls so you can customize what you see. Features such as ‘unfollow,’ ‘hide’ and ‘see first’ help you design your own experience — and when you use them, we take your actions as feedback to help us better understand what content is most important to you. For example, if you hide a story from someone, that signals that you’re less interested in hearing from that person in the future. As News Feed evolves, we’ll continue building easy-to-use and powerful tools to give you the most personalized experience” (Mosseri 2016).

This example seems to me quite ambiguous. On the one hand, it implies that the users are in full control over their News Feed. The first part of this paragraph insinuates that the users have full control; able to fully determine what content is shown on their News Feed and what is not. The subheading screams that the users control their experience. The first sentence begins with ‘ultimately, you know what’s most meaningful to you’, and the second sentence starts with the tools users can use to control their News Feed (‘unfollow’, ‘hide’ and ‘see first’). This, again, implies that the users can fully control their News Feed. Only in the second part of the paragraph the myth unfolds: “when you use them, we take your actions as feedback to help us better understand what content is most important to you” (Mosseri 2016). Now it becomes clear that these features of the platform are not developed to give users control, but to better understand users.

Another example is the title of the blog “A New Way to Control the Ads You See on Facebook, and an Update on Ad Blocking” (Bosworth 2016). This title suggest that users are even able to block all

advertisements, which is not the case. The only thing users can do, is opt-out of *personalized* advertisements – they will still see the same amount of advertisements. And while ‘update on Ad Blocking’ suggests that users can block advertisements, Facebook has actually made it impossible for users to block advertisements with its update that shows advertisements as ‘stories’ on the News Feed. So through various ways the texts create a myth that the user is in control.

However, because sentences such as ‘you control your experience’ and ‘a new way to control the ads you see on Facebook’ address the reader as someone who is in control, someone who is empowered, independent, and autonomous, free to make his or her own decisions, other meanings are repressed. So the mythical sign has a double function: by emphasizing the power of the user it makes sure the user feels like he or she is in control, and at the same time it masks the ways the platform controls the user. It conceals the way users are seduced to perform certain actions on Facebook, it conceals that users are objects of datafication, or what Deleuze calls, ‘dividuals’. This paradox of control clearly circulates in these three texts on personalization.

The myth of individualism

The texts also create a myth of individualism: a myth that allows companies like Facebook to build businesses off users’ data by emphasizing on individual freedom, agency, and autonomy by putting the user central in every text. The myth of individualism is a core myth of the neoliberal ideology and capitalist society. Individualism stands for the idea that each individual has the right to live the way he or she wants, to achieve personal happiness, and to choose ‘individual freedom’. The greatest right in life is to be free, be able to act autonomously, or simply put: to be an individual.

In these texts the authors create a myth of individualism by continuously writing what the user (‘you’) can do to ‘personalize’ and ‘customize’ their News Feed (see section ‘voice and style’ on page 26). The authors create a fantasy that an individual’s News Feed is unique, and that the user has the agency to influence the News Feed. For example, Mosseri writes that the News Feed is “subjective, personal, and unique” (2016), and Frantz calls the News Feed a “personalized stream of stories” (2015). The authors construct Facebook as a platform that is made especially for you, the empowered individual. They focus on the positive individualistic values by focusing on words with positive connotations such as ‘customize’ and ‘personalize’. For example, the sentence, “Today we are announcing even *better* tools for *you* to *actively shape and improve* the experience” (Frantz 2015, emphasis added) emphasizes the users’ agency by writing about the ways the user (‘you’) can influence (‘actively shape and improve’) their News Feed, and emphasizes the positive values of individualism by using words like ‘better’ and ‘improve’.

Slavoj Žižek (2008) criticizes individualism to be a fantasy of the individual as being unique and the center of the world, separate of the community to which he belongs. In these texts, the fantasy of individualism is presented as liberating, as something that provides freedom. However, the notion of individualism is a paradoxical one. While on the one hand it stands for the right to live the way you want, to

achieve personal happiness and to be free and liberated, it also stands for placing personal interests above the needs of a society as a whole, for pursuing personal achievements independently of others, and for seeing the self as the center of the universe. Thus, negative connotations like 'inferior', 'selfish', 'narcissistic' and 'aversion to discipline' also relate to the notion individualism. For example, Facebook can be seen as a platform that turns people into more selfish or narcissistic individuals by inviting users to share self-indulgent statuses and selfies by asking them to share 'what's on their mind'. However, these more negative connotations are repressed in the texts via the emphasis on the positive connotations of individualism. Besides, no matter how many times the authors write about 'individuals', the user is not an individual. Rather, the user is a dividual (Deleuze 1992); a databank divided into small, fragmented files that are restructured, tracked, analyzed, and stored in databases. They are not self-controlled subjects, but controlled by the personalization mechanism. However, the ubiquity of individualism in the texts represses the dividual character of personalization.

