User perspectives on filter bubbles
An interview study of user navigations and experiences in personalised news consumption

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Abstract

This study derives from a located a gap in the methodological coverage and ways in which filter bubbles previously have been problematised. It is structured to through a user perspective to find ways in which users navigation and experience is influenced by personalised consumption. Through interview studies of digital natives, two main focuses of navigation and experience have been chosen with the aim to bring nuanced perspectives to the current state of filter bubbles. The first, using the theoretical framework of uses and gratifications sets out to answer: In what ways do digital natives navigation contest the personalisation of their news consumption?

I found that most interview participants have developed both thorough and individual ways of navigating in their news consumption process. Personalising filters are by some seen as assets to optimize content and by others as thresholds that enforce restrictive behaviour. However, most participants seem to be mildly concerned or unaware of personalising features in their news navigation.

The second focus of user experience seeks to clarify the motives behind user navigation by answering: In what ways do digital natives experience of their navigation contest the personalisation of theirs and others news consumption?

I find that some participants consider the impact of their own interactions with their personalised consumption, but do not understand the extents of it. I also find that shared social norms and traditional media permeate the critical view that all participants carry with them through their navigation. I use these findings to introduce a suggestion to problematise personalisation through user experience as a way of benchmarking filter bubbles that to my knowledge have not been used before.

Lastly, by looking at the navigations and experiences of the participants through a theoretical framework of power, I conceptualise their interactions as motives of counter power towards a personalisation to answer: How can the motives of digital natives navigation be contextualised as acts of counter power towards their personalised news consumption?

I identify both interactions as motives of counter power with some participants’ news consumption, and experiences of subjectivity to power in others. But can’t determine to which extents it relates to the personalisation or other factors in the participants news consumption.
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1. Introduction

This study focuses on bringing perspectives to research on filter bubbles through the user. The phenomena of filter bubbles, a term originally coined by Eli Pariser, is the suggestion that personalised consumption “could limit the diversity of media content people are exposed to and thus have an adverse effect on the democratic discourse” (Zuiderveen et al., 2016, p.2). Personalised consumption, or continuously throughout this study simplified as personalisation refers to structures that impose an individualised system that choose or narrow the choices in what type of media the individual will receive. This can occur in various ways, for example through personalised search results, personalised feeds in Social Network Services and personalised news content on a news webpage. Thus, personalisation or personalised consumption does not refer to the users choices, but the choices that have been made for the user. This personalisation is produced by algorithmic sets of codes that are commonly embedded in digital platforms today. They provide users with a personal environment based on a wide range of different factors, such as the individual’s geographical location and their browsing history (Pariser, 2011, p.2). Filter bubble refers to the phenomena that personalisation can lead to. The way Eli Pariser viewed it was that throughout time personalisation would continuously narrow our nuanced access to media by recommending more and more similar content and excluding that which differentiates itself from what we are used to (2011).

The aim of the user perspective is to find relationships between the users and their personalised consumption that are relevant for the discussion of filter bubbles. Methodologically speaking such a focus through qualitative means has been granted less attention in prior research. Most studies of filter bubbles have either focused on measuring degrees to which algorithms inflict personalisation, or on the relationship between personalisation and democratic values. My aim originates from the uses and gratifications perspective that it is not only media that do something to people, but also people who do something to media (Katz, 1959). Using this perspective, the study sets out to examine how the ways of which users consume is or is not relevant to filter bubble research. The study is based in interviews, which through two theoretical perspectives analyses user navigation and user experience in news consumption. The selected interviewees are considered to be digital natives to emphasise their familiarities with digital technologies (Prensky, 2001, p.1) and their
own partaking roles in their consumption. The first theoretical perspective, *uses and gratifications* is used to analyse the relationship between the interviewees’ *navigation* and filter bubbles. I am deliberately using the term navigation to emphasise their consumption as an interactive process were users are not simply exposed to information, but they within the process of consuming also interact with the media and the environment. Navigation in this paper thus refers to the *process* of consuming news.

The second theoretical perspective, *power*, is introduced to focus on how the interviewees *experience* their consumption. It draws from their experience and the results of the analysis of navigation to relate their consumption to notions of power that either conflict or amplify filter bubbles. Power is also used to discuss new ways of how filter bubbles can be problematized.

The restriction to news consumption rather than media in general is an adaption from previous research, were most argue that restricted access to nuanced news is the main potential concern with personalised consumption (Zuiderveen et al., 2016).

Following the analysis is a more general discussion that connects both theoretical perspectives and analytical conclusions in a discussion of the role of users in filter bubble research. To the best of my knowledge filter bubbles have not been studied qualitatively from a user perspective before. For these reasons, the discussion is devoted to how user perspectives may be used in future research. I also discuss the findings of this study and ways in which user navigation and experience contests or supports the approaches and findings of the prior research presented in the literature review.

### 1.1 Research Questions

The first research question will be discussed through to the first section of the analysis on how user navigation is related to filter bubbles. Due to the qualitative methodological approach the questions are not meant to provide well generalizable answers, but are all restricted to Swedish digital natives.

*In what ways do digital natives navigation contest the personalisation of theirs and others news consumption?*
The reasons to navigate in a certain way could be different for each of the interviewees. The second question revolves around finding the relationship between the interviewees’ experience of their news consumption and their navigation in it.

*In what ways do digital natives experience of their navigation contest the personalisation of theirs and others news consumption?*

The third question conceptualizes experience and navigation through theoretical frameworks of power. Through the analysis of experience and navigation, power is used to discuss motives behind user navigation as acts or claims of power and counter power towards their personalised consumption.

*How can the motives of digital natives navigation be contextualised as acts of counter power towards their personalised news consumption?*

### 2. Contextualisation

#### 2.1 What are Filter Bubbles?

Ever since Eli Pariser popularized the term *filter bubble* in his book *The filter bubble: what the Internet is hiding from you* and through his TED talk on the matter the concept has gained attention both in the media and in research. Pariser first caught tail of it through a blog post mentioning a Google search update in December 2009 that announced: “Personalized search for everyone” (2011, p.1). Google would according to Pariser use 57 different signals in order to specify the search for each individual through signals such as previous searches, geographical location or what type of browser that is being used (2011, p.2). From Google’s point of view these features would help direct users to more accurately find what they were looking for. A search on for example “Pizza restaurant” would more accurately show results of pizza restaurants close to the users location. These types of functions were labelled as *algorithms* that assist in producing the *personalised* web. New algorithms of similar purposes are being widely and continuously developed and amongst the major web services companies and introduced into what José van Dijck today calls *platform society* (2017). These personalising algorithms are to give a few examples some of the code behind layout of the individual social media feed, the recommended products when shopping on Amazon and the suggestions of what we may like based on our history on Youtube, Netflix, or Spotify.
“The future of the web is about personalization…now the web is about ‘me.’ It’s about weaving the web together in a way that is smart and personalized for the user” (Pariser, 2011, p.8) says Yahoo vice president Tapan Bhat. Pariser on the other hand, was highly concerned with the development that Bhat was portraying. Looking through a long-term perspective, he believed that personalisation would end up gatekeeping access to information. That algorithms will over time tunnel users into bubbles were they without comprehending so, would be restricted from accessing what the filters do not let through. “We’re never bored, we’re never annoyed. Our media is a perfect reflection of our interests and desires,” writes Pariser (2011, p.12).

2.2 From Hypothesis to Research

Similar concerns to that of filter bubbles has been introduced before Pariser. In 2007 the political scientist Cass Sunstein conceptualised echo chambers, asking what the democratic benefit of the Internet would be if citizens limits the information they receive (2007). He brought the problematisation that may have influenced Pariser, and that came to become the motivation through which most research on filter bubbles was argued: That personalisation could ultimately contest freedom of speech and freedom of press for the users relying on platforms that invokes personalised consumption on their users (2007). However, both Sunstein’s and Pariser’s concerns were both hypothetical and contested. Benkler amongst others have argued that social networks lead to a greater exposure of diversity that helps users break free from “insular consumption patterns” (Flaxman et al., 2016, p.299). Their hypothetical suggestions expressed a need for continuous research on the relationship between filtering algorithms and democracy, and for empirical support.

Research conducted on filter bubbles has, as the literature review will illustrate, mainly concerned two approaches to filter bubbles. The first has been by focusing on resolving what ways filter bubbles can come to contest forms of democracies in modern western societies. The second has been empirical research conducted through data measurements, looking for filter bubble effects by measuring degrees of bottlenecking of the information users consume over time. There has been no significant finding that either suggests or rejects the existence of filter bubbles to problematic degrees. The results have lead researchers on filter bubbles to stress the need for continuous research, especially since personalisation is still at an infant
stage. “If personalisation technology improves, and personalised news content becomes people’s main information source, problems for our democracy could indeed arise,” (2016, p.10) Zuiderveen et al. concludes in the lights of their study.

