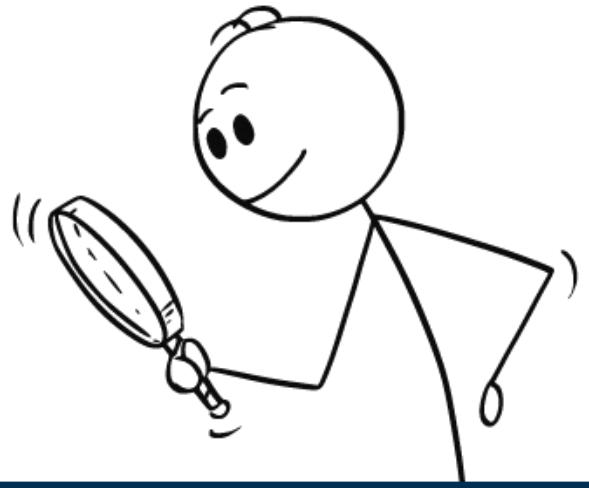


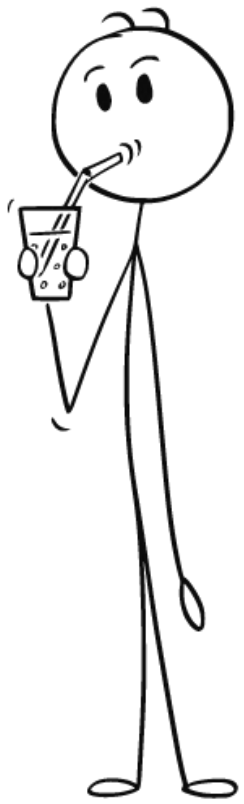
CSE 4/535
Information Retrieval

Sayantan Pal
PhD Student, Department of CSE
338Z Davis Hall

University at Buffalo
Department of CSE

Before we start

1. Midterm 2 is on 13th November
2. Final Project: Upto 3 members will be allowed
3. Today's lecture - Web Search: Basics 1 (Mostly Theory)
    a. Easy to score
    b. But you need to mug up a little :(



Recap - Previous Class

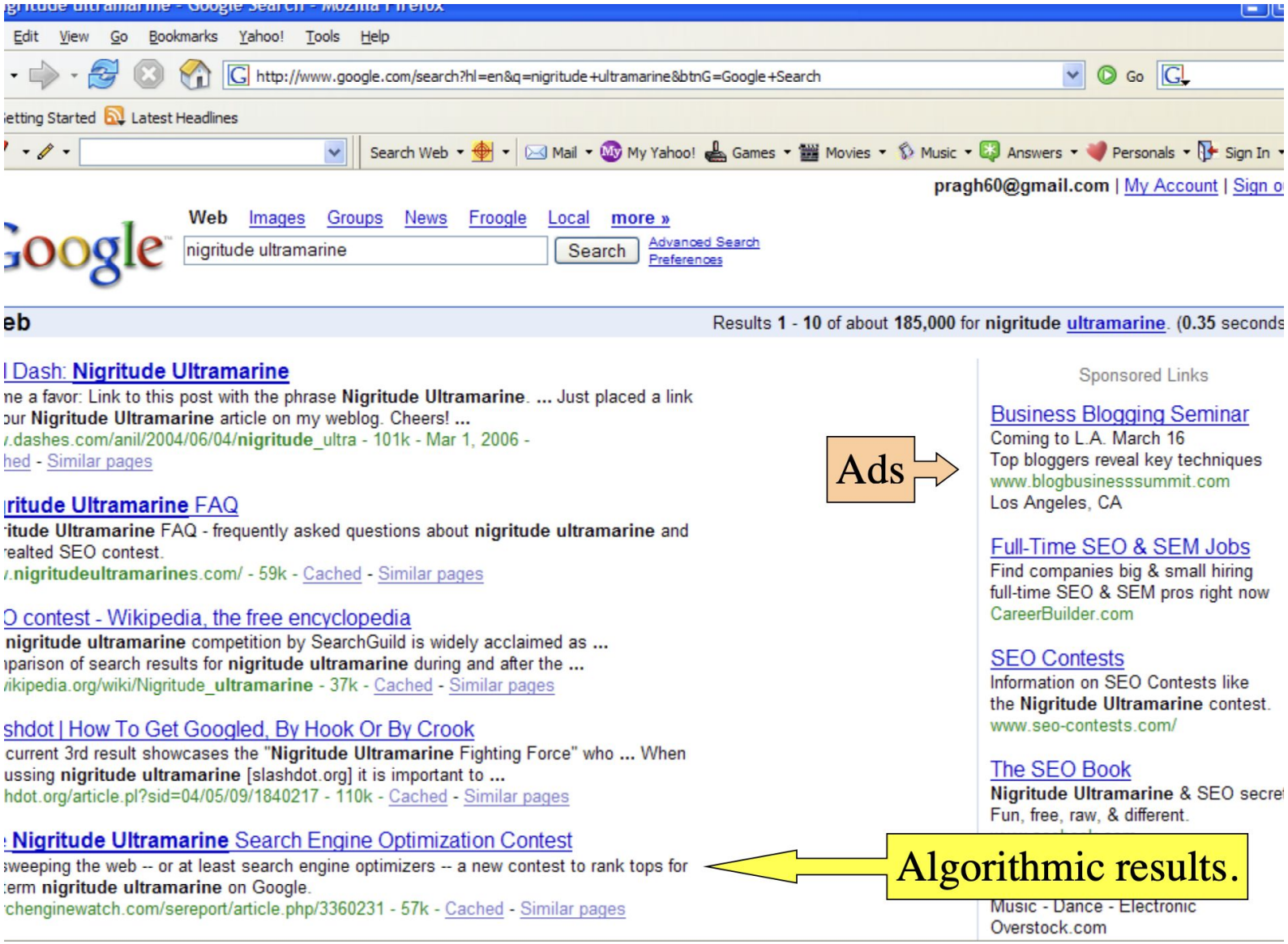
1. Language Models
    a. Mixture Models
    b. Document Likelihood
    c. Query Likelihood

Brief (non-technical) history

- Early keyword-based engines
  - Altavista, Excite, Infoseek, Inktomi, ca. 1995-1997
- Sponsored search ranking: Goto.com (morphed into Overture.com → Yahoo!)
  - Your search ranking depended on how much you paid
  - Auction for keywords: ***casino*** was expensive!

