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If TiVo Thinks You Are Gay, Here's How to Set It Straight

What You Buy Affects Recommendations On Amazon.com, Too; Why the Cartoons?

By Jeffrey Zaslow Staff Reporter of The Wall Street Journal

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Basil Iwanyk is not a neo-Nazi. Lukas Karlsson isn't a shadowy stalker. David S. Cohen is not Korean.

But all of them live with a machine that seems intent on giving them such labels. It's their TiVo, the digital videorecorder that records some programs it just assumes its owner will like, based on shows the viewer has chosen to record. A phone call the machine makes to TiVo, Inc., in San Jose, Calif., once a day provides key information. As these men learned, when TiVo thinks it has you pegged, there's just one way to change its "mind": outfox it.

Mr. Iwanyk, 32 years old, first suspected that his TiVo thought he was gay, since it inexplicably kept recording programs with gay themes. A film studio executive in Los Angeles and the self-described "straightest guy on earth," he tried to tame TiVo's gay fixation by recording war movies and other "guy stuff."

— ADVERTISEMENT —



"The problem was, I overcompensated," he says. "It started giving me documentaries on Joseph Goebbels and Adolf Eichmann. It stopped thinking I was gay and decided I was a crazy guy reminiscing about the Third Reich."

He mentioned his TiVo tussle to a friend, who told an executive at CBS's "The King of Queens," who then wrote an episode with a My-TiVo-thinks-I'm-gay subplot.

A lot of gadgets and Web sites now feature "personalization technologies" that profile consumers by tracking what they watch, listen to or buy. The software, embedded in sites such as Amazon.com and CDNOW.com, then recommends other books, videos and music based on a customer's tastes.

The Willies

Many consumers appreciate having computers delve into their hearts and heads. But some say it gives them the willies, because the machines either know them too well or make cocksure assumptions about them that are way off base. That's why even TiVo lovers are tempted to hoodwink it -- a phenomenon that was also spoofed this year on another TV show, HBO's "The Mind of the Married Man."

Mike Binder, creator and star of that show, had set his home TiVo to record his 1999 movie, "The Sex Monster," about a man whose wife becomes bisexual. After that, Mr. Binder's TiVo assumed he would enjoy a steady stream of gay programming. Unnerved, he counteracted the onslaught by recording the Playboy Channel and MTV's spring break bikini coverage. It worked, he says. "My TiVo doesn't look at me funny anymore."

His wife, however, was taken aback when she saw all the half-naked women he was ordering through TiVo. He told her those women meant nothing to him: "I'm just counterprogramming because TiVo thinks I'm gay." She was unamused. The incident inspired an episode of his show.

Though some users contend TiVo has sex on the brain, TiVo's general manager, Brodie Keast, explains that the box is merely "reacting to feedback you give it." Still, the machine employs algorithms -- searching several thousand key details (favorite actors, movie and TV genres) -- that leave some people wondering whether it is judging their predilections.

Mr. Karlsson, 26, says he "pre-emptively" found all the religious shows in his TV listings and used the "thumbs down" button on his remote control to tell TiVo he has no interest in them. (Giving three thumbs down is the best way to block a program.) After that, his TiVo recorded movies about creepy homicides. "They all have titles like 'Murder on Skeleton Isle,'" says the computer system administrator in Cambridge, Mass.

He uses the "thumbs" button to tell TiVo he hates such films. He also orders cooking shows, which softens TiVo's view of him. "I don't want it thinking I'm an ax murderer," he says.

Mr. Cohen, 30, has a TiVo that mysteriously assumed he wanted Korean news programs. The Philadelphia lawyer gave thumbs down to anything Korean, and his TiVo got the message. Sort of. "The next day, it recorded the Chinese news," he says.

TiVo's 500,000 subscribers use the box primarily to record programs they specifically request, and many laud its ability to pause live broadcasts and record a show's entire

season. Still, in TiVo-focused online chat-rooms and in secretive admissions to one another, some say they resent being pigeonholed by TiVo's suggestions.