2.3 The User Perspective

Both the hypothetical problematisation from Pariser and later research has been conducted through perspectives focusing more on what thresholds or circumstances that personalisation can lead to. But there has been less attention given to how the thresholds invoked are experienced by the user. Most empirical studies have attempted to find the degrees of effects that personalising algorithms impose on society by measuring the extent to which the spread and nuanced consumption of information changes over time. To the best of my knowledge, there have been no prior studies of filter bubbles to this that focus on users experience of personalisation. Yet, outside of the realms of filter bubbles there is a lot of research on media consumption that suggests needs a for user perspectives on digital media. The user perspective I bring is based in that is that it is not only media that has effects on people, but also the other way around; that people has effects on media (Katz, 1959). This study draws on research on user perspectives in media and applies it to the area of personalised consumption. This methodology is different from many prior filter bubbles studies in not attempting to find filter bubble effects in the empirical data. Rather, it sets out to find means through which users navigation is needs consideration in order to more fruitfully problematize the effects personalised consumption can have.

2.3.1 Digital Natives

The arguments behind the term digital native suggests that not only do people have influence on media, but that different people have different influences and different ways of consuming it. Prensky uses the term digital native to describe that young people, who have been raised with technology at hand don’t use it in the same way as older generations do (2001, p.1-2). He argues that in western societies, todays average youth spent their entire lives constantly using and being surrounded by video cameras, smart phones, computers etc. and do as a result of that think and process information fundamentally differently (2001, p.1-2). Digital natives have thus developed a highly
sensitive understanding of digital media (Livingstone & Bovill, 1999, p.52) and grown more reliant on digital technologies as information sources, which make them an interesting selection for this study. To emphasise the differences Prensky calls older generations digital immigrants, who rather than learning to live with digital technologies, learns to adapt to them (2001, p.1-2). Mäntymäki and Riemer write, “in light of recent studies, digital natives should be viewed more as a descriptive category rather an exact group or generation that by their nature possesses better ICT [Information and Communication Technology] skills” (2014, p. 211). Contextualising my study through digital natives makes sense in that it is more likely to find more developed ways through which the interviewees navigate in their news consumption. Zuiderveen et al. reaches in their study on filter bubbles the conclusion that; most citizens today do not rely heavily enough on personalised technologies as substantial information sources (2016, p.10). Focusing on digital natives also provides a study group that is more likely relying on consuming media through services with personalising features, which makes them more relevant.

3. Literature Review

The literature review aims to give a broad coverage in terms of methodological approaches from recent years research. Recent, because of how fast personalisation has developed. Studies from the early 2000’s had rather predicted the development than found it (Thurman & Schifferes, 2012, p.775) and it was first in 2009 that Google openly introduced personalised results in search (Pariser, 2011, p.1). There are several other types of studies revolving around personalised consumption, but that does not problematize as filter bubbles, echo chambers or something similar, but instead for example focus on relationships with ad revenue. In order to keep a relevant focus this review restricts itself to studies of that problematise personalisation in digital consumption as some sort of gatekeeper that either limits, or distorts access to information, and that motivates this restriction as a contest to democratic values. This also creates a natural restriction to news related media content, due to similar restrictions made in previous research because of role news has in preserving democratic values (Zuiderveen et al., 2016, p.2).

While the literature review attempts o cover different approaches, it also illustrates the existing gap in research on filter bubbles from different methodological
perspectives. Personalised consumption has mostly been approached quantitatively and problematised through what restrictions the personalisation leads to. To the best of my knowledge, there are no qualitative studies focusing on users ways of experiencing and navigating due to personalisation. That gap is what has motivated the structure of this study.

The purpose of the review is to introduce the current state in research on filter bubbles, the methods and findings, and to establish underpinnings to compare with findings in this study.

3.1 Should we Worry About Filter Bubbles?
Zuiderveen et al. synthesise empirical research on personalisation to conclude that there at present “is little empirical evidence that warrants any worries about filter bubbles” (2016, p.1). Their evaluation of empirical material is distinguished between what they call self-selected personalisation and pre-selected personalisation. The first refers an active choice that leads to the encountering of likeminded opinions (2016, p.3). An example of this would be people who try to avoid opposing or challenging viewpoints. The second refers to a personalisation that the user either is unaware of, or unable to influence (2016, p.3).

Regarding pre-selected personalisation, Zuiderveen et al. writes that it is trivial to show that media is partisan and that in itself does not invoke problems from a normative point if view (2016, p.6). They argue that it is “insufficient to look at usage of isolated media outlets, because those who use a lot of partisan information also use an above-average amount of mainstream news” (2016, p.6). Furthermore, in Europe most people still get their news through traditional sources such as public television (2016, p.6). Regarding pre-selected, Zuiderveen et al. writes that it is debatable how far pre-selected personalisation has reached. Studies suggests that Google searches differentiates 11% due to personalisation, but there is a lack of adequate benchmarks to tell what these findings means. They argue for a need of more independent research on pre-selected personalisation in order to make progress (2016, p.7). Zuiderveen et al. conclude, “personalization on news sites is still at an infant stage […][and that] problems for our democracy could indeed arise” (2016, p.10).
There is a point of differentiating between pre-selected and self-selected personalisation, but what Zuiderveen et al. does not mention, is that it could be complicated to make this differentiation in research. Neither do they mention that self-selected personalisation transform into pre-selected over time.

3.2 Breaking the Filter Bubble: Democracy and Design

Bozdag & van den Hoven studies tools that have been designed to combat and disrupt filter bubbles through perspectives of different democratic models. Some these programs are designed to put control over the filters in the hands of the user to be able to increase their bubble; others automatically modify the users search results towards increased diversity (2015, p.250). They compare democratic models to the various tools, to find that “norms required by two democracy models dominate the tools that are developed to fight the filter bubbles, while norms of other models are completely missing in the tools” (2015, p.249). For this reason, they argue that several tools end up eroding one bubble, but in doing so creating another one. The “majority of the tools that we have studied to combat filter bubbles are designed with norms required by liberal or deliberative models of democracy in mind” (2015, p.263).

They argue for the need of a more precise benchmark of how filter bubbles contest democracy by comparing hypothetical effects to common takes on democracy in western societies: A liberal democrat is one who urges the importance of self-determination and each individual’s respectful right to make their own choices. From their perspective, filter bubbles are problematic in the sense that they restrict individual liberty, choice and awareness. Deliberative democracies strive to increase information quality, discover perspectives and disagreements, based on the reasoning that this should lead to better epistemic justifications and increased legitimacy. Within a society built around those beliefs, filter bubbles would arguably hurt civic discourses (2015, p.254). A contestatory democracy requires citizens to have key information on important issues and to be aware of possible oppression through reliable public channels so that the actions by the government can be brought to attention and thus contested. Filter bubbles in such a democracy risks limiting or twisting such key information (2015, p.254).
Bozdag & van den Hoven concludes that for filter bubble combating tools to function, the designers need exposure to many conceptions of democracy and to realise that there is not just one model (2015, p.263).

Pariser encouraged users to act irrationally in order to combat filter bubbles, but as Bozdag & van den Hoven argues, disrupting personalisation doesn’t necessarily expand ones bubble, but could just as well produce a different one. There would be no ways to measure to what extent these tools or irrational behaviour works.

### 3.3 Filter Bubbles, Echo Chambers, and Online News Consumption

Flaxman et al. presents in their paper a large empirical study based of 50,000 Americans web-browsing histories “who regularly read online news” (2016, p.298). They look at how the browsing has changed over three months in their data sample using machine-learning algorithms that identify and separate different types and sources of news (2016). The database is selected from 1,2 million users who upon installing the Bing toolbar agreed to share their data and is thus limited Bing users, who are generally believed to be older than the Internet population at large (2016, p.301).

Flaxman et al. present various findings such as: Individuals read publications that are ideologically similar, and, users who read partisan articles regularly are almost exclusively exposed to only to one side of the political spectrum, “many—indeed nearly all—users exist in so called echo chambers” (2016, p.317). The study also finds that a “vast majority of online news consumption mimicked traditional offline reading habits, with individuals directly visiting the home pages of their favorite, typically mainstream, news outlets” (2016, p.318).

The study is motivated through that “functioning democracies depend critically on voters who are exposed to and understand a variety of political views” (2016, p.299), but does not consider news sources exterior to those in the data sample in its findings and conclusions. This approach contradicts Zuiderveen et al.’s argument that most people still get their news through traditional sources such as public television (2016, p.6).

Flaxman et al. concludes that the limitations of their study forced an ideological slant of news outlets, but that their findings “provide an empirical starting
point for understanding how novel means of news consumption affect ideological polarization” (2016, p.318).

3.4 Measuring Online Social Bubbles

Nikolov et al.’s study is another quantitative empirical approach that measure “social bias at the collective level by mining a massive datasets of web clicks” (2015, p.1) to answer the question: “How large is the diversity of information sources to which we are exposed through interpersonal communication channels, such as social media and email, compared to a baseline of information seeking?” (2015, p.3) Two different sets of data are measured; amounts of link shares on Twitter and clicks in AOL search results, both collected of users from Indiana University between 2006 and 2010.

Nikolov et al. states that they do not consider past behaviours or specific interests of the information consumers in order to focus explicitly towards quantitative measurements of bias that do not depend on subjective assessments (2015, p.3).

The main finding of the study is that the diversity links pressed by users is significantly lower from the social media users than the targets reached from the search engine hits, concerning both news and general traffic (2015, p.8). Nikolov et al. conclude these findings as “quantitative support of online social bubbles” (2015, p.11). Although, Nikolov et al. highlights the limiting assumptions which these findings are based on; that a higher diversity of content exposure is coincided with a higher number of visited domains, that may not be paradigmatic to reality (2015, p.11). “The question of whether our reliance on technology for information access is fostering polarization and misinformation remains open” (2015, p.12).