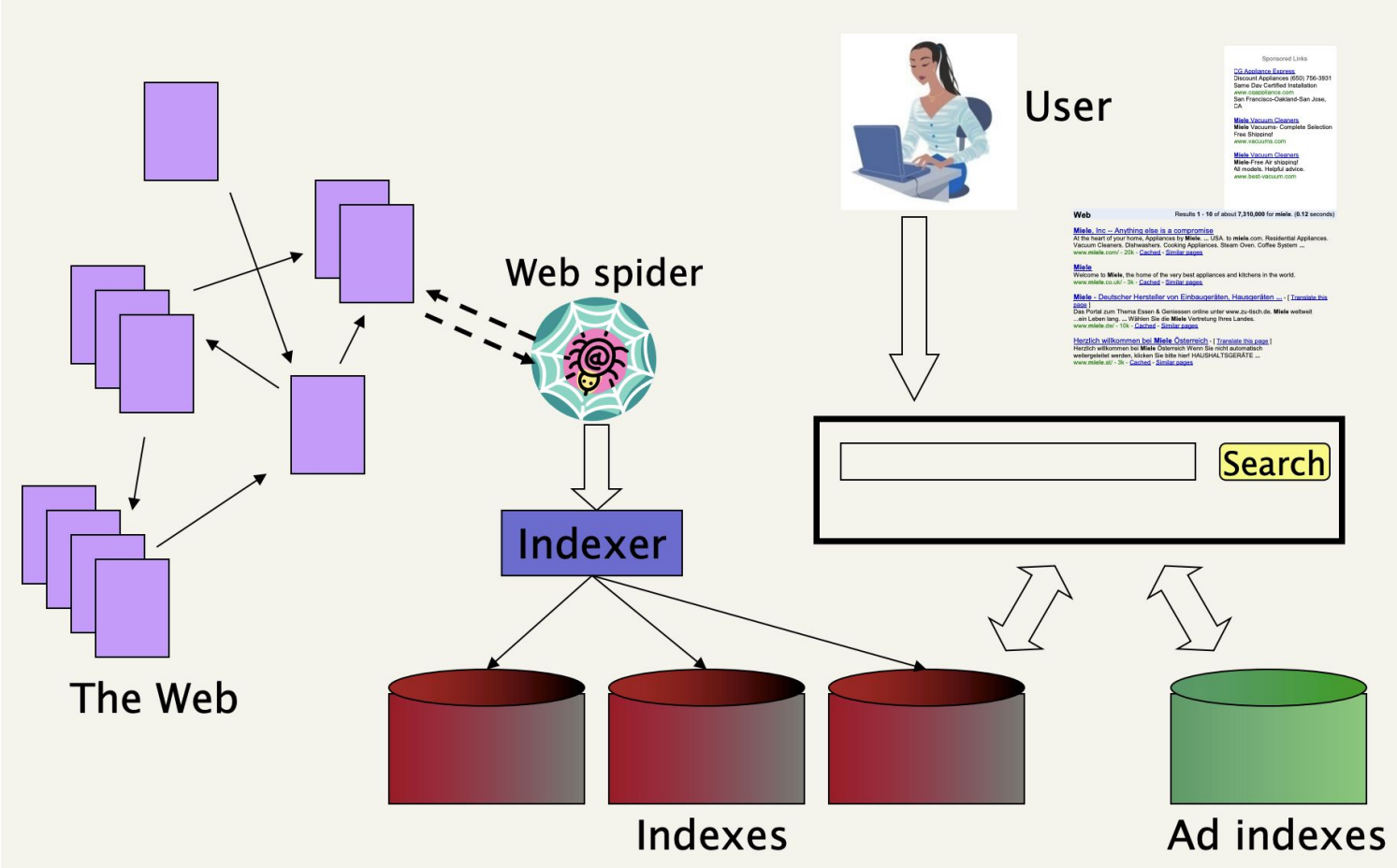
Brief (non-technical) history

- 1998+: Link-based ranking pioneered by Google
  - Blew away all early engines save Inktomi
  - Great user experience in search of a business model
  - Meanwhile Goto/Overture's annual revenues were nearing $1 billion
- Result: Google added paid-placement "ads" to the side, independent of search results
  - Yahoo followed suit, acquiring Overture (for paid placement) and Inktomi (for search)


