



Salon.com



Search

All of Salon.com
Only Technology

Directory

Hot Topics

[Ask the Pilot](#)
[The Matrix](#)
[Computer Games](#)
[Globalization](#)
[Joyce McGreevy](#)

Articles by date

- [All of Salon.com](#)
- [By department](#)



[Find a job](#)

[Search our Personals](#)



[Arts & Entertainment](#)

[Books](#)

[Comics](#)

[Life](#)

[News](#)

[People](#)

[Politics](#)

[Sex](#)

☐ [Tech & Business](#)

[Audio](#)



[Letters](#)

[Columnists](#)

[Corrections](#)



[Salon Premium](#)

[Gift Subscriptions](#)

[Salon Communities](#)

-- [The Well](#)

-- [Table Talk](#)

[Salon Blogs](#)

[Salon Gear](#)

[Reprint Information](#)



[About Salon](#)

[Advertise in Salon](#)

[Investor Relations](#)

[Meet Mr. Anti-Google](#) | [1](#), [2](#)

In his day job, Brandt runs [NameBase](#), an online database of thousands of citations to influential people. The system is principally designed for researchers who want to find books and newspaper articles that mention a specific person. For example, if you're trying to find out who this character "Donald Rumsfeld" you keep hearing about on the news is, you'd type it into NameBase and find about [50 books and articles](#) that mention the man.

The story of NameBase suggests what admirers might call a certain hardy perseverance -- and others would call obsessiveness -- in Brandt. According to a [review](#) of Namebase that appeared in October 2000 in College & Research Libraries News, the database began in the 1960s when Brandt -- described as a "New Left activist" -- "began clipping magazine and newspaper articles and collecting investigative books about the power structure." Brandt did a lot of clipping -- he has collected almost 100,000 names from more than 200,000 citations, including some he had to seek Freedom of Information Act authorization to get.

The result is, in the description of College & Research Libraries News, an index populated with articles "designed to uncover secrets or conspiracies in high places."

On the phone, Brandt doesn't come off as paranoid or neurotic, but the things he spends his time on -- like NameBase -- suggest a deep suspicion of what most of the rest of us might consider only a minor nuisance. Brandt is, for example, very worried about Web cookies. Earlier this year, he [pressured](#) the CIA to change its cookie policy, and, hot off that success, [he asked Google](#) to reconsider its policy of setting 36-year cookies.

David Krane, Google's director of communications, said that he'd look into it and get back to Brandt -- but that was in March, and Brandt hasn't heard anything since.



Today's Daypass sponsored by
[Nature Made](#)

In an e-mail, Nathan Tyler, a Google representative, told Salon that "Google uses cookies to enhance the user search experience. With cookies, Google can store a user's preferences such as their search language, SafeSearch settings, the number of results per page, etc. Our users tell us time and again that they want their preferences saved even if they don't return to Google for a



[Customer Service](#)



[Table Talk](#)

[Spirited
Salon forums]

[Computer flu season:
Protecting yourself from
viruses.](#)

[Bookmark this! Your favorite
Web sites.](#)

- [Posts of the week](#)

[The Well](#)

[Pioneering members-only
discussions]

[Crabby about carbs?](#)

[Sound Off](#)

- [E-mail Salon](#)
- [Send us a Letter to the
Editor](#)
- [Recent Letters](#)



[Downloads](#)

- Get Salon.com on
[your PDA](#)

long time. In addition, a longer cookie life means less data is transmitted at every visit (to refresh a cookie, check if it's current, etc.) and therefore speeds download times.

"We understand that some users prefer not to use cookies at all," Tyler added. "That's why we made Google's search work well if users don't accept cookies -- all users lose is the ability to set search preferences. Most modern browsers allow cookies to be disabled on a per-site basis."

It's hard to get too upset about search privacy at Google when, all over the Web, other sites are increasingly playing fast and loose with private data. Google isn't alone in setting long cookies or saving search terms, says Sullivan. "Other search engines keep that kind of information, but people tend to want to focus on Google because it's so popular -- and they almost unfairly separate it out from the group."

Sullivan notes that, unlike other search services, Google isn't a "portal site," so it doesn't register users in order to offer them auxiliary services (like e-mail). Therefore, Google has no way of tying a search term with a specific person -- only with a specific computer -- which, from a privacy standpoint, poses less of a concern. Yahoo, which requires sign-in for portal services, has already announced a plan to e-mail ads to people based on what they've searched for. ([The plan](#), called Yahoo Impulse Mail, is "opt-in.") If you wanted to be a watchdog for the privacy of search, wouldn't you start by attacking that program?