In the same sense as Flaxman et al.’s study, Nikolov et al. does not consider means of consumption outside of their data in their arguments. Moreover, a dataset from a more recent period than 2006-2010 could provide very different results since the digital landscape has developed a lot since then.

3.5 The Future of Personalisation at News Websites

Thurman & Schifferes article focuses on national news websites in the United Kingdom and United States through survey studies on news content spread out over three and a half year. They find, to an “unprecedented level of detail” (2012, p.775)
the range of personalisation features offered by news websites, and “demonstrates how news organizations increasingly rely on software algorithms to predict readers’ content preferences” (2012, p.775). The growth rate of “distinct adaptive news categories” (2012, p.778) between the first and last survey measured 69 percent, or in numbers, went from 70 to 118. Distinct adaptive refers to sites that automatically adapt their content.

Thurman & Schifferes differentiates similarly to Zuiderveen et al. between active and passive personalisation, sites that allow users to create personal pages of content, like “my page” are active, but when it is imposed automatically, through algorithmic software it becomes passive. Thurman & Schifferes surveys finds that there is a “reluctance of readers to engage with complex forms of active personalization” (2012, p.785) and that it is the passive forms of personalisation have been growing faster.

The study is restricted to news websites, but also excludes “navigational interactivity because this is a universal feature of all news websites” (2012, p.776), meaning that it has different take on navigation then I do and does not consider relationships between user interactivity and the growth rate they find.

3.6 Summary of Literature Review

What have been found are mostly traces of some sort of effect or change imposed by personalisation, but unanimously for all studies, to modest degrees. Some of the articles present support for filter bubbles or social bubbles, but none of them argue their findings as problematic.

A common notion from the review is the need for adequate benchmarks for when personalised consumption becomes a filter bubble, which is suggesting that it is not possible to currently tell what empirical data that is needed to sufficiently support when filter bubbles are contesting democratic values. This leaves us in uncertainties of when findings should be motivated as supportive of filter bubbles or just as an effect of personalisation. It illustrates how undiscovered research on both filter bubbles and personalised consumption in general is and as Nikolov et al. and other scholars suggests: “The question of whether our reliance on technology for information access is fostering polarization and misinformation remains open” (2015, p.12).
Users ways of navigating has mostly been untouched, but in some aspects also contested, as Thurman & Schifferes considers navigational interactivity less important since it is universal for news websites (2012, p.776).

4. Theory

The analysis consists of two major sections, drawing on one core theory each. The methodological aim originates from two main concerns, the first, analysis of navigation sets of to use a U&G perspective on the news consumption of the interview participants. The second, analysis of experience uses power as a perspective to analyse motives behind the user navigation.

4.1 Motivation for theoretical perspective

4.1.1 Uses & Gratifications

Prior research on filter bubbles has mostly overlooked perspectives of users. Some has seen them as irrelevant, but mostly have focus rather been placed on the algorithms that fosters personalised consumption, limits users, and thus threatens democracy. I argue that because algorithms use factors like search phrases, geographical location, and the clicks from the user itself in order to personalise the content for that user (Pariser, 2011) their part in the equation deserves more attention in general.

The theoretical perspective of U&G is motivated mainly because of its prior absence. But also because U&G is has in media research been viewed as suitable for studies revolving around digital media consumption, as is motivated in the following theoretic chapter on U&G.

4.1.2 Power

The analysis of users experience is interconnected with, and builds on what findings from the U&G analysis of navigation.

Notions of power are visible in prior research, especially in the arguments through which filter bubbles are problematised. Although Pariser may not address it as power, his view is that personalisation has been embedded into consumption and thus and into the consumer’s lives (2011). Without actively discussing it, most studies on filter bubbles do view the personalised consumption similarly to models of power.
introduced through Manuel Castells. Filter bubbles are viewed as something that would lead towards the progressive elimination of alternative solutions or approaches towards the problem by establishing itself as standards. Standards that, if viewed as Castells model of network power holds important influential roles in determining what rules and structures that is to be accepted within the network (2009, p.43). My introduction of both navigation and experience is an attempt is to identify if users have abilities and if they attempt to conflict the personalisation of their consumption, which through frameworks of power can be understood acts of counter power.

The purpose of examining user experience in their consumption is to find motives for why they navigate in the way that they do.

If the aim of analysing navigation is to find ways in which users act to consume news, the aim of analysing experience is first to find out why and then to motivate these findings through frameworks of power, as acts of counter power. This is an attempt to rather than measuring certain amounts of filtering in a search for filter bubbles use the users experience as a problematisation. I will give an example in order to clarify my view: Users could consume news from the same source and interact with it in the same way, but for different reasons. One individual wants to pass time at work, she has no interest in the website or news in general and randomly clicks on links just to skim through the headline and view the images. Another individual actively attempts to disrupt his personalised consumption by, like Pariser suggested, behaving irrationally. These two individuals could look identical in empiric tracking data, although they might experience their own news climates vastly different from one another. So by asking these individuals about how they experience their consumption we may find interesting results that lead to important considerations.

Looking at experience through power is not an attempt to find filter bubbles. Rather, the experience of the user can be used to discuss acts within their navigation as counter power towards personalisation and in a more open manner, ways of how filter bubbles could be problematised.

Michel Foucault has throughout his work under a long period of time made substantial and continuous contributions to theories of power. This is the main reason for the introduction of power through his views, but also because of his views that; power calls for empirical studies of present situations through analytical work. He argues that it is through such analytics, that by identifying counter power one also
identifies a catalyst that can shine light on present power relations (2001, p.329). This view suits the format of my study well and that is why his work is used in the analysis. Foucault’s work is used to frame the navigation and experience of the interview participants as acts and notions of power and counter power in their personalised consumption.

Manuel Castells work modernises and conceptualizes perceptions of power for the digital world. He focuses mostly on the relationships power have within digital networks, which is why it becomes relevant for this study. The notions of power that are visible in previous research are from my point of view paradigmatic to power structures that Castells have identified. His work is thus useful for this study to interpret and differentiate how the participants experience power relations, and to compare that to prior research. His contributions are used to sharpen and narrow Foucault’s framework in the analysis to better fit the realms of this particular study.

4.2 Uses & Gratifications Theory

Uses & Gratifications, or U&G refers to an audience-focused approach in research on mass communication. In short, U&G “is a media use paradigm from mass communications research that guides the assessment of consumer motivations for media usage and access” (Stafford et al., 2004, p.259). It shifts the traditional focus of media effects from what media do to the people, to what people do to the media (Katz, 1959, p.2). The term uses alludes to the media that the user is in contact with, whilst the gratifications are the effects from the consumption of the media (Stafford et al., 2004). Originally U&G evolved through communication theory to identify profiles of audiences for radio and early television, (Stafford et al., 2004, p.266) but since then media consumption and technologies has changed drastically. The “emergence of computer-mediated communication has revived the significance of uses and gratifications,” argues Ruggiero (2000, p.3). Through the interactive and user-directed structures of the Internet, user-level approaches like U&G gains more relevance (Stafford et al., 2004, p.266).

In 1979 Blumler argued against critical views that U&G lacks theoretical depth. He meant that a grand theory may not be necessarily, but could rather disrupt the original purpose and through elitist or enlightened perspectives fail in understanding the audience perspectives (1979, p.12). And for the context of use in
digital media, this argument has gained a lot of support. Despite “perceived theoretical and methodological imperfections, I would argue that reproach of U&G must be tempered with encouragement” (Ruggiero, 2000, p.12). He means that the increasing complexity of media in terms of both uses and effects requires careful attendance to aspects of more than the media source itself, such as interactivity (2000, p.13). Mantymäki and Riemer argue that U&G “provides a framework for building the nomological net of the research” (2014, p.212). Since information consumption through web 2.0 services typically encourages audience involvement, uses and gratifications seems particularly suitable for examining Internet usage from consumers’ perspectives (Stafford et al., 2004). And although most research through U&G in the past focused on television and traditional media there is a lot of research emerging orienting around virtual worlds and social network services (Quan-Haase & Young 2010, p.351).

The notion of interactivity with the material in consumption arguably strengthens the theoretical perspective of U&G in my study. Interaction has been defined as “the degree to which participants in the communication process have control over, and can exchange roles in their mutual discourse” (Williams et al., 1988, p. 10). This study focuses on navigation, which I see as an umbrella term for both the interactive aspects and the material that is being interacted with. Navigation is the process that takes place during the consumption. That does not mean that I do not differentiate between interactivity and media exposure, but that the approach of the analysis is not focusing on this differentiation. Stafford et al. discusses my perception through different terminology. They call it the two general types of U&G; the first, Content Gratification being a media usage mainly motivated by the content carried by the medium itself whereas the second, Process Gratification, aligns with the experience of the usage process of the media (2004).