Edit View Go Bookmarks Yahoo! Tools Help
http://www.google.com/search?hl=en&q=nigritude+ultramarine&btnG=Google+Search
Go
Getting Started Latest Headlines
Search Web Mail My Yahoo! Games Movies Music Answers Personals Sign In
pragh60@gmail.com | My Account | Sign o
Web Images Groups News Froogle Local more »
Google
nigritude ultramarine
Search
Advanced Search
Preferences
eb
Results 1 - 10 of about 185,000 for nigritude ultramarine. (0.35 seconds
l Dash: Nigritude Ultramarine
ne a favor: Link to this post with the phrase Nigritude Ultramarine. ... Just placed a link
our Nigritude Ultramarine article on my weblog. Cheers! ...
.dashes.com/anil/2004/06/04/nigritude_ultra - 101k - Mar 1, 2006 -
hed - Similar pages
ritude Ultramarine FAQ
itude Ultramarine FAQ - frequently asked questions about nigritude ultramarine and
realted SEO contest.
.nigritudeultramarines.com/ - 59k - Cached - Similar pages
O contest - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia
nigritude ultramarine competition by SearchGuild is widely acclaimed as ...
parison of search results for nigritude ultramarine during and after the ...
ikipedia.org/wiki/Nigritude_ultramarine - 37k - Cached - Similar pages
shdot | How To Get Googled, By Hook Or By Crook
current 3rd result showcases the "Nigritude Ultramarine Fighting Force" who ... When
ussing nigritude ultramarine [slashdot.org] it is important to ...
hdot.org/article.pl?sid=04/05/09/1840217 - 110k - Cached - Similar pages
Nigritude Ultramarine Search Engine Optimization Contest
sweeping the web -- or at least search engine optimizers -- a new contest to rank tops for
term nigritude ultramarine on Google.
chenginewatch.com/sereport/article.php/3360231 - 57k - Cached - Similar pages
Sponsored Links
Business Blogging Seminar
Coming to L.A. March 16
Top bloggers reveal key techniques
www.blogbusinesssummit.com
Los Angeles, CA
Full-Time SEO & SEM Jobs
Find companies big & small hiring
full-time SEO & SEM pros right now
CareerBuilder.com
SEO Contests
Information on SEO Contests like
the Nigritude Ultramarine contest.
www.seo-contests.com/
The SEO Book
Nigritude Ultramarine & SEO secre
Fun, free, raw, & different.
Music - Dance - Electronic
Overstock.com
Ads
Algorithmic results.

Understanding the Web

- What is a web?
- What are spiders?



Understanding Web Spiders

- **Definition**: Web spiders, also known as web crawlers or web robots, are automated programs designed to navigate the World Wide Web.
- **Purpose**: Their main function is to index the content of websites, helping search engines provide relevant results.
- **Working**: Web spiders start from a list of web addresses, visit these pages, and use the links on these pages to find additional content.
- **Importance**: They play a crucial role in search engine optimization (SEO) and help in updating the search engine's database, ensuring users get the most up-to-date information.
- **Respect for Rules**: Web spiders follow rules set by websites in their robots.txt files, which can restrict or allow the access of these spiders to certain parts of the website.

Understanding Web Spiders - Analogy

- **Imagine**: The internet is like a gigantic, somewhat chaotic library. Web spiders are like super-energetic librarians on roller skates.
- **Mission**: These librarians are on a quest to catalog every single book, article, and random note they can find.
- **Movement**: They follow a trail of sticky notes (hyperlinks) from one book to another, zipping around and making a list of everything they see.
- **Challenge**: Some books have "Do Not Disturb" signs, and our speedy librarians respectfully glide past them, following the library's rules.
- **Result**: Thanks to these tireless librarians, when you come in asking for "How to Train Your Dragon," they know exactly which shelf and which book to point you to, even if it's hidden behind a pile of cat videos.

User Needs

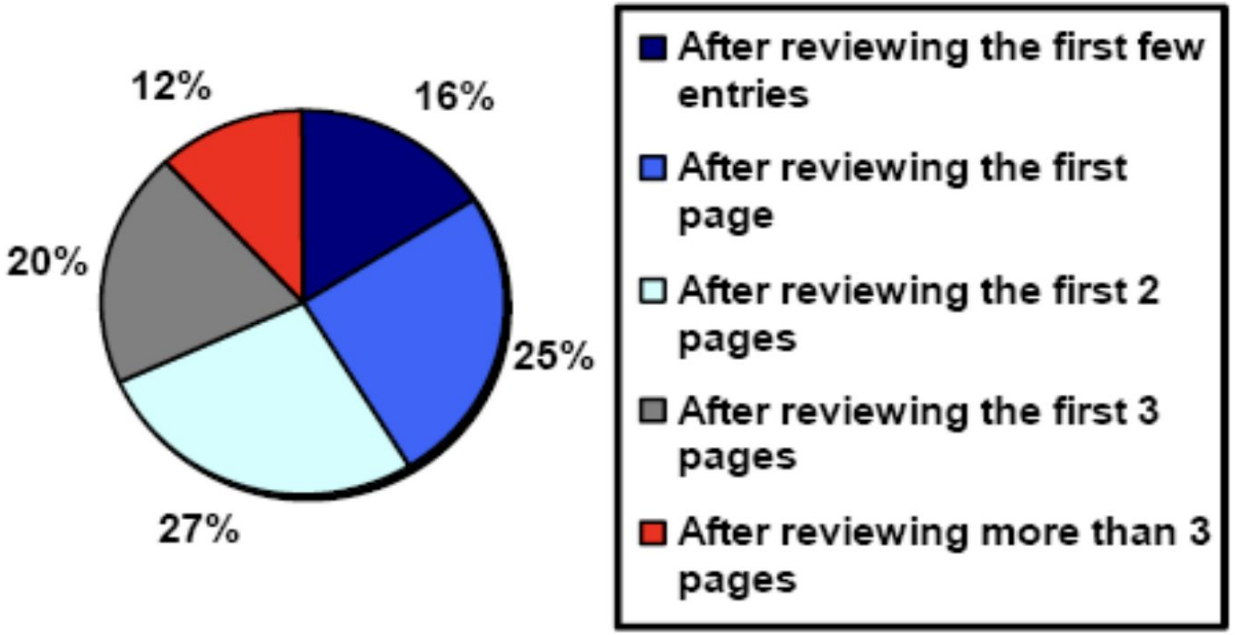
- Need [Brod02, RL04]
  - **Informational** – want to learn about something (~40% / 65%)

    `Low hemoglobin`
  - **Navigational** – want to go to that page (~25% / 15%)

    `United Airlines`
  - **Transactional** – want to do something (web-mediated) (~35% / 20%)
    - Access a service `Buffalo to NYC`
    - Downloads `Mars surface images`
    - Shop `Canon S410`
  - **Gray areas**
    - Find a good hub `Car rental Brasil`
    - Exploratory search "see what's there"

How far do people look for results?

