



Wie sich der Islam reformiert

The European

16.03.2015

Algorithms of Taste

Today, recommendations and criticism follow the algorithms of unsubstantiated opinions rather than expertise. But can good taste be based solely on what we already like?



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The cultural section of newspapers is one of the traditional bastions of criticism. It is here that books, music and theater plays are reviewed and judged. We are all aware that the Internet has changed the nature of newspapers, and that the advent of the “digital realm” has had a major impact on the function of criticism as a cultural practice. For some time now, criticism has ceased to be something carried out by professional critics, and the plethora of forums, blogs, and other platforms all contribute to generating a dense murmur of ongoing assessment.

Whereas before we turned to Bloom, Pivot, or Reich-Ranicki for literary reviews, to Parker for an expert opinion on wine, the Michelin Guide for sage advice about fine dining, and official dictionaries for general information about

our language and spelling, we now check what Tripadvisor has to say, read the recommendations of Spotfire and Amazon, and use automatic spell checkers in all our writing tasks. In the open, amorphous space of the web and social media, with a simple click of the “like button”, people pass vague, non-specific judgments backed up by no explanations or qualifiers.

No longer any single authority

On the Internet, nothing is safe from a rejoinder. Any news report or expert opinion is open to comments and criticism from anyone. Our tastes are no longer defined in the vertical space of authority, but in the midst of a babble of voices in which the view of an expert is just one amongst many, supported or opposed by the opinions of other experts, connoisseurs, enthusiasts, and even simple users. In this transformed context, the function of a “critic” as someone responsible for defining good taste, laying down canons, and deciding what is (and what is not) culturally valuable seems, at best, unnecessary, if not downright ridiculous.

Thus, the hierarchy of the media begins to wobble, and the high priests (the critics) are in danger of falling from their pedestals. Expert knowledge is no longer something static that can only be found in one specific place, but rather something fluid, flowing through a wide range of diverse channels.

All this has given rise to a heated debate between two diametrically opposed groups: those who herald the new online era, characterized by the democratization of criticism and taste; and those who lament the loss of individual sovereignty.

For the first group, democratization is the logical consequence of the fact that, thanks to the Internet, the general public has now recovered something that had been taken away from it and announced in the cultural sections of newspapers as a kind of Official Gazette, laying down the laws of culture. We are no longer living in the golden age of criticism, when supreme authorities were the only bridge over the abyss that separated high culture from the masses. Nowadays, anyone can pass judgment in matters of taste. Critics abounding on the web, as well as the possibility of being able to post a comment on a news article, have opened up an arena for debate and protest that, despite being oftentimes banal, have the effect of undermining the authority of the original written word. The emergence of the figure of an unqualified commentator has introduced an element of horizontality into a medium that was built on the basis of an eminently vertical structure. The public arena has become fragmented, broken up into taste-based communities, and there is no longer any authority capable of imposing one single canon to which everyone must adhere.

From the other side of the fence, negative views of this new era have given rise to a wide variety of arguments, ranging from those that complain about banality to those that herald imminent doom and complex conspiracy theories. In our everyday lives, our judgments and tastes are formed by recommendations compiled by aggregation algorithms (“customers who bought this, also...”). Consumers are kings, and any suggestions made to them are based on an attempt to guess their preferences. Is there any better example of sovereignty? And yet, can good taste be based solely on what we already like?

More criticism, not less

Critics of the Internet include those who denounce a logic which, instead of broadening our horizons, simply confirms our prejudices, as well as those who espouse the apocalyptic visions of having discovered a sinister conspiracy that lurks behind this apparently amiable wooing of online customers. To my mind, what people who make both these arguments fail to understand, is that the whole process is at the same time dialectical and ambivalent, as it opens the doors to future developments that may ensure greater freedom and more information.

They also seem to have forgotten the existence of filters, without which we could not possibly survive in an environment that is so densely saturated with information. We cannot hope to defend our online independence unless we strive to understand the nature of these filters and learn to manage them. And what’s more, these filters can always be improved: they can be rendered more neutral or better able to specify our chosen selection criteria.

Can we conclude, then, that algorithm-based advice to users has rendered criticism in the traditional sense unnecessary? Surely not. For a start, because the proliferation of these procedures does not herald the death of criticism. Quite the opposite, in fact: The critics have multiplied. There is now more criticism, not less, with all that this increase entails. The Internet has triggered a huge rise in criticism: People write hitherto unimaginable reams of reviews on all manner of things, covering an immense range of tastes and qualities in accordance with different niches. In this quagmire of opinions, the media has indeed lost its old monopolistic position, or, in other words, its power to regulate access to the public discourse and set the terms, conditions, and main players of the cultural debate.

The general public has taken a firm hold of the reins of its own sphere of attention. However, this context also offers criticism the chance to return to what it once was: a set of judgments issued by experts who do not limit themselves

to merely recording or reproducing dominant tastes, but who rather take us out of our comfort zone with new, unexpected proposals. Experts who do not focus on any one particular reader or customer, but, instead, strive to say something with a universal value. In this way, critics could free themselves of the shackles of having to tell users what, at heart, they already know.

Read more in this debate: Slavoj Žižek, Jean-Luc Nancy.

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