Quan-Haase & Young underlines another determination for U&G in digital media that, in contrast to traditional media, sometimes can become hard to make. The roles of producers and consumers are not always easy to determine in platform society, which can be entailed by referring to users as prosumers (2010, p.351). This term, like interactivity also emphasises abilities to influence and control distribution and production of content amongst the users. In research on filter bubbles however, the focus is on how material reaches users in their navigation process and not so much on how it is distributed or rewritten onwards from there.
This study does in a sense look to contest the approach of prior studies by drawing on U&G to find notions of influence that navigation has in personalised news consumption. As scholars argue through the digital natives perspective, there are reasons to believe that some individuals have very different methods in consuming news through digital platforms than others. Furthermore, digital natives are more likely to rely heavier on consumption through the digital networks, meaning that they are also more likely to find themselves in filter bubbles than those relying on traditional media.

4.3 Power Theory

4.3.1 Foucault

Foucault’s work on power is substantial and touches upon discussions of its meaning from several perspectives. This section briefly introduces some of his work that I think relates best for the qualitative methodology of this study.

Foucault writes in the subject and power that it never was his goal to analyse the phenomena of power or to elaborate the foundations of such an analysis, but instead to find modes by which human beings are made into subjects (2001, p.326). His work there has been devoted to study how human beings turn themselves into a subject through the domain of sexuality (2001, p.327). This study draws on Foucault’s notion of the subject that, through analytics of experience find if users experience subjectivity to their personalised news consumption.

Dreyfus & Rabinow writes that Foucault never intended for his work on power to be viewed as theory or an applicable view in order to generalize and understand all sorts of historic events (1982, p.184). Instead Foucault attempts to move towards analytics of power, while stating that: “If one tries to erect a theory of power one will always be obliged to view it as emerging at a given place and time and hence to deduce it, […] if power is in reality an open, more-or-less coordinated […] cluster of relations, then the only problem is to provide oneself with a grid of analysis which makes possible an analytic of relations of power” (1982, p.184).

In The subject and power, Foucault stresses the need for a new economy of power relations where the word economy is used in its theoretical and practical sense (2001, p.328). He suggests what he calls a more empirical approach with a closer relationship to present situations that embodies a close relationship between theory
and practice. By identifying counter power, or resistance against power as Foucault calls it one can use it as a “chemical catalyst so as to shed light on power relations, locate their position, find out their point of application and the methods used” (2001, p.329). He argues similarly in *The History of Sexuality*, writing that a move less towards theory, and more towards analytics of power and domains formed by power will lead towards a determination of the tools and instruments that makes analysis of power possible (1981). Foucault means that when bio-power, the theme he focuses on in *Meticulous Rituals of Power* - finds a place within a specific institution, it *invests* within it. He means that it’s the framework and state of the institution that makes up the structure that allows power to exist and to take off. Isolating this structure, institution or discourse by identifying it is what allows one to analyse the present power relations (1981, p.93-94). Foucault states that; “Power is not something that is acquired, seized, or shared, or something that one holds on to or allows to slip away” (1981, p.94).

Dreyfus & Rabinow writes that power relations according to Foucault are no commodities, positions or prizes, but that they are “the operation of the political rituals technologies throughout the social body” (1982, p.184) and that the function and structure of the political rituals makes them mobile and unequal rather than static. Foucault also argues that power is multidirectional, operating both from top-down and bottom-up and having a directly productive role (1981, p.93). “Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere” (1981, p.93). He states that the many and varying types of forced relationships taking place in society that comes into play within the mechanics of production, families, institutions etc. are better realised as “basis for a wide-ranging effects of cleavage that run through the social body as a whole” (1981, p.94). He means that power is not in a position of exteriority to other types of relationships within the discourse.

Consumers, personalised algorithms and publishers all are located inside the same operations of discipline according to Foucault. Within the same structural architecture and the same set of rules. He does not suggest that the structure is free of domination but acknowledges that different positions are held by the actors and those are used for advantages to their own ends. What he suggests is that all of these actors and groups within the network are involved in power relations, no matter how unequal or structured, that they did or do not control. In order to analyse these relations, Foucault stresses that one needs to trace down the relations of power to their
actual material functioning. If not we can find ourselves with the illusion that only those on the top of the pyramid apply power in order to control those at the bottom. The point he wants to make, according to Dreyfus & Rabinow is again not that class domination does not exist, nor that the top does not oppress the bottom, but that there is “a process of self-formation or autocolonization involved” (1982, p.186).

Foucault introduced the analogy of the panopticon that to me functions well as a visual example of how power relations may operate. The panopticon is an architectural structure in a building that allows one body, in Foucault’s analogy, a guard to overview all other bodies or inmates inside the building. In this building, the inmates in on the other hand are not able to see one another or the guard. They see nothing but their own cells (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1982, p.188-189). This analogy describes a relationship were inmates experience surveillance even if the guard is not present, as they would not know if he was. This analogy has since been re-popularized for discussing surveillance in the digital world. Vaidhyanathan introduces the term cryptopticon in his discussions to differentiate between a panopticon and functions of modern and digital surveillance (Walker, 2017). The main difference he says is that we still do not understand or are able to identify much of the occurring surveillance. We do not know about all cameras that monitor us, or to what extents algorithms keep track of us. If we were meant to understand the purpose of the cryptopticon would be more like that of a panopticon and prison inmates, to enforce a certain type of behaviour (Walker, 2017). The cryptopticon is an example of how one can discuss effects of personalising algorithms not only through content restriction, but for example as fear of personal exposure and lack of understanding in ones consumption. Looking at filter bubbles through perspectives like the cryptopticon allows us to problematize them in new ways. We could use it to analyse effects on the consumers as something more than restrictive. I think that the value of such additional perspectives may both better resemble reality and better lead towards answers of the big questions posed in filter bubble research, of whether or not filter bubbles are a problem for society and its citizens.

The work of Foucault extends substantially longer than what this chapter covers. What has been introduced here are the aspects considered most critical to commence analytical work on power in personalised consumption from the user perspective. Notably there are also other power relationships within personalised
consumption I will not focus on, revolving around for example advertisement and sales of personal data.

4.3.2 Castells
This section on focuses explicitly on Manuel Castells perceptions of power in networks in order to supplement what has been introduced through Foucault. Castells work serves to contextualise theories of power in a framework that is suitable for the context of this study.

Castells introduces what he calls four types of different distinct forms of power that revolves around digital networks. The point of making this divide is to be able to link findings from the interviewees’ navigations to the structures surrounding their consumption. These theoretical underpinnings are used to interpret their experience in relation to the structures of power.

To understand Castells work on power, I first briefly introduce his definition of digital networks. He means that a network consists of interconnected nodes. Nodes are components within a network that to various degrees of relevance interact with other nodes within the network (2009, p.19). Nodes can be algorithmic sets of codes, humans, institutions or anything else. What determines their relevance in the network is their absorption and distribution of information and efficiency in helping the network achieving its goals, rather than the specific features of the node (2009, p.20).

Within such network structures, Castells identifies four types of operating powers: Networking power – refers to power held by actors and organisations involved in the networks “that constitute the core of the global network society over human collectives or individuals who are not included in these global networks” (2009, p.42). Castells means that this form of power operates through inclusion or exclusion of the network. He states that the cost of exclusion from the network grows larger more rapidly than the benefit of inclusion does since the values of being in a network increases exponentially in relation to the size of the network (2009, p.43).

Network power – is to be understood as the conceptualisation of theorising globalisation from the perspective of network analysis (2009, p.43). Castells refers to the work of Grewal, who states that the notion of network power comes down firstly to that coordinating standards become more valuable when a used by a bigger number of people. Secondly that this would lead towards the progression of elimination of alternative solutions or approaches towards the same problem by outnumbering and
establishing itself as standards. These standards, or protocols as Castells calls them, holds important influential roles in determining what rules and structures that are to be accepted within the network (2009, p.43). Meaning that it is not exclusion as in networking power that is exercised, but rules for being granted inclusion (2009, p.43).

*Networked power* – “Relational capacity to impose an actor’s will over another actor’s will on the basis of the structural capacity of domination” (2009, p.44). Castells simplifies it to; the workings of each dominant network that defines own power relationships depending on its programmed goals. Such an approach renders the source of power as an isolated single entity, unaffected by surrounding forces (2009, p.44) as well as its own. Castells goes on to discuss what aspects and parts of society that holds power, without thoroughly developing his definition of networked power, and concluding that “maybe the question of power, as traditionally formulated, does not make sense in the network society […] there are power relationships at work, albeit in new forms and with new kinds of actors” (2009, p.45).

*Network-making power* – is according to Castells the most crucial form of power (2009, p.45). For this structure, he introduces the terms *programmers* and *switchers*. Programmers referring to those or that holding the ability to create or change and recreate networks and the goals and attributions assigned to them. Switchers refers to that who holds the ability to connect and enable cooperation between networks by combining resources and sharing common goals, as well as fending off competitive networks through strategic cooperation (2009, p.45). Castells notes that programmers and switchers are social actors even if they may not operate according to the paradigm of one particular group or individual, but that they in reality rather operate between various social actors simultaneously (2009, p.45).

Were Foucault’s work will be used to identify notions of power and counter power through the interviews, Castells work on different types of power will be used to contextualise that identified power to its surroundings to better understand the power relationships. As I already mentioned, my analysis does not seek to identify all of the power structures in personalised consumption, but focus on the perspective of users and prior research.
5. Method

The figure illustrates the structure for the analysis, and the theoretical perspectives used. The analysis of navigation draws on the empirical data from the interviews through a U&G framework. The analysis of experience builds on those findings to analyse user experience through additional empirical data and power theories. Lastly, the findings are discussed in a bigger context and concluded.