The aim of this section was to answer the second sub-question: Which myths circulate in Facebook's external corporate discourse on personalization? The myths that circulate in the discourse on personalization and help to naturalize personalization are the myth of individualism and the myth of control. In short, the myth of control is created by addressing the reader as someone who is in control and able to influence the items they see on their News Feed. Because of this myth, other meanings are repressed. By emphasizing the power of the user it makes sure the user feels like he or she is in control, which masks the ways the platform controls the user. It conceals the way users are seduced to perform certain actions on the platform and that users are actually objects of datafication, or dividuals. The myth of individualism is created by the emphasis on the positive aspects (by writing that *you* can *customize* and *personalize your* News Feed via *better* controls) which represses other possible meanings. The emphasis on the individualistic values also masks the data capitalist motivations of Facebook. The 'features' promoted by the authors don't *help* users to 'stop seeing certain types of ads', or 'customize their News Feed', or to not miss out on 'the stories they care about most'. They help Facebook to collect valuable data about its users and to make the platform more enjoyable for users, which, Facebook hopes, results in users spending more time on the platform, which allows Facebook to sell more advertisements. When powerful companies like Facebook continuously construe personalization in this way, as something good and desired, this meaning eventually becomes 'common sense'. In other words, by continuously describing personalization in a way that puts emphasis on individual freedom, agency, autonomy, and the ability to be in control, Facebook creates a myth of individualism, which represses the fact that individuals are not self-controlled subject but controlled dividuals.

4.3 The naturalization of the neoliberal ideology and the system of data capitalism

In the previous sections I have shown how the texts create myths of control and individualism to naturalize personalization, and discussed what opinions, beliefs, and values circulate through the texts by reflecting on the forms of textualization. In this section, I will conclude the analysis and answer the main research question of this paper: How is personalization naturalized in the external corporate discourse of Facebook?

By framing personalization in a very strategic way and by using myths of control and individualism, Facebook naturalizes personalization and seduces the reader to believe that the current system, the system of data capitalism, is natural. The individuals' fantasies of individual empowerment, freedom, and being in control are captivated in discourse, in myths, and connected to something that originally has nothing to do with it: personalization. While this masks the system of data capitalism underpinning personalization, this does not matter because individuals are aware of the mask. Individuals know about the ways their data is capitalized, but choose to not renounce it because they need fantasies like these, and because Facebook makes them believe it is beneficial for them to keep using the platform. Or at least that is the fantasy.

So what is this system of data capitalism and what is the underpinning ideology? Data capitalism is a form of capitalism where the source of monetization is data. For Facebook, this data is used to optimize the platform and the items shown on a users' News Feed, including advertisements. Based on data, the personalization mechanism determines what information is shown to a user, where on the News Feed, and at what time. While this data is not sold to advertisers, Facebook sells the time of users and the chance of users interacting with or clicking on the advertisement. Put differently, the company sells space on the users' News Feed and the desire to reach a specific group of people with specific interests at the exact right time. As argued in the introduction, the formula is that the more personally relevant information is to an individual, the more time he or she will spend on the platform. For Facebook, this is beneficial because the more time individuals spend on the platform, the more data they are able to gather, and the more advertisements they can sell. In data capitalism, the companies, institutions or groups with access to the data have all the power to control, they have the power to monetize the data. The individuals, the data producers or 'dividuals', do not have access to their own data. They are not able to monetize their data, see what their data profile looks like, or control it. They are the ones being controlled by the companies, institutions and groups with access to their data.

