



CONVENIENCE VS. MANIPULATION

Search engines have been around since 1990 by allowing us to navigate the World Wide Web through a single webpage. According to SearchEngineHistory.com, Archie was the first type of search engine that had a database that searched through its archive of file names and match it with the one you entered [1]. Soon after Archie was released many more search engine variations began to erupt over the years. Directories became a variation of search engines in which they would have a list of trusted or favorite sites that were clickable links. Directories began charging websites an annual fee to be in their list and people would trust such directories to get them to quality content. Directories such as *Yahoo! Directories* charged websites up to \$299/year to be listed. "By 1994 WebCrawler was the first crawler that would index entire pages and opened many other services to follow suit" [1]. Fast forward a few years we see many competitors follow the search engine trend (e.g. Ask Jeeves, AltaVista, Lycos, Inktomi, and Infoseek) with different algorithms and processes to find what you were looking for. These search engines were eventually bought out by competitors or lost in the market race to be the best. By 1998 Google was launched. Google then won the Search War by acquiring search partners such as AOL and Yahoo! [1].

In this paper we will be discussing why it is unethical for a widely used popular Internet search engine such as Google to present different search results to different users who are using the exact same search criteria. We will be providing an analysis of the rule stated above with two different ethical frameworks such as Kantianism and Social Contract to formulate our opinion. This paper will be structured to include three issues/consequences in result of Google's biased search results.

We all use internet search engines like Google to find us the information we are looking for at that time or we can use it to also find us things like videos, music, video games, movies, and even TV shows. Whatever may be your inquiry, we count on Google to provide us with every possible result relating to that search. But as you may have already inferred, it is not always the case. Google works by using bots called spiders to traverse webpages and indexes them in their database for future use. This happens thousands of times a day every day without you knowing. The World Wide Web constantly grows and changes so Google's database has to change along with it. When Google pulls up a list of sites for you to use they are actually showing you an outdated list of sites that include your search. It is in fact impossible to show everything the web offers at all times because of the constant changes. Because of that Google has worked hard at learning what their users are looking for and what they want to see. Google does this by keeping cookies placed into your computer that keeps track of your browser history, passwords, search history, and sometimes your location. With this information they now have an idea of what you might be looking for. For instance, if John Doe loves to go Bass fishing he may type searches with the word "Bass" in them. After a few instances of the word "Bass" in reference to fishing and not the instrument, his searches will result in more bass fishing related websites than bass instrument websites [2].

This brings us to our first Issue, in order to formulate good reasoning, you need both sides to the story. Just recently the 2016 Presidential Debate occurred with Donald Trump [R] vs. Hillary Clinton [D] and if you were like me you probably have an opinion on who may have won the debate. You looked at the pros and cons of both candidates and you formulated your own opinion as to who had the best argument for the specified issues. You did this by seeing both sides to the story. This is something you don't always get to see in the news. Many news articles spin the same story to fit their agenda and their audience. For instance, as of today (9/27/2016) foxnews.com has their front page article as "*DEBATE NIGHT DRAWS BIG MONEY Campaign has raised more than \$13 million in past 24 hours, Trump says*"[3].

It has no mention of Hilary Clinton winning the debate but instead mentions something good that came out of it which is Donald Trump's campaign fundraising. And as of today if you see msnbc.com you will see "*Clinton Studies for debate, and it pays off: Analysis*" [4]. MSNBC and FoxNews have their own agenda they want to pursue and today is one of the most interesting times you get to see that agenda truly shine. In my opinion, after watching the debate, Hilary Clinton walked away victorious and with that you can see that in MSNBC's website where they want to give you all the facts and results and analysis of the debate. As for FoxNews you see they don't want to mention anything about the debate because they know it will hurt their candidate of choice.