'A Pregnant Gay Man'

Like TiVo, other techno-profilers run hard with limited information. Ray Everett-Church of Fremont, Calif., who is gay, ordered "Queer as Folk" videos from Amazon.com. Understandably, the site began suggesting gay-related calendars and books. Then he bought a baby book for a pregnant friend. So for weeks, the site also recommended parenting books. He says it was as if Amazon.com decided he was "a pregnant gay man."

He fought back, he says, "by inundating it with additional data. I searched for other stuff -- on politics, computers -- so it would stop throwing baby books at me. Now it thinks I've abandoned the baby and I'm preparing for a career in politics."

Mr. Everett-Church, a privacy consultant for businesses, predicts that as techno-profiling increases, more people will purposely muck up their profiles. They'll fear ordering books on mental illnesses or sexual preferences because they'll wonder if they'll somehow be publicly identified.

All techno-profiling companies contacted for this article said that information gleaned is for the customer's personal use only. Still, even Amazon.com founder Jeff Bezos knows the potential mortification factor.

For a live demonstration before an audience of 500 people, Mr. Bezos once logged onto Amazon.com (amazon.com) to show how it caters to his interests. The top recommendation it gave him? The DVD for "Slave Girls From Beyond Infinity." That popped up because he had previously ordered "Barbarella," starring Jane Fonda, a spokesman explains.

Dawn Freeman, 23, a tax analyst in Lexington, Ky., has bought lowbrow videos, such as "American Pie," from Amazon.com. But she was aghast when the site suggested Tom Green's gross-out performance in "Road Trip."

"I thought, 'I know I don't like high cinema, but have I really reached the point where I'd like to watch Tom Green lick a mouse?'" To even out her Amazon profile, she went through the site finding "witty independent films."

Her TiVo also thinks she's a sophomoric-humor-loving 12-year-old, she says. It keeps giving her cartoons. "I know it's dumb to take it personally, but it's in your face. These are supposedly objective computers saying, 'This is what we think of you.' "

Dissing Ice Cube

A.J. Meyer, a 35-year-old Web site developer in Minneapolis, ordered the DVD for "Scarface," the Al Pacino gangster movie, from Netflix.com (netflix.com). After that, the site kept recommending movies about gangster rappers. He stopped the assault by giving negative ratings to all movies starring Ice Cube. (Netflix allows members to rate any of its 12,000-plus titles with one to five stars -- whether they have rented a film or not. That helps the site calculate future recommendations.)

After Mr. Meyer ordered a documentary about New York from Amazon.com, it pitched him countless documentaries -- even one on the history of the thimble. He stopped the Ken Burnsification of his profile by searching the site for plasma TVs. "That way, I identified myself as a high-tech guy," he says. "The thimble is more low tech."

Virginia Heffernan, TV columnist for Slate.com, doesn't understand why some people are resistant to techno-profiling, or find it creepy. She didn't look for any deep meaning when her TiVo kept giving her TV shows in Polish. And after buying self-help books on Amazon.com, she accepted that every time she logged on, the site pitched products to make her a more self-fulfilled human being.

"I like the idea that someone cares," she says. "Even a machine."

TiVo users can program the machine to skip certain channels entirely. But many users don't bother to figure out how to do it, or are too intrigued by TiVo's recommendation process, says a spokesman. TiVo is paid to promote programs and products it calls "advertainment" on a special screen. But the company says none of these are given to users as suggestions.

Some people have given up trying to manipulate personalization technologies. Dino Leon, a hair-salon owner in Birmingham, Mich., says his TiVo quickly figured out that he and his partner were gay. They were OK with that, but just for fun, they tried to confuse the software by punching in "redneck" programs, like Jerry Springer's talk show.

TiVo wasn't fooled, and kept recording gay shows. Mr. Leon believes the box was giving them a message: "You're definitely gay. And you're watching too much TV."

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