Neoliberalism is the guiding ideology of most contemporary Western societies, and the guiding ideology of Facebook. As argued in chapter three, the neoliberal ideology in the data economy is built on the fantasy of freedom and empowerment, the fantasy of control, and the desire to capture our behavior and personalize our social world. The neoliberal ideology is also built on the fantasy of free trade; the philosophy that views market exchange as a guide for human action. The neoliberal ideology has created a completely new market in a domain that did not exist before; it has transformed data into an exchangeable good, and it has transformed individuals into dividuals. It justifies the unequal power relations between the ones with access to the data, Facebook, and the ones without access, the dividuals. It naturalizes the role of the user

as a dividual, as a producer of data without the power to access or influence the process, and it alienates this unequal process of data capitalization. This alienation is a central product of the data economy and data capitalism: the users of the platform are alienated from their product, the data. This data does not belong to them and is transformed in ways that completely disconnects it from the user. The users are also alienated from their productive activity. They have no control over their activities, because these are shaped by the company. As explained in chapter one and two, the affordances and algorithms stimulate and determine the activities of users and thus, the data that is produced. And because of the neoliberal ideology, this data is seen as an exchangeable good that can be traded freely.

So while in the texts Facebook frames personalization in such a way that plays with the individual's desire for and fantasy of individual empowerment, freedom, and being in control, this is actually the opposite of what Facebook's personalization strategy is all about. Instead of leading to practices of freedom, it leads to practices of control. However, following Žižek's line of argument, I argue that users are aware of the system of data capitalism and the neoliberal ideology. I believe users are aware of their role in this process and the fact that their data is capitalized. However, Facebook strategically uses their fantasy of individual empowerment, freedom, and being in control to promote personalization. This contributes to individuals holding on to this fantasy while they know better and thus, to naturalization of personalization.

In this chapter I have discussed how Facebook naturalizes personalization in its external blogs. First I have analyzed how personalization is described by assessing the texts via the perspectives of 'voice and style', 'modality' and 'absence'. I have shown how the texts create a 'you-community' to emphasize the things users can do on the platform. This implicates that Facebook assumes that users value to act autonomously, to be free, and to have control over their News Feed. However, the authors do not discuss how the updates they write about support Facebook's business model or how it actually works. Also, while in the academic debate it would be unthinkable to write about personalization without discussing algorithms and data since they are crucial elements to personalization, the word 'algorithm' is completely absent from the texts and the word 'data' is only mentioned once. So while the positive side of personalization is discussed in detail with the use of words with positive connotations, crucial elements of the personalization mechanism itself are absent.

In the second section of this chapter I have shown how the texts create myths of control and individualism. The texts create a myth of control by repeatedly writing that the platform 'puts users in control' and by focusing on the functionalities the users can use to 'customize' their News Feed. However, the myth of control is a paradoxical one. While the authors emphasize the control the user has, the control the company has over its users and how the functionalities strengthen this control is not discussed. The texts also create a myth of individualism by emphasizing on individual freedom, agency, and the ability to act autonomously. By putting the user central in every text and by focusing on the things users can do to 'customize' and 'personalize' their News Feed, the texts create this myth of individualism which is central to

the neoliberal ideology. However, other possible meanings of individualism are repressed, such as the selfish and narcissistic connotation of individualism as seeing the self as the center of the universe.

In the final section I have concluded how Facebook discursively naturalizes personalization. I have argued that personalization is framed in such a way that seduces the reader to believe that the current system, the system of data capitalism, is natural. The individuals' fantasies of individual empowerment, freedom, and being in control are captivated in the discourse via the myths of control and individualism. While Facebook has all the access to the data and thus the power to control and to monetize the data, the users are 'dividuals' without access to their own data. This alienation of the users of the platform from their product, the data, is central to data capitalism. Because of the neoliberal ideology, this data is seen as an exchangeable good that can be disconnected from the producer and traded freely. The neoliberal ideology justifies these unequal power relations, naturalizes the role of the user as a dividual, and it alienates the unequal process of data capitalization. However, users are aware of this but choose to act as if Facebook's personalization mechanism does bring individual empowerment, freedom, and control to users. Because they want to, but also because of the way Facebook uses this fantasy to discursively frame personalization.