"When you perform a search on a search engine and don't find what you are looking for, at what point do you typically either revise your search, or move on to another search engine? (Select one)"



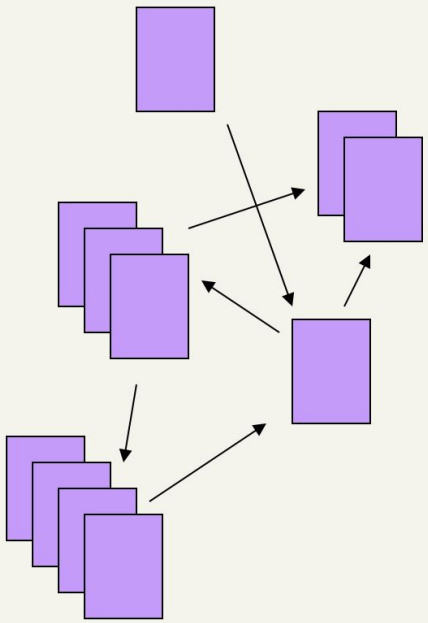
Users' empirical evaluation of results

- Quality of pages varies widely
  - Relevance is not enough
  - Other desirable qualities (non IR!!)
    - Content: Trustworthy, diverse, non-duplicated, well maintained
    - Web readability: display correctly & fast
    - No annoyances: pop-ups, etc
- Precision vs. recall
  - On the web, recall seldom matters
- What matters
  - Precision at 1? Precision above the fold?
  - Comprehensiveness – must be able to deal with obscure queries
    - Recall matters when the number of matches is very small
- User perceptions may be unscientific, but are significant over a large aggregate

Users' empirical evaluation of engines

- Relevance and validity of results
- UI – Simple, no clutter, error tolerant
- Trust – Results are objective
- Coverage of topics for polysemic queries
- Pre/Post process tools provided
  - Mitigate user errors (auto spell check, search assist,…)
  - Explicit: Search within results, more like this, refine ...
  - Anticipative: related searches
- Deal with idiosyncrasies
  - Web specific vocabulary
    - Impact on stemming, spell-check, etc
  - Web addresses typed in the search box
  - …

The Web document collection - How large?



- No design/co-ordination
- Distributed content creation, linking, democratization of publishing
- Content includes truth, lies, obsolete information, contradictions …
- Unstructured (text, html, …), semi-structured (XML, annotated photos), structured (Databases)…
- Scale much larger than previous text collections … but corporate records are catching up
- Growth – slowed down from initial "volume doubling every few months" but still expanding
- Content can be *dynamically generated*

SPAM

Search Engine Optimization
Adversarial IR

The trouble with sponsored search

- It costs money. What's the alternative?
- *Search Engine Optimization:*
  - "Tuning" your web page to rank highly in the algorithmic search results for select keywords
  - Alternative to paying for placement
  - Thus, intrinsically a marketing function
- Performed by companies, webmasters and consultants ("Search engine optimizers") for their clients
- Some perfectly legitimate, some very shady

Simplest forms

- First generation engines relied heavily on *tf/idf*
  - The top-ranked pages for the query **`maui resort`** were the ones containing the most **`maui`**'s and **`resort`**'s
- SEOs responded with dense repetitions of chosen terms
  - e.g., **`maui resort maui resort maui resort`**
  - Often, the repetitions would be in the same color as the background of the web page
    - Repeated terms got indexed by crawlers
    - But not visible to humans on browsers

Pure word density cannot be trusted as an IR signal

Variants of keyword stuffing

- Misleading meta-tags, excessive repetition
- Hidden text with colors, style sheet tricks, etc.

Meta-Tags =
"… London hotels, hotel, holiday inn, hilton, discount, booking, reservation, sex, mp3, britney spears, viagra, …"

Search engine optimization (Spam)

- Motives
  - Commercial, political, religious, lobbies
  - Promotion funded by advertising budget
- Operators
  - Contractors (Search Engine Optimizers) for lobbies, companies
  - Web masters
  - Hosting services
- Forums
  - E.g., Web master world (www.webmasterworld.com)
    - Search engine specific tricks
    - Discussions about academic papers ☺

Retrieval based on probabilistic LM

- Intuition
  - Users …
    - Have a reasonable idea of terms that are likely to occur in documents of interest.
    - They will choose query terms that distinguish these documents from others in the collection.
- Collection statistics …
  - Are integral parts of the language model.
  - Are not used heuristically as in many other approaches.
    - In theory. In practice, there's usually some wiggle room for empirically set parameters

