

My name is Vaughan Evans, and I am one of the directors of FEB Digital. [Describe some details about the company/yourself. Try for “I” statements” i.e: I am, I’ve worked, so that there is a build up to the next line].

I’m also a guitar enthusiast. A [other interest]. A [other interest]. Now, the reason I mention this is because the story of how I initially developed these interests is distinctly different from how we are developing our interests today. Like so many other aspects of our lives, digital has transformed and enhanced the way we develop and maintain our passions and hobbies.

So, in order to see that transformation and its potential benefits and drawbacks, let’s rewind back to (year), when I first started to develop my passion for music. [first moment you remember becoming interested in music]

My interest intensified from there. I spent hours pulling books off the library shelves, digging up magazines, and immersing myself in any other reading material I could find that related to the history of music. I learned about Jimi Hendrix and Keith Richards, read biographies about the Beatles, and spent most of my savings on concerts, records, or guitars. Radio was a good source of general knowledge while TV advertisements introduced me to the most popular bands around. I’d spend hours searching through charity stores for cheap records, occasionally uncovering an album that would spark an interest in an entirely new genre, and I’d skim through sections of the record store, picking out the bands with the most albums because I figured that meant they probably had something going for them. Finding a bootleg video of my favorite band performing a song I hadn’t heard before was like uncovering gold.

People, as well, played a major part in my interest development. When I went to gigs, I’d skim the crowd for t-shirts with other band names on them. I asked fellow music lovers at school, friends, and relatives what kind of bands they liked and what albums they owned. My cousin, a music lover as well, would tip me off to 80s and beyond, while my father, who was in a band himself, introduced me to pre-80s material. Music completely shaped what I did and who I spoke to, and every time I browsed through the latest albums in the store, every time I went to a concert or started a conversation with fellow fans, I would walk away with new connections and new recommendations for music to listen to, stores to visit, and bands to see.

And the discovery process would begin all over again.

But if I were to develop my interest in music now, my discovery process would look very different. All of the material I need to fuel one spark of interest, all of those concerts, magazines, books, conversations and recommendations that I collected over the years, can be found right here [hold up phone].

I no longer *have* to go to the library to read up on the history of my favorite artists or the latest guitars. I no longer *have* to spend hours hunting through piles of records in the store, hoping to find that one elusive album. I no longer have to actively gather recommendations from others. I don’t even need to purchase tickets in order to see a band perform. The digital world has made all of the material I need to pursue my interests instantly accessible, and more and more people, particularly millennials and teenagers, are using the internet as the main way of expanding their knowledge and learning more about their interests.

Caroline, our 21-year-old intern, is a prime example of this shift. While my interest in music began to develop from the people I was surrounded by and the material I would uncover in libraries and record stores, her interest in feminism was fostered entirely in the digital space. Feminism was a word that came up a few times in her offline life, which was enough to intrigue her. But, rather than trying to seek out knowledge from the people and physical resources she was surrounded by, like I first did with music, she immediately turned to Google. Her knowledge of the issues feminists strives to change didn't come from conversations in coffee shops, printed newspaper articles, or from attending talks and events. It came from Twitter accounts, Youtube videos, and online news articles or digital books. All of the information she wanted to find, all of the background knowledge of feminism both in the past and in the present, was accessible in seconds.

Now, we all know that this is great and exciting. Many of us have the careers we have today because we were inspired by how exciting this is. But I'm going to spend a few minutes reemphasizing the amazing ways the internet has changed the way we acquire and share information, specifically in terms of our interest development. We can hyper focus on the topics we care about now more than ever before, and the range of media that this information is packaged in enables us to immerse ourselves in every aspect of our interest much more quickly. It took me years to develop and expand my interest in music. It took Caroline only hours. Such intense focus can quickly transform a spark of curiosity into a lifelong passion, and that passion could shape the people we become. During a millennial research study we conducted for one of our clients, for example, many of the 16 to 19 year-olds we spoke to said that the digital exploration of their interests and hobbies was a key method of creating and projecting their identities. With so much material available for them to explore, they can establish and change those identities almost instantaneously.

Just as the sheer amount of knowledge available to us has made it easier to discover new material and build our identities on our own, digital has also increased our ability to find a community of people that share our interests. While that face-to-face interaction that I had with fellow music enthusiasts still occurs today, many of the connections we make with people who share our interests now occur in a digital space. Today, we can sign in to Twitter, Facebook, or Tumblr and, with a quick search, find thousands of people around the globe that share our passions. All it takes is one carefully tagged post, one hashtagged tweet, and we can become instantly engaged with a global community of people who are passionate about the same things we are passionate about. Some people like Tanya (from our TIME INC study), who describes her online interaction with community members of the fashion tracking website, The Hunt as "just like helping a friend dress for a night out," place the same weight and value on these digital relationships as they do with the connections they built in-person.