Conclusion

In the texts about personalization, Facebook creates myths of control and individualism that naturalize the neoliberal ideology and data capitalist motivations of the company. Facebook uses the individual's desire to be autonomous, free, liberated, empowered, and in control, and links these values to something that is essentially a control technology. The platform's personalization mechanism is carefully designed to capitalize user data by turning individuals into individuals: databanks that can be divided into small files and reorganized in endless ways for endless purposes. The entire architecture of the platform is designed with the aim to create a personalized space users will enjoy so much they will keep coming back, which allows Facebook to collect more data and sell more advertisements – automatically, autonomously, and invisibly. Individuals are locked in a world guarded by Facebook. Even the lives of people that do not use Facebook (or one of the other platforms owned by the company) are datafied via the social plugins installed on websites across the Internet and capitalized by the company. This data capitalist system, that is based on the neoliberal ideology, controls the lives of individuals on the Internet.

While this control is invisible, a lot of individuals are aware of the data capitalist motivations of Facebook. They know that their idea of freedom masks a particular form of exploitation, and they know that the data that is collected of them produces certain relations of power. However, most of them still choose not to renounce it and keep using the platform. They are cynical subjects that are aware of the ideological mask and the social reality, but consciously insist upon the mask. Even though they do not agree with the fact that Facebook monetizes their data, they do not act upon it and decide to still use the technology because it is beneficial for them in the short run. The 'as if', the underlying (unconscious) fantasies of what things are like, sustain and structure the social reality of individuals. They keep up the fantasy that personalization empowers them to find information, keep up with their social life, learn new things, and so on, because they want to, and maybe even because they need to.

In this paper, I have shown how Facebook uses this fantasy upheld by individuals and even strengthens it, and uses it to naturalize personalization. The company frames personalization in such a strategic way that the neoliberal ideology and data capitalist motivations of the company are naturalized, and personalization is seen as 'common sense', as natural. By creating a 'you-community', the authors try to persuade the reader that the personalized News Feed, and the features that help to create this personalized space, are in the users' best interest and put them in control. This message is subtly repeated in between the lines, almost like a mantra aimed to enhance chances of the user remembering this message. The authors assume that users value individual empowerment and use this value to naturalize personalization by focusing on the things users can do. However, the technologies underpinning the personalized News Feed are ignored. Crucial elements of personalization mechanisms – algorithms and data – are almost absent from the texts. In the end, Facebook is a prediction machine designed to profile users and create highly personalized information spaces filled with promoted content. But even if users are aware of these systems,

how they contribute to Facebook's business model, and how they sustain certain relations of power, the absence of these elements does contribute to the fantasy of personalization as something good and desirable, something that empowers individuals and puts them in control.

Two myths that circulate in the texts and help to sustain this fantasy are the myth of control and the myth of individualism. By repeating that the platform puts users in control and by focusing on the functionalities the users can use to influence the content they see on their News Feed, the platform creates this myth of control. This is a paradoxical one, because it is actually Facebook who gains more control over users with these functionalities. It helps the company to collect more valuable data of their users, which enables the company to create even better customized information spaces, which the company hopes will result in the users spending more time on the platform, and thus, the ability to sell more advertisements. The myth of individualism is created by emphasizing on individual freedom, agency, and autonomy, by putting the user central in every text, and by framing the News Feed as something that is made especially for the unique and empowered individual. However, also the myth of individualism is a paradoxical one. While on the one hand it stands for the right to live the way you want, to achieve personal happiness, and to be free and liberated, it also stands for placing personal interests above the needs of a society as a whole, for pursuing personal achievements, and for seeing the self as the center of the universe. But these meanings of individualism are repressed in the texts. By focusing on positive perspectives, the texts create myths of control and individualism that mask the data capitalist motivations of the platform and naturalize the neoliberal ideology. An ideology that justifies the transformation of data into an exchangeable good and the transformation of individuals into individuals. It naturalizes the role of the user as a individual, as a producer of data without the power to access or influence the process, and the role of Facebook as the owner of data, and it alienates this unequal process of data capitalization.

So while individuals are aware of the ideological mask and the social reality, they keep using the platform because they feel like it is in their best interest in the short run. Because they feel like they cannot escape the control Facebook has, or maybe because they feel like they personally benefit from personalization. But the way Facebook discursively frames personalization and naturalizes the neoliberal ideology and data capitalist motivations contributes strongly to the preservation of this fantasy of personalization. These texts have an active role in construing, constituting, and distributing relations of power and ideology, and thereby, the construction of the social world. Powerful companies like Facebook make individuals believe in the fantasy of personalization, which is now a fantasy of individual empowerment, freedom, and being in control.

