Question: Social media has given rise to the age of extremes. More becomes much, much more and less much, much less. There is no middle ground. But this seems to go against the entire digital era and the founding principles of the Internet which were all about equality, equal access, and "bridging the divide". Sure, the digital divide might be less today but the social, economic and intellectual divide is on the rise. Instead of becoming more balanced, people are becoming more polarized; instead of reading more, we all read the same things; instead of enjoying a diversity of music, music production and consumption are all becoming homogenized. And this trend is on the rise with the rise of analytics and big data which give us more of what we consume. Social influence, in summary, is on the rise at the expense of individuality. This should all make us worry, a lot!

Dear Rhoda Lew,

Have you read Thomas Friedman's book?

It is true that there is no middle ground. To begin with, social media generally requires access to reliable electricity and Internet connection. While we are trying to "bridge the divide" in a hot, flat and crowded world, it is actually causing a greater rift between those who have access to reliable electricity and those who don't. Many years back, information was available to those who may not have had access to electricity. It may have involved long walks to the library, but they could still access information at that time. However, today, this isn't the case. In that sense, the gap has grown exponentially.

That aside, when we talk about social networking, we will tend to have mutual friends. For example, consider your connection to several of your closest friends. They will likely have relationships to other people you don't know, maybe even people you hate. But the way social media works is for all of them to become involved in a single network and community. In order for the community to work well, everyone in the network has to have strong ties with each other; this is more likely to happen when you can get along with each other's differences or perhaps you all have the same kind of preferences.

With social media, we tend to share many different things, perhaps what we like and dislike. This data can be utilized by firms such that they manufacture goods based on our tastes and preferences. This includes Youtube and other video sites, where the statistics of videos like the Kissanime that you watch are being calculated and hence other people intending to follow the 'in' thing will know what they are to produce in order to become popular and successful. As such, the majority of the goods produced will tend to lose their individuality.

Some forms of social media will allow certain content to spread virally once a critical number of people show interest in it. For instance, the black/blue gown that some people say is white/gold. When something goes viral, it captivates the attention of many others even if their interests didn't originally involve such stuff. This is also a loss of individuality.

There, however, is some saving grace in all this, as there are people who do want to try out different things and strategies; in other words, they decide to maintain their individuality. As for your Field Exercise, I find that you do still maintain some form of individuality, so all is not lost.

See you next time.

With regards,
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