Not only do we have the capability of connecting with people who hold similar interests, but we can also easily find and connect with people who have interests that are much different from our own. We can share our own niches with others and discover new ones that we might want to engage with, and we can become even more interconnected and integrated into what media expert Marshall McLuhan likes to call a "global village" ([Source](#)). The opportunity digital has created for sharing and engaging with others—both with people who fall within our niches and people who might be outside of it—has made developing our interests an even more community-based process.

Additionally, more and more websites and applications are tailoring the content we see to what their site has learned about our interests, allowing us to access material we are interested in even faster. Netflix tells us what movies we will like based on our previous choices. Amazon shows us what new products we might like to purchase. Spotify plays the same role as the people I met in concerts once played, suggesting new songs and artists that I may also like based on my current playlists. Google's personalized search feature that launched in 2009 even tailors our search results so that the most relevant information appears at the top of our list, making no two searches exactly the same ([Source](#)). Targeted advertising places the products we are most likely to desire right in front of us.

We love this. We engage in this. Perhaps more often than we realize. Over 60% of Netflix's movie rentals come from its recommendation services ([Source](#), [Source](#)). A study conducted by Wharton researchers at the University of Pennsylvania revealed that users who had received recommendations from iTunes purchased nearly double the amount of songs as those who received no recommendations at all ([Source](#)). 35% of Amazon's purchases stem from their suggested products ([Source](#)). Gone are the days where we have to go out and find our interests. Our interests can now find us.

And as thrilling as that is, this could also be problematic.

At the same time the web offers us an incredible opportunity to delve deeply into our already established interests, the range of our interests and the spectrum of people we engage with could be subtly shrinking with this increased personalization. What incentive do I have to search for new material on my own when Spotify can tell me right away what kind of music I'd like? Why would I spend my time skimming through an entire news site when my Facebook feed can bring the most relevant material—both recommended by the site and posted by my friends—immediately to my attention?

I wouldn't. Not many other people would either. Most of the 16 to 19 year olds we spoke to in our study "believed that the best material would find them either through word of mouth via a community, through a relevant ad, or from their own efforts searching on Google or YouTube." And, in the customer interviews we do for client projects, more and more people are demanding that the content most relevant to their interests and lives be the first items they see on a website or application. We have developed an expectation that the web *should* be tailored to our established interests, the content *should* come to us, and the web has adapted to these expectations. Websites and companies work hard to gather the data and develop algorithms that will help make our web experience as relevant and tailored to us as possible.

However, as websites' algorithms filter out the content that is less relevant to our needs and interests and directs us toward the material it thinks we'll like, we can unconsciously become locked in a newsfeed filled with information that is a bit *too* filtered to our personal tastes. This could ultimately prevent us from doing the very thing digital made possible in the first place: expanding our knowledge and interests and evolving our identities.

The teenagers we spoke to were confident in their ability to develop and expand their identities through the digital exploration of their interests, but the world of "you may also likes" and "recommended for you" that we live in isn't focused on the people we could become. It isn't focused on finding radically different content that we might enjoy or on

placing the most important news stories right in front of us. It's focused on who we already are, what we already like. We already actively search for and engage with the material we know we will enjoy. Combine this process of self-filtering with algorithms designed to tailor the web to our needs and interests, and we could find ourselves missing out on the very content that could transform us.

Eli Pariser, the chief executive of the content-sharing site Upworthy, calls this narrowing of focus due to increased personalization the "filter bubble." As he mentions in his TED talk, this bubble could create some problems for us in the future, particularly when it comes to discussing political or social issues ([Source](#), [Source](#), [Source](#)). He states that, by narrowing our world only to our interests, to what makes us most comfortable, we are losing the much needed exposure to new ideas and ways of thinking. We can miss out on new content that might spark a new passion, or a news article that, although not written about a topic we would choose to browse on our own, could change the way we view a particular issue. Furthermore, this intense immersion in communities of people who share similar viewpoints and interests could prevent us from being as open to new ideas and new viewpoints, hindering our ability to understand one another and compromise ([Source](#)).

This could become particularly problematic when it comes to creativity both in the tech industry and outside of it. The ability to look at situations from different perspectives has frequently been identified as one of the key components necessary for innovative and creative thinking. Methodologies such as design thinking constantly stress the importance of composing teams from multidisciplinary backgrounds in order to innovate the best solutions, and many other studies indicate that more diversity in thought leads to better ideas and conversations. One study by Katherine Philips, a professor at Columbia Business School in the U.S., found that people who had to prepare for a discussion with a member of the opposite political party presented much better work and had more interesting discussions than those who prepared for a discussion with someone whose political party aligned with their own ([Source](#)). We lose the diversity of thought in our newsfeeds and Google searches, and we lose opportunities for intelligent discussions, creative collisions, and powerful innovation.