In this paper I have analyzed the discourse on personalization via a Critical Discourse Analysis. While Fairclough's approach to the Foucauldian discourse analysis is helpful to explore power relations on the level of the surface text, the addition of the Barthesian theory of mythology enabled me to explore the underlying beliefs and intended connotations, and Žižek's ideology critique enabled me to reflect upon the underlying fantasies and desires. Together, this gave me the freedom to analyze on the level of text and explore the

underlying network of fantasies and desires. Nonetheless, this methodology has its limitations. First of all, it is a subjective methodology, based on subjective notions of ideology and naturalization. These interpretations are not false, but others will interpret these texts differently. Also, it is important to note that this analysis does not say anything about the broader discourse, it says something about how ideology works in the texts analyzed. Thus, to get a broader understanding on how late capitalist systems of control are naturalized in discourse on personalization, further research is necessary.

Hopefully, I was able to critically reflect upon Facebook's strategy to seduce the reader of the idea that personalization is something good and desirable, and something Facebook selflessly develops to help users. The individuals' fantasies of individual empowerment, freedom, and being in control are captivated in discourse, in myths, and connected to something that originally has nothing to do with it: personalization. While this masks the system of data capitalism underpinning personalization, individuals are aware of it. So while individuals know about the ways their data is capitalized, they choose to not renounce it, because they need fantasies like these, and because Facebook makes them believe it is beneficial for them to keep using the platform. This fantasy of individual empowerment, freedom, and being in control is similar to the fantasy that surrounded the Internet in its early days. So while our knowledge of new technologies and how they give rise to certain relations of power has grown, the fantasies remain the same. I hope this paper has shown the power of the discourse, and exposed how texts use and strengthen fantasies of individuals via strategically framed utterances and the creation of myths. And hopefully, this paper will open up discussions about not only the fantasy surrounding personalization and how it is discursively naturalized, but also the fantasies surrounding other technologies.

Suggestions for further research

To make sure this study was feasible, I selected texts about personalization published by Facebook. However, to better understand how personalization is naturalized I suggest two other lines of study. To get a better understanding of the myths that circulate in discourse on personalization I suggest to analyze texts about personalization published by other large new media companies whose business model is based on (data) personalization. This could tell us something about the reoccurring techno-utopian fantasies surrounding personalization and the myths that are used to naturalize personalization. To make this study less subjective, my advice would be to perform this research in a group. Furthermore, I suggest to add an analysis of the authors' expressions of sentiment to the methodology. An analysis of the connotations and emotions attached to words could provide additional insights into the way that personalization is naturalized.

The second line of study is a software studies approach, because the architecture of the platform contributes for a large part to the naturalization of personalization. The architecture is already ideological (Mager 2012) because they are designed according to particular interests (like the expansion of capital) and because they have been "developed through different histories of power" (Skeggs and Yuill 2015, 1367). And

as argued in section 1.1, I believe the theoretical frames presented in this paper could provide an inspiring perspective for an interface analysis. Hopefully, with these theoretical frames and method it is possible to achieve a better understanding of how the neoliberal ideology is naturalized via the interfaces of platforms that rely on personalization.

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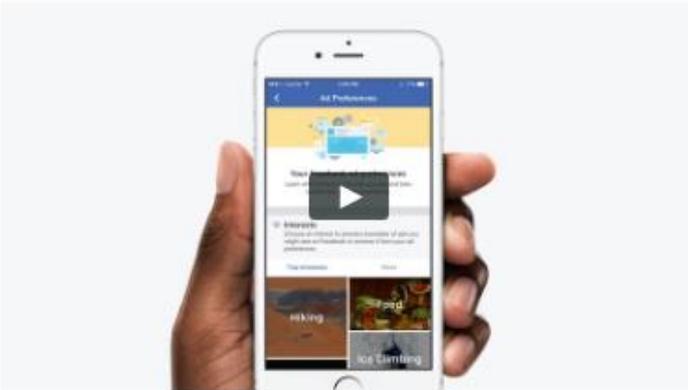
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Appendix A

August 9, 2016

A New Way to Control the Ads You See on Facebook, and an Update on Ad Blocking



By Andrew Bosworth, VP, Ads & Business Platform

As more and more content has shifted to the internet, online experiences have improved dramatically, becoming more immersive and intuitive. But many digital ads haven't kept up. We've all experienced a lot of bad ads: ads that obscure the content we're trying to read, ads that slow down load times or ads that try to sell us things we have no interest in buying. Bad ads are disruptive and a waste of our time.