The first main motivation for the methodology of this study originates from the scarcity of qualitative research on filter bubbles in general. Moreover, that personalising algorithms use inputs from the user to calculate what material that should be provided to the user. And it is my view that qualitative user perspectives to be particularly relevant in studies on filter bubbles because of that. The second motivation is that new ways of understanding and problematizing personalised consumption as filter bubbles may be realised if their surrounding actors are studied further, and users is one of them. In the current state, filter bubbles are, in a simplified sense viewed as something enforced onto the user and that becomes problematic when it reaches a point were users are being shut out of important information such as independent and nuanced news. There has in prior research been an outspoken need for adequate benchmarks to better make sense of empirical findings. I believe that new ways of understanding how to set such benchmarks can be found through additional perspectives. Meaning that this study sets out not only to bring a focus through users to filter bubble research, but also to find other ways in how personalised consumption is problematised as a filter bubble.
5.1 Methodological Approach

I have chosen to conduct interview studies to examine both experience and navigation. Especially for navigation, using a think-aloud approach rather than interviews was at first very appealing. It would however not render an accurate view of all the news the participants consume unless I could follow them throughout their entire day. Interviews allow me to capture both the users of perception of their experience and ways of navigating when consuming news which functions well for both questions and the size of this study.

The interview questions are written to let the participants reflect generally regarding their own news consumption. They do not have a focus towards filters or personalised content. This is because I, as Zuiderveen et al. argue need to consider how personalised consumption is balanced by other media like traditional newspapers or television to problematise it (2016). Furthermore, I believe that it will allow the participants to more openly reflect on their experience if I do not rewrite their view of what news consumption is through too specific interview questions. I rather gather an excess of data through which I can be more selective.

The interviewees are encouraged to consider all forms of news sources in their thought process; at the start of the interviews I explain that all outlets they consume news through that they consider news worthy should be included. I exemplify with Snapchat, Facebook and Twitch.tv as possible news aggregators that they may not have thought of.

16 interviews were conducted, to get a wide enough data sample for the scale of the study, with each interview consisting of 31 questions. The interview questions are spread out to cover navigation and experience. The questions regarding navigation are either asking how often and under what circumstances news are consumed. Or they ask the interviewee to describe a process, for example; how do you choose when you search, what do you look at? What links do you press? The questions regarding experience revolve around their motives for their navigation; why do you consume news? Why those sources? Do you experience censorship? It also revolves around their experience of the news landscape in general. Who controls your consumption? What is overrepresented in news? And so on.

After the interviews I go over and transcribe the data in order to compare and identify similarities and differences between the interview participants. The parts
from the interviews that are chosen for the analysis are those that best contribute to the research questions, regarding navigation and experience and that provide results were the participants seem to think mostly unanimous or mostly individually.

Following Kvale & Brinkmann, I recognize that part of my analysis takes place during the interview (2014). The interviews set of from the perspective they call the constructionist notion that perceives the interviewee as being produced locally within and through paradigms of the practice of the interview (2014, p.188). That means that I did not perceive of the interviewees through positivistic or romantic views as sources of data to be extracted by asking the right set of questions. The interviewees were through my perspective seen as fellow travellers that together with me, the interviewer produced knowledge through our conversation (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014, p.188). Epistemologically this study follows a constructivist perspective were I recognize my own presence and influence that permeates the interviews and all parts of the study. Collins writes that constructionism “recognises the existence of a reciprocal and independent relationship between objects in the world and social consciousness” (2010, p.40). The study does furthermore take a deductive format through the hypothesis of testing the digital native perspective on the conclusions made in previous filter bubble research through empirical findings (2010, p.40).

This interview approach is also motivated by the beneficiaries of being able to use my own experience of digital news consumption by viewing myself as a digital native and using that as an advantage. On the other hand, the lack of diversity provided in my empirical format suggests that applicable generalizations of the results in this study are ill advised. These analytical aspects reflect the trajectory of the entirety of the study, as it originates from the urge for nuance in methodological approaches to filter bubbles rather than additional data. The focus of the study is uppermost to identify relationships between users navigations and experiences with personalising filters that can contest filter bubbles, not to make measurements of the effects filters impose on the users consumption in my empirical data.
5.2 Ethical Considerations

Generally for interview studies the necessary ethical considerations reflects the extent to which the interviewee is in need of exposing oneself both for the interviewer during the session and the future work based on their exposure. Meaning that questions of moral and ethics concern both the context and medium of the interview, as well as the researchers ambitions (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014, p.97). The interviews are set up to follow a few procedures that Kvale & Brinkmann means are important considerations to lay ground for a hospitable interview climate (2014, p.99-100):

All participants are informed of their individual confidentially and the purpose and orientation of the interview when originally contacted. They are encouraged to only participate if the interest is mutual.

Each interview was introduced through a brief orientation of the topic and purpose of the interview as well as ensuring them anonymity and the right to discard questions or abort the interview at any point (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014, p.170-182). Participants are aware of their anonymity and that they might be cited anonymously. Citations are translated and summarised to make better sense in writing, but I attempt to accurately represent the meaning of the statement from the original phrasings.

Furthermore, the interviews took place either in the participants own home or in study rooms, always in a private environment between the interviewee and me. Lastly, the interviewees were encouraged to add any statements before ending the recording and later to ask questions regarding the session and the study at large. The original interview questions can be found under the last chapter: Appendences.

During the analysis I strive not to criticise or judge the statements of the interviewees, but instead to interpret their perceptions. Notably and naturally participants demonstrate different consumption and for the sake of the analysis these are compared to one another, but not to rank or judge the individuals.

5.3 The Interviewees

All interviewees are living within close perimeters to the Malmö region, and all but two has been doing so doing so throughout most of their lives. They are all friends and acquaintances of mine, most of which I’m in contact with and some that I know more briefly. Some of the participants also know each other. There is to my
knowledge a huge politically left leaning majority amongst the participants, possibly unanimously. Below follows brief descriptions of each interviewee, note that the names used are not their actual names.

Dale is a Civil engineer student extremely active in his social media usage, through which he is very active in political debate. He is constantly updating himself and seems to feel a strong need to constantly to stay connected.

Laura, used to study and work with photography, but now is studying to become a nurse. She is a social person that seemingly consumes news mostly as food for thought in social situations.

Audrey is also very socially active and interested in societal concerns. She is currently studying in Malmö and seems to similarly to Laura relate her consumption to social scenarios.

Donna spends a lot of her time pursuing her own hobbies; she is particularly interested in baking and programming and not very active or outspoken in societal debates, although seemingly diligent with staying updated.

Leland’s father works for the local newspaper and he has notably transferred some of that interest and knowledge to his son. Leland himself studies creative writing and is notably very interested in how local news build and affect his surroundings.

Ben works with customer relations for an electrical company. He comes off as less interested in politics than most other participants, yet he is very active in his news consumption, perhaps the most frequent consumer. He is different from others with seeing the format and accessibility as the most important factor for his choice of sources.

Harry stands out as the only participant not generally interested in consuming news or keeping updated in the same sense. He seems to experience such consumption as destructive or depressing. He is studying to become a psychologist.

Shelly is less active and interested both her own presence on social media and in using it in general. She gets most of her news through television or by reading Metro and monitors on the train. She is studying to become a guidance officer.

Norma works extensively through social media services and is well oriented with producing content for SNS. She has a lot of critical thoughts regarding the news in general, perhaps because of her background in media and communications.
Albert works as a postman and has a long background as a musician. He expresses dissatisfaction with the disparity in news and its depiction of a chaotic society, as well as the absence of cultural coverage. He still likes to stay updated.

Lucy recently moved to Malmö to study from a much smaller community. She says she is very anxious because of the increase in crimes and violence in her surroundings and that following the news here works as a catalyst for her anxiety. Yet she cannot help herself from doing so.

Josie is a social worker and has seemingly very personal and emotional connections to her consumption. She is an active follower of social media based forums for Swedish Africans and political podcasts.

Pete’s studies political science and displays some dissatisfaction with the way leftist politicians and media indoctrinates the climate. He seems dedicated to finding news sources that are less strained, but still very restrictive towards their credibility.

Lawrence is a doctor that almost exclusively listens to podcasts and radio, and like Pete, expresses a will off finding sources that provides objective views.

Hank is the only parent in the selection. He says that he gets addicted to following certain political developments as if they were TV shows and is more interested in American politics than Swedish.

James works as a video editor and fuses a lot of his consumption into his waiting times at work. Originating from northern Sweden, he keeps track of two local newspapers as well as the national news. He has technological interest and seems very knowledgeable of the functions behind the digital platforms he uses.

5.4 Discussion of Validity

5.4.1 Validity of Empirical Data
The selection of interviewees is motivated through their contextualisation as digital natives. Prensky amongst others argue that digital natives function differently from older generations in technological usage and understanding through their consuming experience (2001, p.1-2). Furthermore, the opted age span of 24-30 on the participants draws on Casero-Ripollés study of news consumption amongst young people that found clear differences in consumption frequency for different ages. In his study only ten percent of 16-17 year olds consume news daily, whereas those who are 23 to 30 years old reaches 42 percent (2012). My selection of participants draws on these
views to find participants who are young enough to be digital natives, but old enough to frequently consume news. A different span of age or cultural background is likely to provide different data. I have furthermore not addressed concerns like ideology or class in the selection of participants, but set merely set the restrictions to Swedish news consuming digital natives.

