Personalised online environments lead us to judge others more harshly

March 5 2019, by Janneke Van Den Elshout

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Many of today's online environments provide personalisation options. Social media is such an environment that is filled with personalised content. UT researcher Jan Bats says this has a direct effect on the way

we interact with each other in these environments. On March 1, the University of Twente will award Bats a Ph.D. for his work, which includes a thesis exploring our behaviour online. Bats' thesis explains how, in personalised online environments, we form opinions about others much faster and more harshly, experience interpersonal contact differently, and assert our own interests more. This provides a new explanation for how we interact with each other online.

"Why does this happen? Why are people quicker to argue with each other online, and do we judge others more harshly online than we would in person?" Many current scientific opinions point to how we feel more anonymous when communicating through the internet. This sense of anonymity also ensures we can't see the people we are talking to, or the effect our words and actions have on them. There's often a mob mentality online, and it's easy to disparage others when you don't need to worry about it turning physical.

Making yourself 'at home' on the internet

However, besides these statements, another explanation can also play a role. Everyone feels at home in their own environment, and many [social media platforms](#) allow users to personalise their environment according to their preferences. We can upload our own photos as backgrounds, change the language, adjust the look and feel of the environment down to the fonts used, and choose who we do and do not communicate with. Just like our homes, we organise social media and other online environments to our comfort and make it our own, under our control. Does this affect the choices we make when using the internet, and how we interact with others online? After all, in our own homes we often do things differently than we do elsewhere.

Theory

"In my thesis, I find proof of this home environment theory through journal research and three experiments. I thereby add to the existing theories about our behaviour online. When we experience an online environment as more personal—as we often do with social media—this affects how we interact with others in that environment."

Experiments

To carry out my experiments, I divided participants into two groups. Those in one group were asked to set up an online environment according to their own preferences, while those in the other group could not. The participants who used a personalised online environment were quicker to form negative judgements about others who did not meet their standards. These participants allowed their own interests to play a role in their choices more than the participants who did not have a personalised environment. On the other hand, those with personalised environments were also more amicable towards the friends they had in that environment. To conclude, when using personalised online environments, we judge those who think differently more harshly, we put our own interests first, and we are kinder to our friends.

Provided by University of Twente

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