Today, we're announcing some changes to help with this problem. First, we're expanding the tools we give people to control their advertising experience. Second, we're providing an update on our approach to ad blocking on Facebook.

What We've Done So Far

For the past few years at Facebook we've [worked to better understand](#) people's concerns with online ads. What we've heard is that people don't like to see ads that are irrelevant to them or that disrupt or break their experience. People also want to have control over the kinds of ads they see.

As a result of what we've learned, we've introduced tools to help people control their experience, improved how we decide which ads to show and created new ad formats that complement, rather than detract from, people's experience online.

Improving Ad Controls

With today's announcement, we're building on these efforts by making [ad preferences](#) easier to use, so you can stop seeing certain types of ads. If you don't want to see ads about a certain interest like travel or cats, you can remove the interest from your ad preferences. We also heard that people want to be able to stop seeing ads from businesses or organizations who have added them to their customer lists, and so we are adding tools that allow people to do this. These improvements are designed to give people even more control over how their data informs the ads they see.

Addressing Ad Blocking

When they're relevant and well-made, ads can be useful, helping us find new products and services and introducing us to new experiences — like an ad that shows you your favorite band is coming to town or an amazing airline deal to a tropical vacation. But because ads don't always work this way, many people have started avoiding certain websites or apps, or using ad blocking software, to stop seeing bad ads. These have been the best options to date.

We've designed our ad formats, ad performance and controls to address the underlying reasons people have turned to ad blocking software. When we asked people about why they used ad blocking software, the primary reason we heard was to stop annoying, disruptive ads. As we offer people more powerful controls, we'll also begin showing ads on Facebook desktop for people who currently use ad blocking software.

Some ad blocking companies accept money in exchange for showing ads that they previously blocked — a practice that is at best confusing to people and that reduces the funding needed to support the journalism and other free services that we enjoy on the web. Facebook is one of those free services, and ads support our mission of giving people the power to share and making the world more open and connected. Rather than paying ad blocking companies to unblock the ads we show — as some of these companies have invited us to do in the past — we're putting control in people's hands with our updated ad preferences and our other advertising controls.

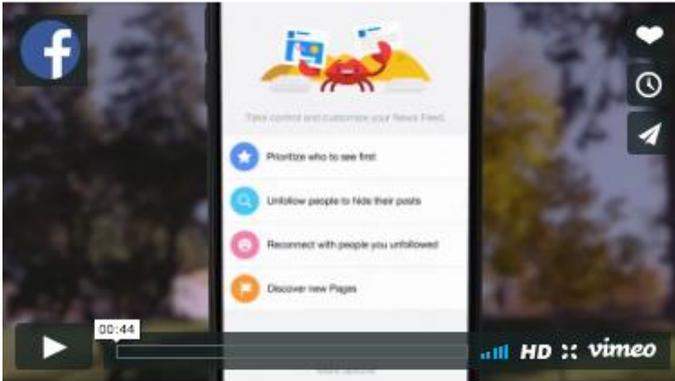
We believe that these expanded controls give people a better experience with advertising on and off Facebook. We also know there's more work to do, and we're continually listening to your feedback to make advertising better for everyone.

Transcript video

"With Facebook's new Ad Preferences, you can easily customize the ads you see in the News Feed. Simply click the chevron in the top right corner, tap on 'why am I seeing this?', and you can learn why this particular ad is appearing in your feed. And by tapping on 'manage your ad preferences' you can take control over your ads-experiences. And you can even choose which interest you'd like to see ads about. Now you can find personally relevant ads that speak directly to the topics you care about. Ad Preferences. On Facebook."

July 9, 2015

Updated Controls for News Feed



By Jacob Frantz, Product Manager

News Feed is a personalized stream of stories that you build from the people and Pages you've connected to on Facebook. The goal of News Feed is to show you the stories that matter most to you. To do this, we use ranking to order stories based on how interesting we believe they are to you: specifically, whom you tend to interact with, and what kinds of content you tend to like and comment on.