This paper is not about the presidential election but I do want to mention a moment in our current history where the media bias can play a role into who you decide to vote for. The media has a very powerful role in our society by showing us what they want to show us and how they want to portray it. That is similar how Google is sorting their databases for their users. You could do what I just did and use Google to search these different websites and formulate your opinion. But what happens when you search *Presidential Debate*? Then you are leaving it up to Google to send you links to websites if thinks you are interested in. For someone who may be a Democrat they may sort their list of links to show websites with bias towards democrats and vice versa. Without both sides to your news sources you are unable to formulate your own accurate opinion on what is right or wrong in those scenarios especially when it comes to politics.

Our second issue deals with a psychological issue called the false-consensus effect. This effect happens when you believe the majority of your peers will react, vote, decide, or follow one way but they all do the other. Psychosocial Rehabilitation Specialist Kendra Cherry defines it as "the tendency to overestimate the degree to which other people agree with our beliefs, values, attitudes and behaviors" [5]. We can develop this overestimation by being surrounded by peers of only one group (e.g. Democrats, Republicans, Feminism, BlackLivesMatters, etc...) without listening to the opposing side of their opinions. This can be accomplished very easily by visiting sites where you can specifically surround yourself in these ideologies with social networking sites like Reddit, Tumblr, and Facebook. These sites allow you to narrow your news feeds to only come from sources you follow. Eventually everyone in those groups start preaching to the choir. Once they expand outside their own sphere of influence you see the real differences in ideology. Google's personalized search filtering is just like these social networking sites except it does this for you without your knowledge of it even happening.

This brings me to my last issue which deals with the truth. When personalized search results begin showing you what you want to hear and want to see you then miss out on the truth. This hurts the consumer as well as the publishers and website owners who want honest journalism. If you publicize articles that go against the norm you will find out that Google will stop presenting your news information to its customers. Without your site being posted on the front page you miss out on your target audience. This will drop your advertising revenue's as your site loses interest and your company will soon go under. With that being said, we now have sites who instead use a tactic called Click Bait. Click Baiting is where you provide an article title or picture for a video that has nothing to do with your article or video but grabs the attention of the typical user (e.g. Boobs in the thumbnail of a video). These practices are now flooding the internet and to find a decent website with accurate information is becoming more and more difficult. "You will find that the truth is often unpopular and the contest between agreeable fancy and disagreeable fact is unequal. For, in the vernacular, we Americans are suckers for good news." [6]

How would Kantianism formulate this ethical dilemma? Kantianism uses two different ways in determining if a rule is moral such as, Good Will and the Categorical Imperative. The rule we are using is "Is it ethical for a widely used popular Internet search engine such as Google to present different search results to different users who are using the exact same search criteria?" Now in order for a Kantian to determine this rule to be ethical it must pass both formulations of the Categorical Imperative and Good Will. Starting with Good Will we look at what Google's intentions are for providing users with different results. Google's intent is to provide their users with content most suited to their beliefs and logic. They want their users to have a better experience and if that has a negative consequence their good will is still with good intent. Next let's look at the second formulation at the Categorical Imperative as it is a little easier for us to apply in this scenario. In the second formulation it states that we shall not use others as a means to an end. Basically when Google is collecting your data for sites you visit and uses that to give you a better experience on their site so that you can come back and use it again then they are using you as a means to an end. In which case you are basically another statistic in their database and their focus groups. They need you to visit their site often so they can justify their costs for advertisements and server costs. They manipulate your results so that you see what they want you to see and when you see what you want to see you are sure to come back for more. Thus for a Kantian this rule is unethical.

Under the Social Contract Theory, we can use John Rawls's Principles of Justice to formulate our own understanding of what is right in this ethical dilemma. If Google presents different search results with the same search criteria, then they are violating John Rawls's first principal of justice. This principal states, "each person may have a fully adequate number of rights and liberties as long as they are consistent with everyone else having the same rights and liberties" [2]. One person may have better results as another can have worse and if you consider it a right to have access to the same information then they are breaking this right.

Clearly Google is not intending to participate in unethical practices but as you can see with Kantianism and the Social Contract Theory, intent is only part of the moral framework. They want the user to have a better internet experience using their site over their competitors such as Bing and to do so they provide a more personalized experience but as we have shown it can cause many complications for websites and their users.

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