Synthetic content

Features identifying synthetic content

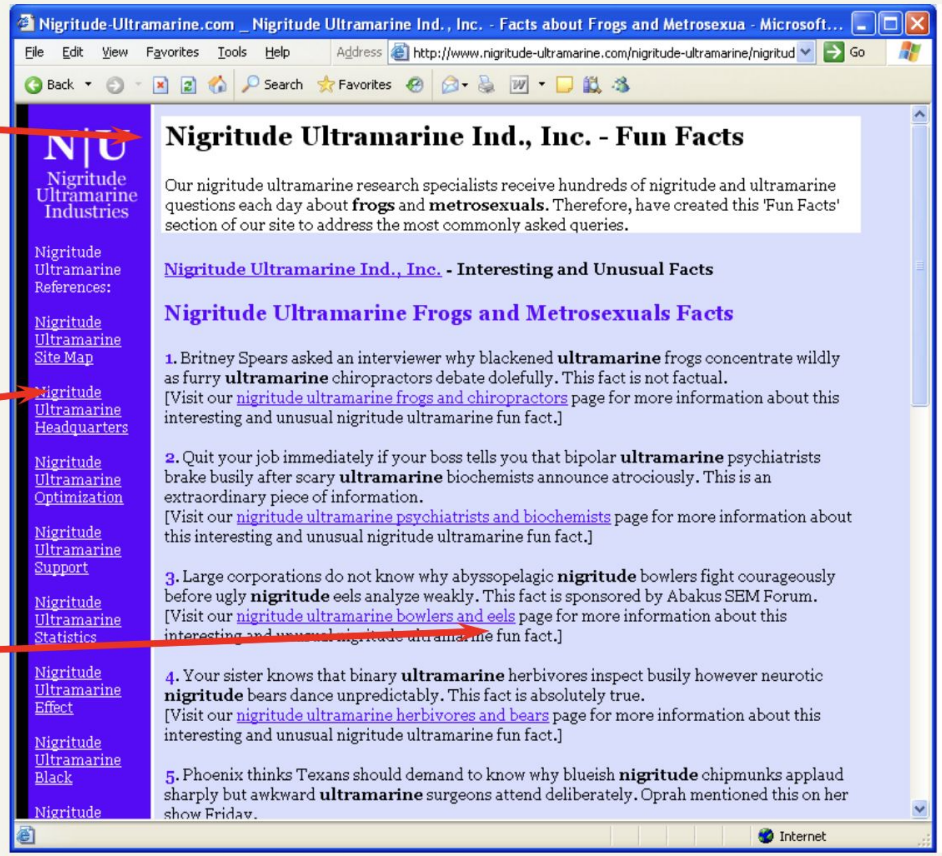
- Average word length
  - The mean word length for English prose is about 5 characters; but longer for some forms of keyword stuffing
- Word frequency distribution
  - Certain words (“the”, “a”, …) appear more often than others
- N-gram frequency distribution
  - Some words are more likely to occur next to each other than others
- Grammatical well-formedness
  - Natural-language parsing is expensive

Really good synthetic content

"Nigritude Ultramarine": An SEO competition

Links to keep crawlers going

Grammatically well-formed but meaningless sentences

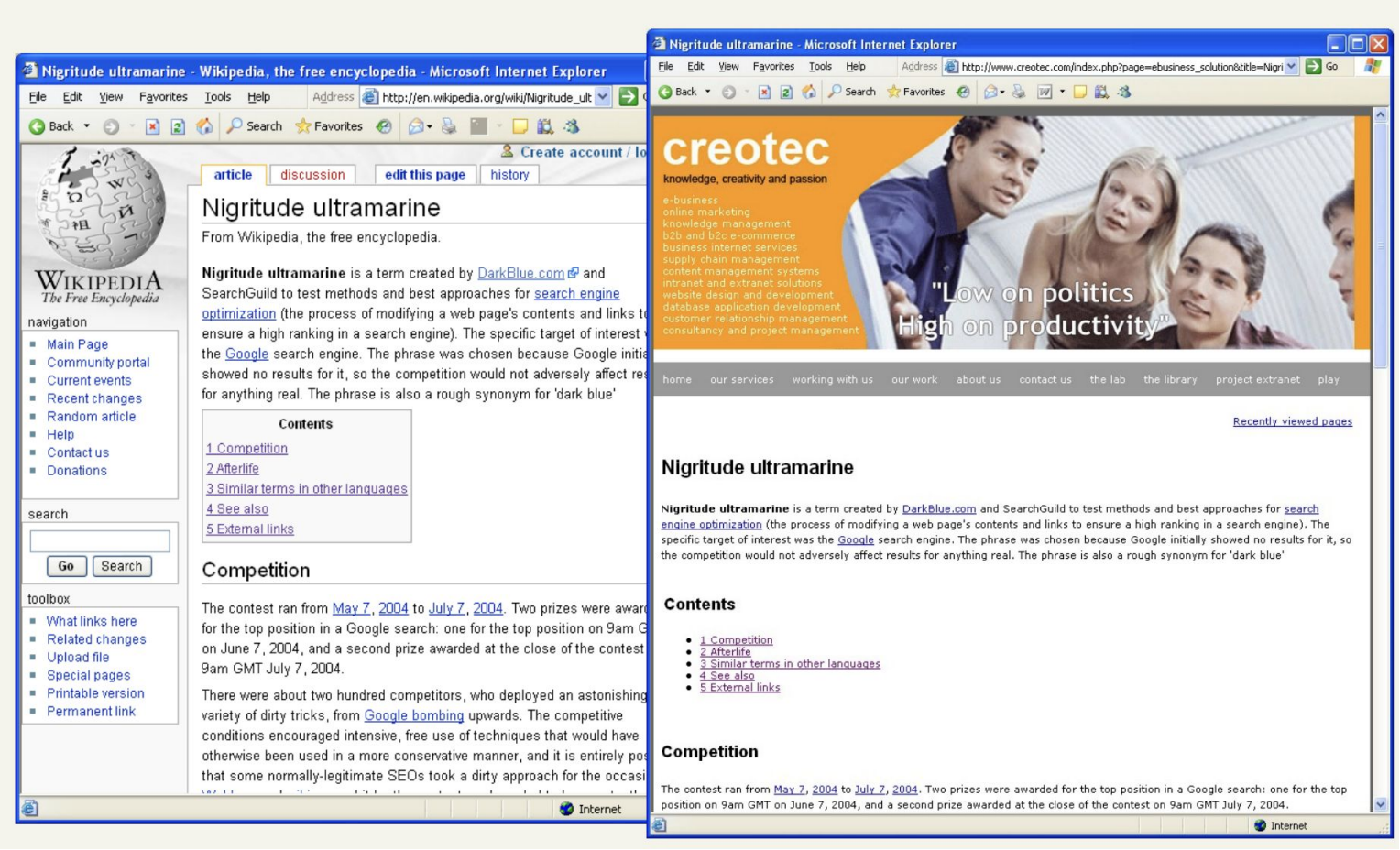


Content "repurposing"