We're always working to improve and personalize your News Feed experience. We know that ultimately you're the only one who truly knows what is most meaningful to you and that is why we want to give you more ways to control what you see. Last year we announced some new ways to control what you see in News Feed. Today we are announcing even better tools for you to actively shape and improve the experience. We've redesigned and expanded Facebook's News Feed Preferences to give you more control.

Select friends and Pages to see first

To help prioritize stories, and make sure you don't miss posts from particular friends and Pages, you can now select which friends and Pages you would like to see at the top of your News Feed.

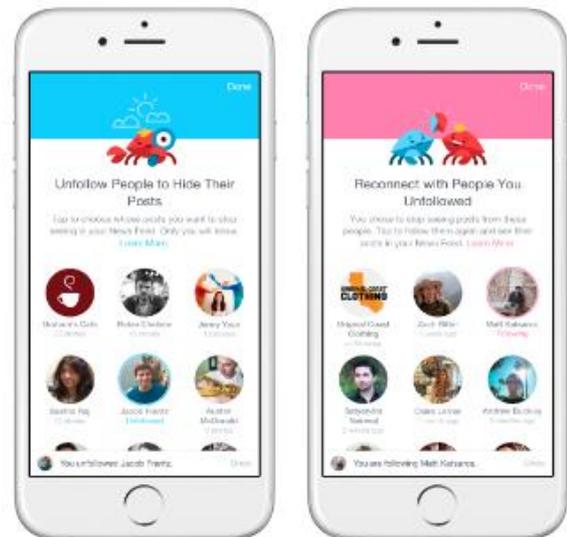
Within News Feed Preferences, tap on a friend's profile picture to see their posts first. You will then see any new stories they've shared since your last visit to Facebook at the top of News Feed, with a star in the top right of their post so you know why they're at the top. You can scroll down to see the rest of your News Feed normally.

Find new Pages to connect to

Helping you find new Pages to follow can help you connect with publishers, artists and businesses you might be interested in. Based on the types of Pages you've liked in the past, you can discover new Pages in order to get more of the stories you care about.

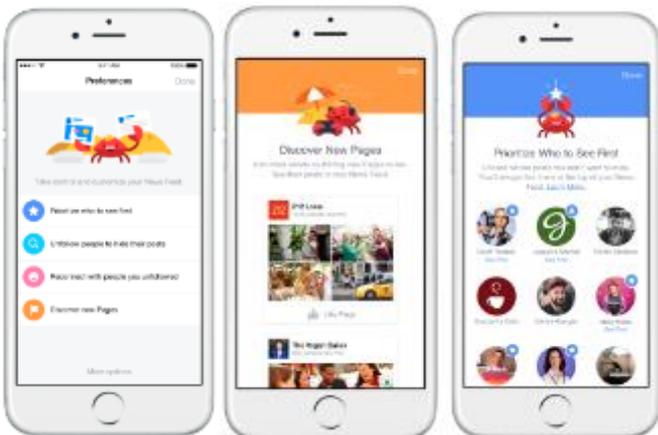
Select which friends and Pages to follow or unfollow

With an updated design of the tools we previously launched, you can now see a list of the top people, Pages and groups that you've seen in your News Feed over the past week, and choose to unfollow any friend, Page or group if you don't want to see their updates. You can also see who you've unfollowed in the past and choose to re-follow them at any time.



To get to News Feed Preferences, tap More in the bottom right hand corner of your mobile app. News Feed Preferences are located under Settings. You can come back at any time to update your choices.

The new ways to control your News Feed will be available today on iOS and will be rolling out on Android and desktop over the coming weeks.



Transcript video

"We're always working to make News Feed a personalized stream. Delivering the Top Stories from the people and pages you connect to on Facebook. But ultimately, you know what matters most to you. So we're expanding your News Feed preferences in order to give you more control. With one of the new updates to News Feed preferences, you can choose the people and preferences you see first. Whether it's friends or family, or your favorite band, they will be right at the top of your News Feed so you won't miss their posts. You can always change who you see first in your preferences. And of course, the rest of your News Feed will still be there to keep you up to date. Now you can better customize your News Feed. Giving you control of the stories you care about most. [text in video: Prioritize the stories you want to see. Part of the new News Feed Preferences.]"

June 29, 2016

Building a Better News Feed for You

By Adam Mosseri, VP, Product Management, News Feed

The goal of News Feed is to show people the stories that are most relevant to them. Today, we're announcing an update to News Feed that helps you see more posts from your friends and family. We explain this change in more detail [here](#).