5.4.2 Validity of Theoretical Perspective and Analysis
The theoretical perspectives have been chosen to bring nuance into research on filter bubbles. U&G approaches have been criticised for their lack of theoretical depth and narrow focus (Ruggiero, 2000, p.12). Qualitative empiricism from U&G is by some considered too individualistic and makes it difficult to generalize beyond the data to consider societal implications (2000, p.12). Furthermore the narrow focus could make studies compartmentalized to extents were they are hard to involve and compare to other contributions to the same topic (2000, p.12). This study does thus not attempt to draw widely generalizable conclusions, but recognizes its narrow focus. Furthermore, the purpose is not to find to what extent the interview participants are trapped in filter bubbles, but to analyse how their ways of navigating coincides with filter bubbles. The purpose the U&G framework is essentially to identify user influence that could speak for future methodological needs, rather than proving or disproving filter bubbles existence.

My introduction of both navigation and experience is an attempt is to identify if users have abilities to, and if they attempt to contest the personalisation of their consumption. Foucault’s perceptions of power are used in the analysis of such attempts. Castells work helps me frame these perceptions in a digital, networked structure. My focus lies on user experience and how it can be realised as acts of power. I do not attempt to identify at a larger scale, power structures that surrounds personalised consumption. Neither do the research questions attempt to resolve the extents of how successful the interview participants are in their conflicting acts, but merely to identify them.

5.4.3 Validity of Findings
Since this study introduces new perspectives on the topic of filter bubbles, findings rather represent needs for continuous studies than progress in the field. The research question of how navigation influences personalisation in news consumption is
answered through a few selected findings in the interview material. It does not cover every way in which users navigate, but provide indicators of ways that I think can be considered. The same goes for user experience. Experience in itself is hard to concretise and the acts of power that I identify comes down to my judgement of what the Interviewees express.

6. Analysis

The analysis is sectioned first after the two main thematic divisions, navigation and experience. Within these divisions they are sectioned thematically after what findings I have made during the interviews and when listening through and transcribing the material. The takeout’s presented are bits that I find most relevant and interesting to highlight in relation navigation and experience. They can be representative of both individuality and collectiveness amongst the participants.

6.1 Navigation

The sources, which users choose to consume news through, seem to originate from social values that have partially carried over through traditional media and social norms, but also continuously built throughout the digital consumption.

*What are your main sources?*

*Ben:* Mainly? I could go on and on. But I am constantly on Aftonbladet and Sydsvenskan, even if Aftonbladet isn’t that good.

[…]

*Why do you go to the sources you do?*

*Ben:* They are easily accessible and handy. I can quickly scroll through what I want. In comparison to a TV, there I cannot choose and paper formats are ungainly.

I actually don’t like Aftonbladet to be honest; I am really bothered by them. But I think it has the best layout, its very accessible. But it doesn’t mean that I like it, if a better one arrives I would easily choose that instead.

Sydsvenskan that Ben and a lot of participants refer to is the biggest local newspaper for the region. Aftonbladet is one of Sweden’s biggest newspapers with a big digital focus.

Ben felt seemingly exposed to my judgement when he answered these questions, as if he knew that I as a researcher would deem newspapers like Aftonbladet unreliable. For him what Stafford et al. calls the process gratification
surpasses the content gratification (2004) in the sense that the interface and layout of one newspaper makes Ben prefer it over other sources with, according to him better content. Ben was one of the few participants to reason this way; most seemed focused on content gratification. He tells me that he prefers to consume news through his phone and through applications that allows him to scroll. However, in other questions I find out that there is much more depth to his navigation than easy and quick access.

Ben: I hate when you go to Aftonbladet and they try to attract with headlines [clickbait] and by principle I refuse to click those, apart from that I read pretty much everything.

From this statement we find that Ben seems to consider his own influence in his navigation and restrict himself from certain news, and he is not alone amongst the interview participants to think in such ways.

How are you exposed to news that you have not actively or purposefully opted to consume?
James: On Facebook there is a lot of that. I guess it would that I can think of for now.
Is that content different in any way from the news that you choose to consume?
Yes. It is, really. If I look at a news site or on TV it’s general news, but on Facebook the people I am friend with decides what I get to see there, that or Facebook itself, through people liking, reacting and sharing.
- Are there any particular differences in terms of quality, subjects or length that you can identify?
Yes. It’s a lot of news that comes from sites that I don’t know what it is, a lot of clickbait things. Then I think actively that I shouldn’t press them, because I hate that sort of things. But, otherwise it’s the type of questions that my friends or people that I known a long time ago think are important. It’s less world news about starvation in Somalia and more on how Löfven [Swedish prime minister] has failed, and a lot about Trump. Also a lot of feminism, people I am friends with are engaged in that stuff.

There are several really interesting aspects with James statements. Just as many but not all interviewees, he doesn’t seem to view Facebook as a platform for news consumption, but treats it as a sort of by-product that comes with the service. Like Ben, he actively resists following the links he calls clickbait, as he seems aware that it would have influence on his Facebook feed. On the other hand, other participants like Donna says that she uses Facebook to get her daily news update and has pressed follow on all the newspapers she wants to read in order to automatically get their updates when she scrolls through Facebook. Both Donna’s and James’ examples
illustrates how they through their interactions or refusal of interactions interferes with their Facebook feeds outcomes. These are examples of very different, in a sense opposing types of interactions embedded into their navigation when they are consuming news. Their different ways of reasoning is a good example to showcase one of the problems that may occur if consumption through Social Network Services, or SNS such as Facebook is problematized by measuring clicks to determine certain types of exposure. James is essentially saying that he does not want to give clickbait news providers the revenue of his clicks or more room in his feed, whilst Donna attempts to provide the personalising algorithms with enough information of what she likes to shape her feed accordingly.

Similarly to Donna, Pete has found another type of platform that helps him select his news sources. He is using Omni, a Swedish application and webpage that writes out only a brief summarizing headline and paragraph and then provides a list of links to other articles on the same topic. He says he uses it because a lot of newspapers have paywalls these days, but Omni is free and Pete says that he likes it because it provides him with a broad selection of articles that he can choose. Norma on the other hand decided to subscribe with a premium account to the local newspaper, Sydsvenskan. Through this account she is updated with headlines through push notifications every time she looks at her phone. She thinks it is an easy and effective format to combine with the news she watches on television before work or in the evening.

As we can see all of these five participants have built up very individual and different ways of navigating when they are consuming their news. To problematize their news intake as filtered to the extents of a bubble, all of the ways in which they consume should be taken into consideration. If Norma was part of a the big data study like those from Flaxman et al. or Nikolov et al. presented in the literature review, we would not have been able consider her television and phone applications as supplements to her internet searches. Furthermore, perhaps more relevant to answer the question of how navigation conflicts personalisation in news consumption, is how much the interviewees differentiate from one another in their relationship with personalised content. Calling on U&G perspectives, we can identify that the interviewees, “does something to the media” (Katz, 1959, p.2) by not clicking it. Both Ben and James speak of clickbait, a term that according to Wikipedia refers to “web content that is aimed at generating online advertising revenue” (2017). The usage of
this term alone suggests some understanding of their ability to changes outcomes due to their interactions. But, just as it is important to consider interactions or refusal of such, it is to consider those who do not to such extents attempt to influence their consumption. Albert for example, seems aware and not fully satisfied with why the state of his consumption is what it is. But does not seem to have the same intentions of influencing it as James, Donna or Ben.

*What or who decides what types of news that you consume?*
*Albert: It’s the government or the news channels. What did you call it?*
*News sources?*
*Albert: Yeah sources. I don’t have any power over what they choose, as well as those who share news on Facebook. I for example have an old teacher from high school who shares Occupy Democrats articles all the time. So I hear everything they write about Trump’s actions. And it feels extremely angled. A lot of that is surely totally accurate, but it’s still something I have not selected. It just becomes that way.*

In this example with Albert as well as for most interviewees, ways in which they navigate when they consume news are built around their lives. Those who commute use their phones or free newspapers and those working in office environments checks news with high continuity during work. Contexts like these may play important roles in the interviewee’s ways of navigating when consuming news, and should be considered as reasons to why the interviewee’s consume news so differently. Albert does not necessarily *care less* than James. He does for example also watch news on television, and is a less frequent Facebook user. Some participants might have grown more dependent on personalisation to fit consumption into their lives, and that should not be bluntly assumed as paradigmatic to them being less critical or more persuaded by personalisation. Thus, conflicting navigations towards personalisation do not only come from a will, absence of will, or lack of understanding from the interviewees end. Ben’s example supports this my statement, he is choosing the newspaper that he thinks has the best accessibility over that which has the best content and has found a way to navigate that gives him quick access to news. But the price he has accepted to pay for that accessibility is to become more selective and restricted with his clicking.

To conclude the section, I want to highlight that the examples I have brought up so far may have indicated that users are prudent with their interactions during their navigation. But as Laura’s following statement indicates there are many interactions that appear as automated.
How do you Google more specifically, step by step?