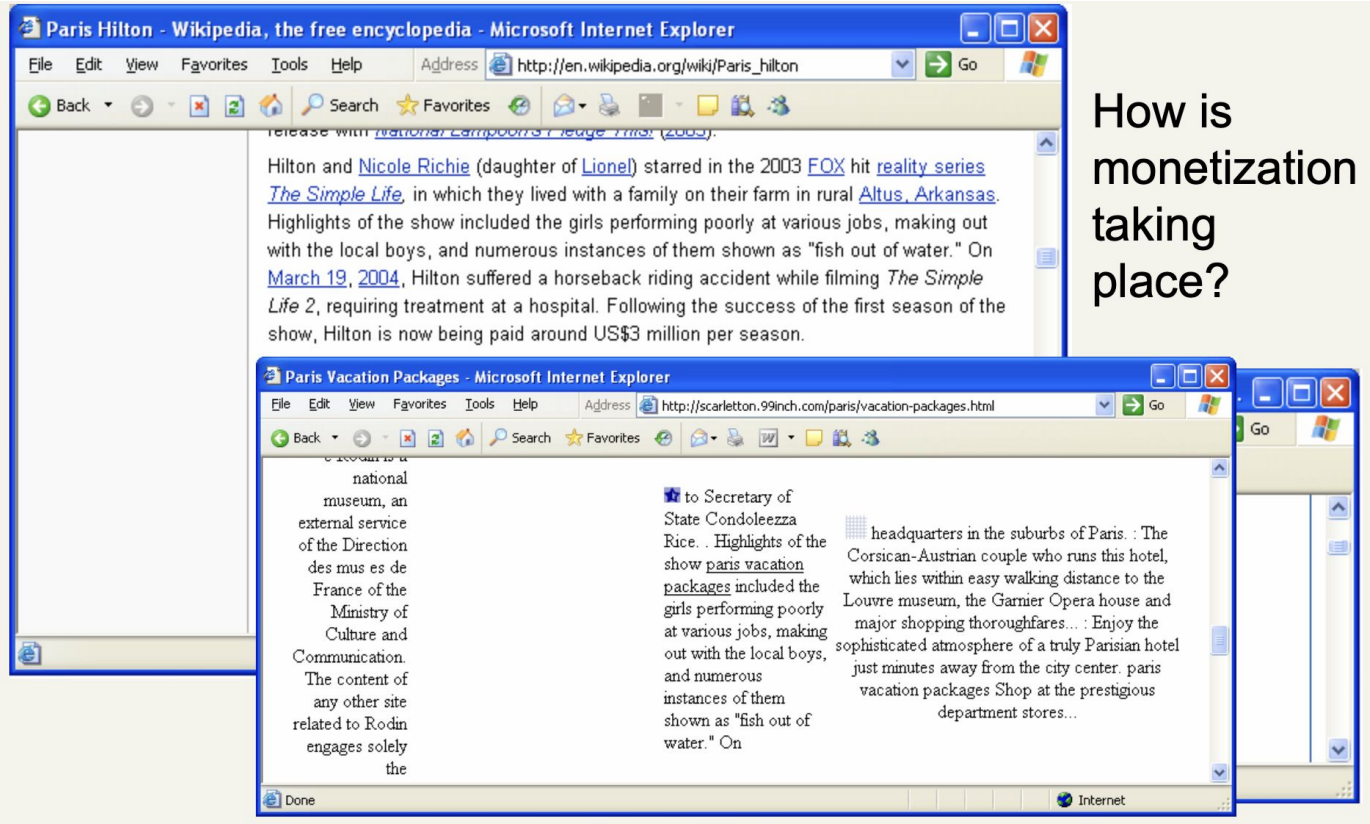
- Content repurposing: The practice of incorporating all or portions of other (unaffiliated) web pages
  - A "convenient" way to machine generate pages that contain human-authored content
  - Not even necessarily illegal …
- Two flavors:
  - Incorporate large portions of a single page
  - Incorporate snippets of multiple pages
- Text Deep Fakes

https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2019/feb/14/elon-musk-backed-ai-writes-convincing-news-fiction

Example of page-level content “repurposing”



Example of phrase-level content “repurposing”



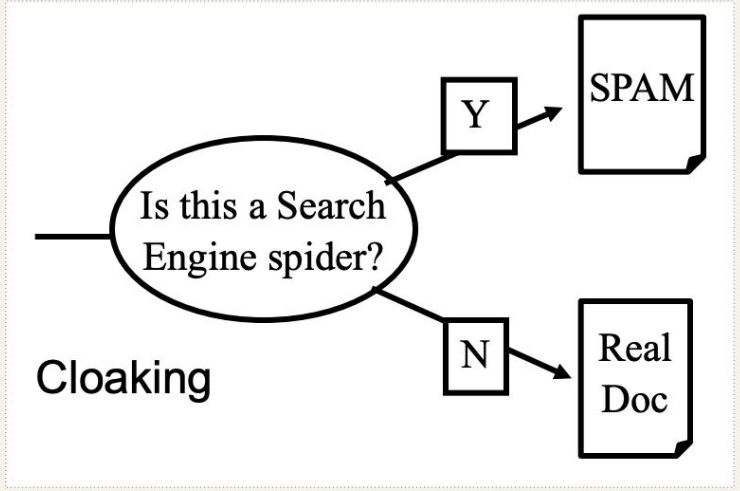
How is monetization taking place?

