How Algorithms Shape What We Think Is True

Open your phone, and within seconds, the internet knows what you want to see. It predicts your next search, the next video you will watch, and even what kind of opinions will hold your attention. Algorithms are the invisible systems behind all that prediction. They filter billions of posts, videos, and articles to give you what seems 'relevant.' But that convenience has a quiet cost: it shapes what people believe is true.

Algorithms start with personalization. They track your clicks, likes, watch time, and even how long you hover over a post. Each interaction becomes a data point, teaching the system what grabs your focus. If you pause on a video about space, you will see more space content. If you comment on a political clip, similar clips will fill your feed. Over time, this creates what experts call a 'filter bubble.' Inside that bubble, the world looks consistent; every post agrees with you, every comment reinforces your view. It feels comfortable, but it also limits awareness.

This phenomenon has real-world consequences. In major events, such as elections or public health emergencies, algorithms can exacerbate misinformation by prioritizing engagement over accuracy. An emotional post spreads faster if it keeps people scrolling, which communicates to the system that there is 'interest.' In 2021, a Pew Research Center study found that users who got most of their news from social media were more likely to see false or misleading information than people who used a variety of sources. The algorithm cannot create a falsehood, but it does heighten the voices that are loudest and most emotionally stimulating.

The effect does not stop with the news. On platforms like TikTok or Instagram, trends spread through repetition. When you see the same idea presented by many creators, your brain begins to accept it as credible. Psychologists call this the 'illusion of truth effect.' The brain mistakes familiarity for accuracy. If a message shows up often enough, it starts to feel right, even when it is wrong.

Still, algorithms are not villains. They make it possible to find learning resources, support communities, and art that might otherwise stay hidden. The problem lies in the design: they value engagement more than understanding. To use them wisely, students can balance algorithm-driven feeds with intentional searching. Reading full articles instead of headlines, following credible journalists, and checking multiple viewpoints all help break the loop.

The truth used to depend on what people read or saw firsthand. Now, it depends on what the algorithm decides to show. Recognizing that influence does not mean rejecting technology, but using it with awareness. The next time a headline appears on your feed, ask why it is there. Algorithms might shape what you see, but you still shape what you believe.