

Recommender Systems as a Mode of Technological Maieutics

This presentation will address the existential function that recommender systems can perform in our online lives. Rather than theorizing recommender systems as a source of alienation or inauthenticity, in this paper I will examine these systems as sites of opportunity for existential self-examination. While these technological systems, and digital interface technologies more generally, are often treated with wariness and suspicion by existentially-minded academics—who often shroud this critique in the language of “encroachment,” “alienation,” or “mediation”—I will argue counter to this trend and suggest that recommender systems may in fact draw us closer to ourselves and even reveal us to ourselves. On one end of my argument I will claim that the theoretical vocabulary that is currently very popular in the philosophy of technology (that is, the language of mediation theory) is limited in its ability to address the self-reflective and self-disclosive elements of online recommender systems. On the other end of my argument I will claim that these systems have the potential to enact a maieutic process of self-examination akin to the existential method propounded and practiced by foundational existential figures such as Socrates and Kierkegaard.