Techniques for detecting content repurposing

- Single-page flavor: Cluster pages into equivalence classes of very similar pages
  - If most pages on a site a very similar to pages on other sites, raise a red flag
  - (There are legitimate replicated sites; e.g. mirrors of Linux man pages)
- Many-snippets flavor: Test if page consists mostly of phrases that also occur somewhere else
  - Computationally hard problem
  - Probabilistic technique that makes it tractable (Fetterly et al SIGIR 2005 paper)

Cloaking

- Serve fake content to search engine spider
- DNS cloaking: Switch IP address. Impersonate



More spam techniques

- **Doorway pages**
  - Pages optimized for a single keyword that re-direct to the real target page
- **Link spamming**
  - links between pages that are present for reasons other than merit
  - Mutual admiration societies, hidden links, awards – more on these later
  - *Domain flooding:* numerous domains that point or re-direct to a target page
- **Robots**
  - Fake query stream – rank checking programs
    - "Curve-fit" ranking programs of search engines
  - Millions of submissions via Add-Url

The war against spam

- Quality signals - Prefer authoritative pages based on:
  - Votes from authors (linkage signals)
  - Votes from users (usage signals)
- Policing of URL submissions
  - Anti robot test , i.e. not submitted by a robot
- Limits on meta-keywords
- Robust link analysis
  - Ignore statistically implausible linkage (or text)
  - Use link analysis to detect spammers (guilt by association)
- Spam recognition by machine learning
  - Training set based on known spam
- Family friendly filters
  - Linguistic analysis, general classification techniques, etc.
  - For images: flesh tone detectors, source text analysis, etc.
- Editorial intervention
  - Blacklists
  - Top queries audited
  - Complaints addressed
  - Suspect pattern detection

Size of the Web

What is the size of the web ?

- Issues
  - The web is really infinite
    - Dynamic content, e.g., calendar
    - Soft 404: www.yahoo.com/<anything> is a valid page
  - Static web contains syntactic duplication, mostly due to mirroring (~30%)
  - Some servers are seldom connected
- Who cares?
  - Media, and consequently the user
  - Engine design
  - Engine crawl policy. Impact on recall.

What can we attempt to measure?

- The relative sizes of search engines
  - The notion of a page being indexed is still *reasonably* well defined.
  - Already there are problems
    - Document extension: e.g. engines index pages not yet crawled, by indexing anchortext.
    - Document restriction: All engines restrict what is indexed (first *n* words, only relevant words, etc.)
- The coverage of a search engine relative to another particular crawling process.

Deep vs Dark

- Deep Web
  - that which cannot be indexed by search engines
  - e.g.
    - Search box on an e-commerce site
    - Password protected content (e.g. FB profiles)
    - Calendar databases
- Dark Web
  - Subset of the deep web
  - Not indexable, cannot be accessed using traditional web browsers
  - Malware, illicit content, used for nefarious purposes

Graph Structure in the Web

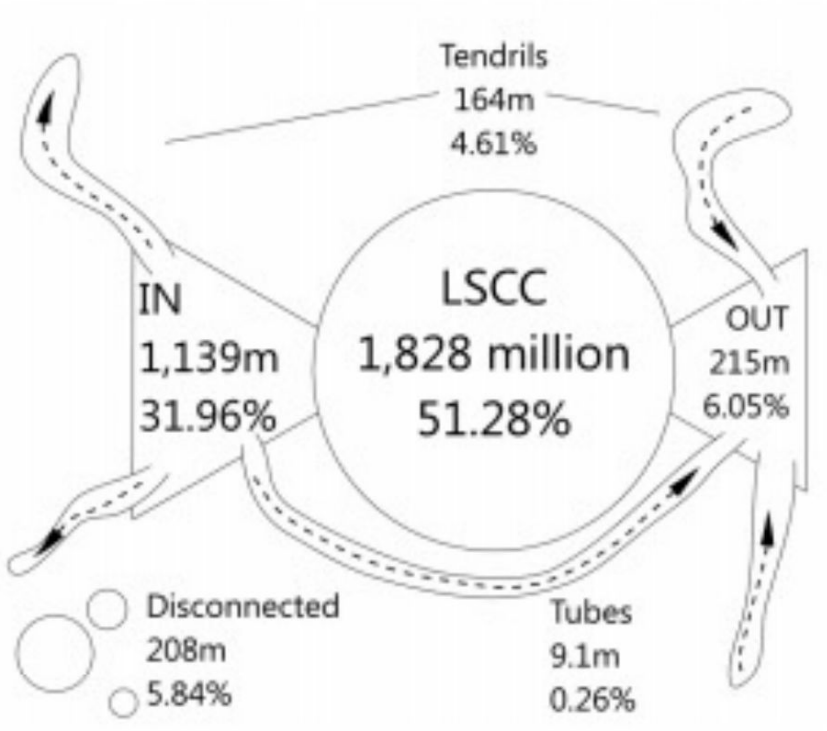


Figure 7: Bow-tie structure of the web graph

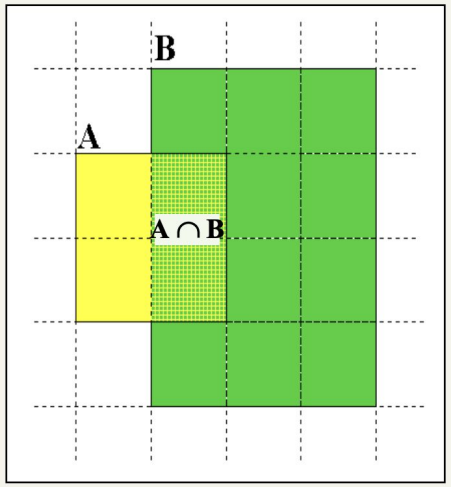
Zipf's Law on the Web

- Number of in-links/out-links to/from a page has a Zipfian distribution.
  - A large number of docs have the same number of in-links/out-links to/from a page
- Length of web pages has a Zipfian distribution.
  - Certain page lengths are most common; i.e. a huge number of docs with the same page length.
- Number of hits to a web page has a Zipfian distribution.
  - A large number of pages will generate the same number of hits; dramatic drop-off in number of pages as the above frequency reduces

How will you compare 2 search engines?