While the web certainly provides us with thousands of ways to find new ideas and inspiration, when we become immersed in a world where most of the content we see first is aligned with our own perspectives and viewpoints, we could significantly decrease the range of new material we come in contact with. And, if individually we lose the exposure to the material that can help spark that one ground-breaking idea, that one spontaneous "ah ha" moment that leads to creativity and innovation, the consequences for us as a society will be gigantic. According to statistics released by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, creative industries such as film, music, IT, advertising, publishing, libraries and computer services generated 76.9 billion pounds for the UK's economy in 2013 ([Source](#); [Source](#)). 76.9 billion. That's a staggering amount. An article written for the Stanford Social Innovation Review further highlights the UK's success in creativity and innovation, stating that 60% of productivity growth came from innovations between 2000 and 2009, and, when it comes to GDP, Britain's ideas economy is considered the largest in the world ([Source](#)). If this success is to continue, we need to make sure we are exposed to the different perspectives and people that can help drive this thinking.

The consequences of this narrowed focus extend beyond the economic level as well. Increased personalization features, as one SciLogs article mentions, can amplify

confirmation bias by presenting us with content that is tailored to the ideas, news, and opinions we already hold ([Source](#)). Without opportunities to see the content that counters our beliefs, we lose the chance to evolve our opinions and ideas.

Similarly, some people also argue that, rather than creating an interconnected, integrated global village that brings people of a variety of interests and backgrounds together, the intense personalization of the web could actually be making us more isolated from one another ([Source](#)). While we might become closer to the people who have our same values and interests, when our interests and content related to those interests becomes the only material we see, we risk missing out on building relationships with people who have different interests and values. The “global village” that the internet created such potential for could crumble as we find ourselves settling into our own corners of the web, surrounded by people who are just like us.

This could be incredibly damaging to a society as diverse and complex as our own. As we immerse ourselves in our interests and passions, the lens through which we see the world begins to narrow. We lose sight of the people, ideas, and places that are so much different from our own. And as we lose sight of this diversity, as these new traditions, cultures, and values become hidden in our digital lives by algorithms that push the familiar, it could become more difficult for us to understand and accept these differences when we encounter them in person. In 2008, Pew researchers Lee Rainie and Janna Anderson worked on a research study examining this idea. They presented participants with a scenario that painted 2020 as the year the Internet would have succeeded at making people more tolerant than ever before, and instances of violence or hate crimes would be significantly reduced.

Their results were frightening. Out of a group of 1,196 people, 55% disagreed that the Internet would succeed in helping people become more tolerant of one another. In fact, many believed that it would only make us less tolerant of one another. When asked why, one participant claimed, “Humans are basically tribal and they will simply use the new virtual spaces to create new tribes or solidify and enhance existing ones.” Another agreed, stating, “The net’s ability to enhance the sense of in-group membership will enhance fragmentation of previously large, multi-ethnic polities” ([Source](#)). Both of these participants are highlighting the very thing increased personalization enables: an ability, knowingly or not, to isolate ourselves in communities of people who are just like us and engage in information that only aligns with our interests and values. Without exposure to the people who hold beliefs that are completely opposite our own, we are not likely to ever understand them. And a lack of understanding of one another, particularly when it comes to issues people are interested in and passionate about, can often have serious, destructive consequences.

So where does this leave us? Even though we have a world full of information and new interests to explore right at our fingertips, are we truly taking advantage of these opportunities and expanding our knowledge and interests, or is our knowledge becoming limited and routine? Are we losing the joy of discovering new hobbies and passions and the global awareness that digital made so possible in the first place?

The answer is difficult to determine. On one hand, we have thousands of doors open to us. We can explore. Learn. Play. Change. Create. We can easily find our interest niche and establish ourselves within a community of fellow fans with a few clicks on a keyboard.

Information that once took us years to accumulate, collections that took us decades to build, can all be gathered in a few months or less. Digital has made it possible to develop, share, and expand our interests faster than ever before.

On the other hand, however, we are much more likely, both due to algorithms out of our control and our tendency to self-filter the web to our own interests, to remain isolated and comfortable in a few established niche areas. We might miss out on the articles, the videos, the pictures, the moments that could result in change. We might miss the very content that, although different from what we would seek out on our own, could spark a new passion that can be explored all over again.

Whether the impact our personalized digital world has on our interest development is positive or negative, I will leave you to determine on your own. But as we go about the process of developing our interests, as we conduct our Google searches and explore our passions in new cities and spaces, it's important that we remember to push ourselves outside our comfort zones and try something new. One of the best qualities about digital, the quality that probably spurred the passion that led many of us to this room today, is its amazing ability to expose and connect us with new people, new ideas, and new knowledge. It would be a shame if we were to keep ourselves locked in our own narrow corner of the web and allow those new potential interests to pass us by.

So go and explore. Google your passions. Seek out new content. Build connections with people who share your interests and with people who share none of them. And make sure that, whether you are out in the city pursuing your interests or developing them through the comfort of your home, you are always keeping your mind open to the world. Thank you.