When we launched News Feed in 2006, it was hard to imagine the challenge we now face: far too much information for any one person to consume. In the decade since, more than a billion people have joined Facebook, and today they share a flood of stories every day. That's why stories in News Feed are ranked — so that people can see what they care about first, and don't miss important stuff from their friends. If the ranking is off, people don't engage, and leave dissatisfied. So one of our most important jobs is getting this ranking right.

As part of that process, we often make improvements to News Feed, and when we do, we rely on a set of core values. [These values](#) — which we've been using for years — guide our thinking, and help us keep the central experience of News Feed intact as it evolves. In our continued efforts to be transparent about how we think about News Feed, we want to share those values with you.

News Feed Values

Our success is built on getting people the stories that matter to them most. If you could look through thousands of stories every day and choose the 10 that were most important to you, which would they be? The answer should be your News Feed. It is subjective, personal, and unique — and defines the spirit of what we hope to achieve.

FRIENDS AND FAMILY COME FIRST

Facebook was built on the idea of connecting people with their friends and family. That is still the driving principle of News Feed today. Our top priority is keeping you connected to the people, places and things you want to be connected to — starting with the people you are friends with on Facebook. That's why if it's from your friends, it's in your feed, period — you just have to scroll down. To help make sure you don't miss the friends and family posts you are likely to care about, we put those posts toward the top of your News Feed. We learn from you and adapt over time. For example, if you tend to like photos from your sister, we'll start putting her posts closer to the top of your feed so you won't miss what she posted while you were away.

Our research has also shown us that, after friends and family, people have two other strong expectations when they come to News Feed:

- **Your feed should inform.** People expect the stories in their feed to be meaningful to them — and we have learned over time that people value stories that they consider informative. Something that one person finds informative or interesting may be different from what another person finds informative or interesting — this could be a post about a current event, a story about your favorite celebrity, a piece of local news, or a recipe. We're always working to better understand what is interesting and informative to you personally, so those stories appear higher up in your feed.
- **Your feed should entertain.** We've also found that people enjoy their feeds as a source of entertainment. For some people, that's following a celebrity or athlete; for others it's watching Live videos and sharing funny photos with their friends. We work hard to try to understand and predict what posts on Facebook you find entertaining to make sure you don't miss out on those.

A PLATFORM FOR ALL IDEAS

We are not in the business of picking which issues the world should read about. We are in the business of connecting people and ideas — and matching people with the stories they find most meaningful. Our integrity depends on being inclusive of all perspectives and view points, and using ranking to connect people with the stories and sources they find the most meaningful and engaging.

We don't favor specific kinds of sources — or ideas. Our aim is to deliver the types of stories we've gotten feedback that an individual person most wants to see. We do this not only because we believe it's the right thing but also because it's good for our business. When people see content they are interested in, they are more likely to spend time on News Feed and enjoy their experience.

It's important to note that while we welcome a multitude of viewpoints, we also believe strongly that people should feel — and be — safe when they use Facebook, and we therefore have [Community Standards](#) that define the behavior that we think is out-of-bounds on the platform. We think it's possible to be inclusive without making Facebook a place where people are subjected to attacks, hate, or other harmful behavior.

AUTHENTIC COMMUNICATION

The strength of our community depends on authentic communication. The feedback we've gotten tells us that authentic stories are the ones that resonate most. That's why we work hard to understand what type of stories and posts people consider genuine — so we can show more of them in News Feed. And we work to understand what kinds of stories people find misleading, sensational and spammy, to make sure people see those less.

YOU CONTROL YOUR EXPERIENCE

Ultimately, you know what's most meaningful to you — and that's why we've developed controls so you can customize what you see. Features such as “unfollow,” “hide” and “see first” help you design your own experience — and when you use them, we take your actions as feedback to help us better understand what content is most important to you. For example, if you hide a story from someone, that signals that you're less interested in hearing from that person in the future. As News Feed evolves, we'll continue building easy-to-use and powerful tools to give you the most personalized experience.

CONSTANT ITERATION

We view our work as only 1 percent finished — and are dedicated to improving along the way. As we look for ways to get better, we will continue soliciting feedback. We will be as open as we can — providing explanations in News Feed FYI wherever possible and looking for opportunities to share how we work.