How will you compare 2 search engines?

Relative Size from Overlap
Given two engines A and B



Sample URLs randomly from A

Check if contained in B and vice versa

$A \cap B = (1/2) * \text{Size } A$

$A \cap B = (1/6) * \text{Size } B$

$(1/2) * \text{Size } A = (1/6) * \text{Size } B$

$\therefore \text{ Size } A / \text{Size } B = (1/6)/(1/2) = 1/3$

Each test involves: (i) Sampling (ii) Checking

Sampling URLs

- Ideal strategy: Generate a random URL and check for containment in each index.
- Problem: Random URLs are hard to find! Enough to generate a random URL contained in a given Engine.
- Approach 1: Generate a random URL contained in a given engine
  - Pick a random query from search log; pick random page returned as search result
  - Suffices for the estimation of relative size
- Approach 2: Random walks / IP addresses
  - In theory: might give us a true estimate of the size of the web (as opposed to just relative sizes of indexes)

Statistical methods

- Approach 1
  - *** Random queries: preferred method
  - Random searches
- Approach 2
  - Random IP addresses
  - Random walks

Random URLs from random queries

- Generate <u>random query</u>: how?
  - **Lexicon:** 400,000+ words from a web crawl

    Not an English dictionary
  - **Conjunctive Queries:** w_1 and w_2

    e.g., vocalists AND rsi
- Get 100 result URLs from engine A
- Choose a random URL as the candidate to check for presence in engine B (how do you check for presence?)
- This distribution induces a probability weight W(p) for each page.
- Conjecture: $W(SE_A) / W(SE_B) \sim |SE_A| / |SE_B|$

Query Based Checking

- *Strong Query* to check whether an engine *B* has a document *D (corresponding to random URL)*:
  - Download *D*. Get list of words.
  - Use 8 low frequency words as AND query to *B*
  - Check if *D* is present in result set.
- Problems:
  - Near duplicates (not D, but something identical to D)
  - Frames
  - Redirects
  - Engine time-outs
  - Is 8-word query good enough?

Advantages & disadvantages

- Statistically sound under the induced weight.
- Biases induced by random query
  - Query Bias: Favors content-rich pages in the language(s) of the lexicon
  - Ranking Bias: *Solution:* Use conjunctive queries & fetch all
  - Checking Bias: Duplicates, impoverished pages omitted
  - Document or query restriction bias: engine might not deal properly with 8 words conjunctive query
  - Malicious Bias: Sabotage by engine
  - Operational Problems: Time-outs, failures, engine inconsistencies, index modification.

Alt 1: Random searches

- These are real queries based on real users, rather than “random queries”
- Choose random searches extracted from a local log [Lawrence & Giles 97] or build “random searches” [Notess]
  - Use only queries with small results sets.
  - Count normalized URLs in result sets.
  - Use ratio statistics

Advantages & disadvantages

- Advantage
  - Might be a better reflection of the human perception of coverage
- Issues
  - Samples are correlated with source of log
  - Duplicates
  - Technical statistical problems (must have non-zero results, ratio average not statistically sound)

Alt 2: Random IP addresses

- Generate random IP addresses
- Find a web server at the given address
  - If there's one
- Collect all pages from server
  - From this, choose a page at random

Random IP addresses

- HTTP requests to random IP addresses
  - Ignored: empty or authorization required or excluded
  - [Lawr99] Estimated 2.8 million IP addresses running crawlable web servers (16 million total) from observing 2500 servers.
  - OCLC using IP sampling found 8.7 M hosts in 2001
    - Netcraft [Netc02] accessed 37.2 million hosts in July 2002
- [Lawr99] exhaustively crawled 2500 servers and extrapolated
  - Estimated size of the web to be 800 million
  - Estimated use of metadata descriptors:
    - Meta tags (keywords, description) in 34% of home pages, Dublin core metadata in 0.3%

Advantages & disadvantages

- Advantages
  - Clean statistics
  - Independent of crawling strategies
- Disadvantages
  - Doesn't deal with duplication
  - Many hosts might share one IP, or not accept requests
  - No guarantee all pages are linked to root page.
    - Eg: employee pages
  - Power law for # pages/hosts generates bias towards sites with few pages.
    - But bias can be accurately quantified IF underlying distribution understood
  - Potentially influenced by spamming (multiple IP's for same server to avoid IP block)

Alt 3: Random walks

- View the Web as a directed graph
- Build a random walk on this graph
  - Includes various "jump" rules back to visited sites
    - Does not get stuck in spider traps!
    - Can follow all links!
  - Converges to a stationary distribution
    - Must assume graph is finite and independent of the walk.
    - Conditions are not satisfied (cookie crumbs, flooding)
    - Time to convergence not really known
  - Sample from stationary distribution of walk
  - Use the "strong query" method to check coverage by SE

Advantages & disadvantages

- Advantages
  - "Statistically clean" method at least in theory!
  - Could work even for infinite web (assuming convergence) under certain metrics.
- Disadvantages
  - List of seeds is a problem.
  - Practical approximation might not be valid.
  - Non-uniform distribution
    - Subject to link spamming

Conclusions

- No sampling solution is perfect.
- Lots of new ideas ...
- ....but the problem is getting harder
- Quantitative studies are fascinating and a good research problem

References

1. Slides provided by Sougata Saha (Instructor, Fall 2022 - CSE 4/535)
2. Materials provided by Dr. Rohini K Srihari
3. https://nlp.stanford.edu/IR-book/information-retrieval-book.html