And Brandt concedes that, in truth, the thing he hates most about Google is not its cookie, but its ranking policy. PageRank is his Enemy No. 1.

PageRank, according to people who consider themselves experts on Google, is what makes the site as good as it is. Developed by Google's founders, Larry Page and Sergey Brin, while they were students at Stanford, the system is credited with revolutionizing the search world. In the old days, search engines just served up results in whatever order they pleased; the engines didn't treat some sites as more "important" than others.

The idea of site importance was Google's singular inspiration. According to the company, this is how PageRank works: "Google interprets a link from page A to page B as a vote, by page A, for page B. But, Google looks at more than the sheer volume of votes, or links a page receives; it also analyzes the page that casts the vote. Votes cast by pages that are themselves 'important' weigh more heavily and help to make other pages 'important.'"

For a while, there was no way to see how "important" Google thought your site was. But a couple of years ago Google released the [Google Toolbar](#), which has a small green meter that tells you the rank of every page you visit. Although it doesn't give a very precise measure of page rank (You can't tell, for example, whether Google is partial to the New York Times or the Washington Post, as they both appear to have the same rank) the toolbar does give a crude idea of page rank, providing a way to tell the very important pages from the very unimportant.

Google's PageRank meter got a lot of webmasters focused on their own rank. It was the toolbar that clued Brandt in to the fact that Google didn't like him very much.

When you type "[NameBase](#)" into Google, Brandt's site comes up first, but Brandt is not satisfied with that. "My problem has been to get Google to go deep enough into my site," he says. In other words, Brandt wants Google to index the 100,000 names he has in his database, so that a Google search for "Donald Rumsfeld" will bring up NameBase's page for the secretary of defense.

For some reason, though, all of NameBase's deep pages -- its pages with specific names and citations -- have a low Google page rank, which causes them to show up low in the search results. Search for "[Donald Rumsfeld](#)" in Google and in the first five pages you get a lot of .mil and .gov sites, some news stories, and some activist sites. Namebase's entry on Rumsfeld doesn't come up. (It is in Google's database, but to find it somebody would have to first wade through hundreds of results.)

Brandt sees this as Google's major flaw. "I'm not saying there aren't some sites that are more important than others, but in Google the sites that do well are the spammy sites, sites which have Google psyched out, and a lot of big sites, corporate headquarters' sites -- they show up before sites that criticize those companies."

In other words, Brandt recognizes that there has to be *some* order to Google's results, and that some sites might deserve to come up before others. He just disagrees with the way Google does it. In Brandt's ideal world, if you searched for "[United Airlines](#)," you would see [untied.com](#) -- a site critical of United -- before you see [United's page](#). And if you searched for Rumsfeld, you'd see NameBase's dossier on him before the [Defense Department's site](#) on the "The Honorable Donald Rumsfeld."

Brandt would prefer that Google look more at the content of a page than the links to it. As a matter of personal philosophy, he thinks that judging a site based on links is unfair. "It's democratic in the same way that capitalism is democratic," Brandt says. "You could have the cure for cancer on the Web and not find it in Google because 'important' sites don't link to it."

In an [essay on PageRank](#), he writes (using the [royal "we"](#)):

"We feel that PageRank has run its course. Google doesn't have to abandon it entirely, but they should de-emphasize it. The first step is to stop reporting PageRank on the toolbar. This would mute the awareness of PageRank among optimizers and webmasters, and remove some of the bizarre effects that such awareness has engendered. The next step would be to replace all mention of PageRank in their own public relations documentation, in favor of general phrases about how link popularity is one factor among many in their ranking algorithms. And Google should adjust the balance between their various algorithms so that excellent on-page characteristics are not completely cancelled by low link popularity."

Now, asking Google to get rid of PageRank because it ruined searching is akin to asking the PGA to get rid of Tiger Woods because he ruined golf -- it's about the most outlandish thing you can ask for, and Brandt seems to know that. But he says if people think that Google works well for them, they should ask: "Compared to what?" Google may be better than other search engines out there, but is it as good as a search engine can be?

Google's Tyler defended PageRank. "Page rank is an unbiased measure of the value of pages on the Web -- it's fundamentally a measure of where a random surfer is likely to end up," he said. "Sites with merit and/or importance are likely to attract more links and surfers. In response to the claim that commercial sites will dominate the PageRank system, it's easy to find noncommercial sites that enjoy great page rank simply because many people believe a site is important."

