

Personalised information: "bulb" or tunnel vision?

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Last week I read the book *The Success Illusion* by Richard Engelfriet, a must. Not only does he reveal in a humorous way how futurologists actually sell nonsense in particular, the book also encouraged me to review the scientific literature concerning matters such as disruptive start-ups, the long-tail and the alleged information bulb. What were my findings?

In 2004 the physicist Chris Anderson postulated a theory in which he stated that with the emergence of the internet many writers and artists get a chance of success. As a result, greatest hits and bestsellers would have an increasingly relatively smaller share in the totals of artist success. He states that through the internet the production costs of, for example, books or a music albums have become so low that many more artists and writers will publish their products, and successful niche markets will arise. He calls his theory the long-tail. If the "sales figures" (or streaming figures) are plotted on the y-axis, and all "products" (releases) on the x-axis, after the first high (steep) hill (the superhits, or blockbusters) there will be a very long tail, which will become increasingly higher, because the products in the tail will be discovered as "niches". For example, Aslander and Witteveen wrote in their book *Nooit Af* (permanent beta, 2015) many pages about this phenomenon, which according to them already caused "disruption" of the existing markets. However, their "evidence" consists of a few companies (Uber and Airbnb), which are rather big companies nowadays.

However plausible the long-tail thought may sound, it is simply not true. In fact, the opposite is actually the case; there has been a movement for at least 10 years in which fewer and fewer products (hits, blockbusters) have an increasing share in all success. How does this work? Already in 2008, research at Harvard University of Elberse shows that "Although no one disputes the lengthening of the tail (clearly, more obscure products are being made available for purchase every day), the tail is likely to be extremely flat and populated by titles that are mostly a diversion for consumers whose appetite for true blockbusters continues to grow." (p9). Now, ten years later, this observation has been frequently confirmed in empirical research into the streaming of products on the internet. In these studies, in which algorithms are used to measure the streaming frequencies of products Zhong & Michahelles, for example, conclude in 2013: "Our results suggest that Google Play is more of a "Superstar" market strongly dominated by popular hit products than a "Long-tail" market where unpopular niche products aggregately contribute to a substantial portion of popularity." (p. 499). As far as YouTube is concerned, 80% of the streaming only concerns 10% of the repertoire. Blockbusters and superhits (apps, games, music, books and films) are still making a growing part of the total "turnover". In other words, obscure niche products can be distributed more easily than ever before, but remain out of sight until they are "accidentally" discovered and picked up by the blockbuster channels, which now have more power than ever before.

So there is no artistic disruption, no more than an entrepreneurial disruption: small and fresh start-ups that "challenge" big companies are a fairy tale, 90% of all start-ups no longer exist after 3 years and only made in America 50 years ago large companies 35% of the GDP, now that has more than doubled (72%). From time to time, newcomers sometimes succeed in taking over parts of the market, like Ford did 110 years ago from Wagoneer and the Mafia from previous syndicates (Uber - operating outside the law, exploiting people). Or a new pop star, who first spent a few years in the long tail.

At Spotify I still get, while I listen to modern composers, suggestions to listen to angry rapping men, while this music really does not make me happy and Spotify can not possibly have ever "caught" me listening to that music. On Netflix I get - while I like to watch British and Scandinavian series - suggestions mostly American blockbusters, because I looked at "Sorjonen" and "The Bletchley Circle". Psychologically, we may have gone just the opposite direction. This means our personalized information "bulb" may very well turn out to be a personally packaged globalized tube vision!