Laura: I just click around to different pages, and then it depends on if the page looks serious or not, but I don’t think I have a choice like that. Or I guess I take the first in the list, because that is what’s presented to me.

The process of interactions is to many participants hard to describe and reminisce over. Some responses made me feel as if I had asked them how they use their fork when they eat. The way James and Ben describes their restrictive interactions make it sounds as if they put more thought into them than they do. Since they are digital natives we should not interpret all interactions as thoughtful. Many are likely to be more or less automated in their muscle memory.

The digital natives in this interview navigate according to their abilities, towards fulfilling their expectations of news consumption. Thus, the ways of which digital natives navigations influence the personalisation of their content seems highly individual. For all of the interviewees there seems to be mostly reluctance or unawareness connected to the view they have on their interactions.

6.1.1 Conclusion of Navigation Analysis

In what ways do digital natives navigation contest the personalisation of theirs and others news consumption?

The interview participants have although similar in sources, through which they consume, developed highly individual ways of navigating when attending to these sources. It does not only come down to interactions, but also different technologies and platforms through which the sources are reached. A few participants seem critical towards personalisation, or of supporting clickbait and thus ignore certain links. Others use applications and services explicitly built on personalisation such as Omni in order to diversify their news sources on the same topic. In general, most participants seem to carry a big variety of both news sources and means to reach them. This means that there is no specific overarching relationship to identify amongst the participants but rather that navigation is motivated through each of their individual gratifications, their surrounding lives and their literacy.

From the perspective of these findings it would be very hard to motivate highly personalised news consumption as problematic in itself and it would also require more than browser history data to trace their diversities of sources. This suggests that, when it comes to these participants, it would be hard to motivate
notions of filter bubbles in ways of which they have been approached in prior research.

6.2 Experience

Building on the ways of which the participants navigate in their consumption, this section first adds the notion of the participant’s experiences, then discuss experience and navigation through frameworks of power.

Most participant’s incorporated common values and norms into their consumption. Their criticism of certain newspapers and aggregators seemed permeated with how they should be deemed better or worse through social norms, rather than with what they actually thought. Similarly, the motives behind consumption stems for many from the urge to keep updated in order to participate in discussions in the civic discourse.

Why do you (not) consume news?
Laura: I want to know what’s going on in the world. The news we get is restricted. Then it’s a social matter as well, you want to stay updated and to be able to discuss recent events with people. It becomes a social matter, in order to have a proper conversation with someone.

Most interviewees seem build their critical view through these social norms. Ben, who in the first section of the analysis told us that his main news source is Aftonbladet even though he does not think of it as a good newspaper. This indicates that the interviewees’ experience does not only originate through their own navigations but from outer factors as well, and that is important to consider when examining the relationship between experience and navigation. The social values permeate not only news sources, but are visible in views on social media platforms and news aggregators as well.

When asked about the general experience of news consumption, many seem to feel as restricted to some degrees, and to have many conceptions of how different news sources angle information.

Do you, or have you ever experienced a feeling of censorship within your news consumption?
Hank: Yeah, tons of it.
Tell me.
There are a lot of newspapers that angle the news towards what they wish to turn it into. All the major ones do this as well. Perhaps by leaving things out that are important. If they do that, then in some way it becomes that they censor the truth in a way.

Audrey: Yeah of course, especially with crimes and so on. The news never immediately publishes what has happened, but if I go on Flashback I instantly find all the information.

There is a high expectancy of not only truthful reporting without skewing the perspectives, but also of a broad and rapid coverage amongst the participants. Newspapers today have to compete for attention and in scenarios like the one Audrey’s suggests they can’t really win due to press ethics and laws. Flashback is Swedish forum that has high coverage of crimes occurring in the country, amongst other things. It is common that individuals and motives are exposed immediately in the event of larger crimes. The diversity in sources that Hank and Audrey seem to use allows them to be critical by contrasting one news outlet in relation to another.

6.2.1 Conclusion of Experience Analysis
In what ways do digital natives experience of their navigation contest the personalisation of theirs and others news consumption?

We can use the cryptopticon as an analogy to view the relationship between experience and navigation. Hank, just as Ben and James express unwillingness to support certain articles and also avoids clicking them.

Hank: I try to be wary to not click on things that I’m curious to read but that I feel are unnecessary to know. I don’t want to give them that click and I feel that its more important that other things show up instead.

Notably Vaidhyanathan’s view of the cryptopticon refers to surveillance, something that not everyone would classify registration of clicks as. Nonetheless we find that Hank, Ben and James, three individuals that have a bigger interest in technology than the other interviewees’, experience the outcome of their navigation similarly. They have all altered their interactions because of their influences, yet they do not comprehend to what extents these choices matter. They, like Vaidhyanathan describes it, cannot keep track of the extents through which algorithms or cameras monitor
them (Walker, 2017). Similar uncertainties are also true for those who do depend on personalisation, like Donna’s when reads news through Facebook.

Through this notion, one could argue the users experience as another type of benchmark for what a filter bubbles are. In the previous analysis I found individual and complex ways through which the interviewees’ navigations operates. That makes it is hard to determine extents through which they can be considered to be living in filter bubbles. But if personalised consumption instead is problematized through the perception of the users experience we could have an easier time finding the adequate benchmarks that Zuiderveen et al. means are necessary to make sense of empirical findings (2016, p.7). Personalised consumption could be problematised to degrees of which the consumer creates his own restrictions, or other means that are results of dissatisfaction with the digital news landscape. Such dissatisfaction could occur in many ways, anxiety towards surveillance, or dissatisfaction with content provided trough personalisation. From the U&G perspective, it is not sufficient for the diverse news to reach the consumer. Thus, looking at the users experience we also problematize personalised consumption through gratification. If the personalisation of ones news consumption would result in poor reliability or dissatisfaction, it could be problematised as more than restrictive gateway keepers.

Are there any specific news outlets that you have particularly strong or weak reliability with?
Lucy: Weak: Expressen and Aftonbladet, because they bring up a lot of garbage. No mostly because I heard that they do that. They write a lot to get reactions rather than things being 100% true.

To conclude, experiences seem to stem quite strongly through social values carried by the interview participants. Critical views are nested into their navigation and are seemingly very influential factors, especially in their viewpoints of certain news sources and social media platforms as news aggregators. This is one of the few aspects found were most interview participants seem to think similarly. The analogy of the cryptopticon and using it to find benchmarks for filter bubbles should be seen as a suggestion from an identified perspective. None of the users experiences suggests that they concretely are experiencing a problematic consumption.
6.2.2 The Framework of Power

How can the motives of digital natives navigation be contextualised as acts of counter power towards their personalised news consumption?

By using frameworks of power to understand the motives by which users navigate as they do, I will attempt to discuss their consumptions relationship to personalisation as power relations. By identifying motives as acts in relation to power, I attempt to theorise the relevance of viewing the user as something more than that which personalisation is invoked on. As mentioned in the theory section, filter bubbles have by Pariser, and generally also in other research, been realised in structural ways similar to what Castells calls network power. Through the algorithmic structures, standards become established that influences the consumers’ news exposure. Users who find themselves consuming within these structures will also need to follow these standards to be able to keep consuming (Castells, 2009, p.43). When the standards would reach a restrictive degree that threatens democracy, we would according to the common viewpoint have filter bubbles.

Audrey, who still mainly consumes her news through mainstream news outlets such as Sydsvenskan or Dagens Nyheter, does not seem to find herself in a state of need to follow procedures of established news sources. She combines what she reads there with what she finds on Flashback.

Why do you follow Flashback? What does it give you that mainstream media does not?
Audrey: Because a newspaper is very restricted by the executives or someone, and they can control the information whilst Flashback is personal and people write unfiltered. That gives a broader perception.

Her statement does not suggest that she is not dependent on her main news sources. If they were to disappear she could not replace them with Flashback, but she has nonetheless started using Flashback to circumvent the ethical restrictions in mainstream news. From this point of view, Audrey has not become a subject to network power since she does not follow the standards imposed by personalisation. She has found a way to combine a multitude of sources to bypass them. Her ways of attending to these different news platforms is one way to theorise a relationship were Audrey have not become a subject to her personalised news consumption, or if we view filter bubbles as my interpretation of Pariser’s, to network power. In order to support that statement I need to add that Flashback is not a personalised platform, but
What is relevant here is not the extent to which Audrey is a subject of power but that this example demonstrates how power can help us make benchmarks to determine filter bubbles.

What more I found interesting in other participants experiences was that those individuals who are generally more politically engaged and interested in following the news were the ones that expressed a more subjective position in relation to their consumption than the others.

What factors are most important in order for you to experience news as reliable and trustworthy?

Norma: I don’t think you can trust news. I think, that all, perhaps not public service as much, but all other news medias that people make money off of, their news are published for a reason. I do think most journalists are honest people, but there is a reason to why some things are published, and why some things are not.

Concerns like these that Norma express could also be identified as motives for counter power, just like Hank’s refusal to click certain links could be identified as the action of counter power towards personalisation. But for Norma and maybe also for Hank, the problem does not seem to be about personalisation of their consumption, but for the consumption of others, and for society. Much of the dissatisfaction seems to stem from views on the structure of the digital news landscape. Some participants are concerned with click revenue and others with how the competition for the spotlight lowers quality.

Are there any specific news outlets that you are particularly critical towards?

Josie: I was going to say Flashback, but that’s site is also the opposite. But the news agencies that wants to be first with information. I don’t trust those.

That makes it hard to view their motives as acts specifically towards personalisation, but rather as acts or criticisms towards the news climate at large.

Castells emphasises the importance of realising that actors within networks, not only are algorithms, but also can be humans, companies, state law and essentially anything else (2009, p.45). And as I have identified, some of the interviewees are aware of effects from their interactions in their news navigation. But since the motives behind their navigation are hard to make out it is hard to identify specific relationships of power between personalisation and the interviewees. What we see are indications of power relationships between the participants and their consumption. As
Foucault argues, power is not in a position of exteriority to other types of relationships within the discourse (1978, p.94). Thus, to critically argue the participants interactions as counter power towards personalisation there would have to be more support behind their motives.

Nonetheless I do think frameworks of power serves a purpose to highlight that personalisation is not a single entity invoking itself upon the user, but that personalising algorithms are actors amongst many other actors in personalised news consumption. And through frameworks of power we can make it easier to identify these different actors, their relation to each other, and then also use those frameworks when we problematise that personalisation.

7. Discussion

This study has devoted a lot of focus users role in personalised consumption and argued for the necessity of taking them into consideration in filter bubble studies. I have pointed towards new perspectives both to problematize filter bubbles and to study them. What I did not consider is the extents to which users navigation actually creates different outcomes from the personalising algorithms. As was proposed by Bozdag & van den Hoven, attempts to erode a bubble through irrational behaviour or bubble breaking applications are likely to end up creating another type of bubble (2015, p.263). It would nonetheless be interesting to study the extents of which the opted ways of navigating actually change the outcome of the personalising filters.

I think the near future will bring many needs to understand and to study personalised consumption in both quantitative and qualitative ways. The sales, distribution and storage of personal data is likely to be contested by for example laws on privacy or net neutrality. Two concrete examples would be Russia’s interference in the American election by creating and spreading news content over social media, using the functions of the landscape for political purposes. Another one would be UK’s recent introduction of a new data protection act giving Facebook users the entitlement to delete their entire profiles at the age of 18 (Swinford, 2017). With a platform society that continuously develops and changes as rapid as it does it will be important to have broad understandings and multiple perspectives. We must not only think of personalising filters as troublesome through how they make restrictions, but
as aggregators through which many different actors can influence the media landscape, such as the example with the American election.

A continuously evolving digital landscape calls for other aspects that has been left out both of this study and the discussion of filter bubbles in general but that may become a much needed in the future. This study has focused on digital natives, but an opposite focus could shine light on the ethical problems with a personalised media landscape, such as digital literacy, education or class. There is today no doubt that those with a good understanding of how to retrieve information through the Internet generally has a higher and faster accessibility to information than those who relies on other means, these means through which the interviewees in this study has thought themselves to navigate could become extensively more relevant in a future were traditional news media is not as present as it is today. This is also why I think the perspective of power could become more relevant for personalised consumption.

What this study has in a way suggested is that it is still to early to consider the effects of personalisation to be impactful. The interview participants are in their current lives too bound by social connections and a frequent usage of traditional media to become isolated by algorithmic bubbles. Although they should be considered digital natives, most participants have experienced the entire development of the Internet, from way before web 2.0 and personalisation. It would have been interesting to compare their ways of navigating and their experience to a younger group who does not have the same capability to compare the media landscape to what it was before the social media blooming. It would also be highly interesting to follow the interviewees through longitude studies to get the perception of change.

Rainie & Wellman stress the need to realise the Internet and online activities as interwoven into our life rather than separated as a sort of appendage were acts and information is valued differently than offline (2014, p.119). I believe that it is through such contexts we must problematize personalisation. Not through an exclusive focus of the functions of the algorithms, not as something we are either living in or not. But through observing all aspects of the landscape that they act within, we need to consider the relationships personalisation has with all actors in the digital landscapes.
8. Conclusion

I have through a uses and gratifications perspective attempted to find ways in which users navigation and experience of their personalisation are relevant in filter bubble research. Similarly to all prior empirical studies of filter bubbles to my knowledge, I did not find any strong supporting data of ways in which personalised consumption impose anything more than modest concerns for the interview participants. The focus of my study has been to discuss ways in which users experience and contest the personalisation of their own news consumption. I have found that although most participants have strong bounds to news consumption outside of personalised platforms, there are ways in which they both contest personalisation and consciously use its features for their advantage. I found that users, to the extent of their abilities and wanted gratifications have developed different ways of navigating in their news consumption. Some of the participants have opted to use personalisation tools as features to create the environment that they want, or to reach a bigger diversity in news sources. Others have restricted themselves from interacting with clickbait headlines as to actively oppose the spreading of such content, both through their own consumption and society at large. These findings have shed some light onto why users are worthy of attention in filter bubble research, but to what extents their interactions, or refusal of such imposes effects towards personalising algorithms has not been discussed.

The interview participants do overall express mostly unified critical views of towards SNS as news aggregators and certain news sources. These collective views suggest that they carry social values through their navigation that combats the personalisation of their consumption that does not follow the social values. I have through the study of users experiences introduced a new way of problematizing personalised consumption. Commonly filter bubbles are defined as problematic because of their restrictiveness to nuanced information. I suggest that user experience can be another problematisation that does not only revolve around availability of diverse news, but can also consider for example, that users withdrawal from interacting with certain content due to personalisation. This consideration has originated through some of the interview participants unwillingness to click certain links in protesting acts, but could also be realised through other means such as unwillingness to share ones personal data.
Lastly, I have used power as a theoretical framework for filter bubbles, to be able to locate relations between personalised consumption and the users. By looking at the ways the interviewees’ navigate I have attempted to locate their actions as motives of counter power towards personalisation. I have found that different individuals experience both positions of subjectiveness in their news landscapes and acts of counter power towards their news landscapes. It is however unclear to what extents their subjectiveness and actions of counter power are related to news consumption at large, or personalisation specifically. Thus I have found no specific power relationships, but rather identified notions of such, and also how power can be used to theorize filter bubbles. I do see power as a useful framework for such relations, as it can include of the focuses from this study, the users, but also other actors in personalisation. Through such frameworks we can find relationships between these different actors that can be helpful in determining when personalisation becomes a filter bubble.
9. References


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10. Appendices

10.1 Appendix 1

Inledande uttal: Den här intervjustudien berör personlig uppfattning av, och navigeringe i det moderna media- och informationsklimatet. Frågeställningen syftar inte bara till nyhetskonsumtion i traditionell form utan inkluderar alla format du kan exponeras för, exempelvis live streams och tweets eller snapchat.

Den här intervjun spelas in med ljudupptagning. Intervjumaterialet behandlas bara av mig och i samtliga transkriberinger och omnämningar kommer du att framställas anonymt. Du kan när som helst avbryta intervjun eller avböja från särskilda frågor. OK från intervjusubjekt?

- Hur ofta konsumerar du nyheter?
  o I vilka miljöer?
  o Vilka är dina huvudsakliga nyhetskällor?
  o Vilka medie format (papperstidning, tv, etc.)? Varför föredrar du dem?
- Hur exponeras du för nyheter som du själv inte aktivt valt att söka, i vilka tjänster och under vilka förutsättningar?
  o Skiljer sig detta material huvudsakligen från det du självmant söker upp på något sätt? (hur skiljer de sig?)
- Vilka sökmotorer använder du regelbundet?
  o Vilka sociala media tjänster?
  o Hur ofta använder du dessa tjänster (estimera)?
- Följer du något nyhets-tjänst genom sociala medier, podcasts eller andra digitala format & plattformar?
  o Hur hittade du dessa källor?
- Hur brukar du gå tillväga för att bekräfta eller granska information? Vilka är de viktigaste faktorerna du tittar på för att du ska känna tillförlitlighet till att informationen är korrekt?
- Upplever du personligen avsaknad eller överrepresentation i din nyhetskonsumtion?
  o I geografiska områden?
  o I samhällsområden?
  o I kulturella/underhållningsområden?
  o Av en journalist, person eller källa genom sök och sociala medier
- Hur upplever du att täckningen av dessa områden har förändrats de 10 senaste åren generellt i nyhetslandskapet?
- Vad eller vilka förutom du själv är det som bestämmer vilka nyheter du konsumerar?
- I jakt på information kring en stor händelse såsom en naturkatastrof eller ett politiskt val, hur går du tillväga?
• Vad är det som avgör när du konsumerar nyheter eller nyttjar sociala medier?
• Följer du någon självständig journalist eller alternativ nyhetskälla, varför det och på vilket sätt skiljer den sig från de mer etablerade?
• Upplever du, eller har någon gång upplevt en känsla av informationscensur i din nyhetskonsumtion?
• Finns det några särskilda sociala medie tjänster, sökmotorer, journalister eller nyhetsbyråer som du har svagt förtroende för?
  o Som du har starkt förtroende för?
• Finns det kontexter eller miljöer på internet sänker ditt förtroende för nyhetsmaterial som publiceras där?
  o Som stärker det?
• Finns det något du vill tillägga till ämnet utöver dina övriga svar under intervjun?