But he added that Brandt's view that PageRank is the most important part of Google's algorithm is off the mark. "It's also important to emphasize that page rank is only one of more than one hundred different factors we use to determine the relevancy of a page for a search query," he said.

This is a point many people don't seem to get. Danny Sullivan, of Search Engine Watch, says webmasters and search engine optimizers tend overemphasize the

importance of PageRank, and in the process "greatly oversimplify how Google ranks its pages." To determine rank order, Google looks at more than just links from "important" sites -- it looks at the context of those links, the link text, and dozens of other characteristics. The tech press, early on, looked for a reason why Google was so good, and Google told them about PageRank. It was a good story and it caught on. But the truth is that Google's ranking formula is a very closely guarded secret, and it goes well beyond PageRank.

Bob Massa, a search engine optimizer who runs [SearchKing](#), seems to know that Google is more than PageRank, but he also knows that many people put a value on that little green bar in the toolbar. And so he's "selling" higher PageRank scores.

His method is simple. He has a collection of sites on specific subjects -- like [maps.searchking.com](#) and [health.searchking.com](#) -- and he [prices](#) ads on those sites according to their PageRank scores. An ad on a site of his that has a score of 5 costs \$19 per month; a score of 8 is \$99 a month.

Why would somebody pay \$69 a month for an ad on [maps.searchking.com](#), a PageRank 7 site? Because they think they know how Google works: If you get a link from an important site, your own site becomes more important. You don't pay the \$69 for the clicks you might get from all the visitors to [maps.searchking.com](#) -- you pay it to get a higher rank in Google.

In an interview, Massa didn't come right out and say he is trying to sell higher rankings in Google. "I'm just saying that sites with high page rank have a huge perception of value, and if you want to pay more for that I'm not going to talk you out of it," he said. "When they put it on the toolbar and made it public, they must have known it's going to become a currency."

He is less subtle on his site: "Having a thousand links from sites that are performing poorly does no good! Let me say that again, **HAVING A THOUSAND LINKS FROM POORLY PERFORMING SITES DOES NO GOOD!**" In fact that can hurt you more than help. SearchKing can provide you with a quality traffic through your text ad and give you quality links."

When Salon called him, Massa said he was "busy as a one-eyed dog in a sausage factory." He couldn't keep up with orders for his PageRank ads -- and he hopes that Google won't interfere with that business. If the company asked him to stop using the word "PageRank" in his promotional material, he wouldn't mind doing that. "But if behind my back they would do something to hurt my portal sites," like, for example, remove them from the index, "then the whole Internet needs to start fearing them," he said.

Google's Nathan Tyler said: "We encourage webmasters to use common sense when considering any commercial offering that purports to increase page rank. We also encourage webmasters to steer clear of 'free-for-all' link programs, link farms, and any attempt to mimic PageRank. In addition, it's inevitable that high-quality pages which sell links from their site will inevitably diminish their own value/page rank."

Sullivan, of Search Engine Watch, says that Massa's is the first program he's seen that has been so "brazen about selling page rank" -- and he doesn't think it's going to work, especially since Google knows about the program.

Brandt, though, is convinced that Google relies too much on PageRank, which he calls Google's "original sin." He wants Massa's ads to succeed, because he thinks that such a scheme will subvert PageRank, and Google will have to abandon it in favor of other ranking techniques.

"I don't have much pull with Google," he says, not at all discouraged by that fact.
"But I really think the days of PageRank are numbered."

salon.com



About the writer

[Farhad Manjoo](#) is a staff writer for
Salon Technology & Business.

Sound Off

Send us a [Letter to the Editor](#)

Related stories

[Google à go-go](#)

While other search engines sputter and fail, Monika Henzinger, Google's director of research, has an answer to every query.

By Katharine Mieszkowski
06/21/01

[Google: We're down with ODP](#)

Will the streamlined search engine's decision to mix in the 20,000 editors of the Open Directory Project mess with its mojo?

By Mark Durham
03/24/00



[The Free Software Project](#)

Read Andrew Leonard's book-in-progress on Linux and open source -- and post your comments.

[Salon Search](#) [About Salon](#) [Table Talk](#) [Advertise in Salon](#) [Investor Relations](#)

[Arts & Entertainment](#) | [Books](#) | [Comics](#) | [Life](#) | [News](#) | [People](#)
[Politics](#) | [Sex](#) | [Tech & Business](#) and [The Free Software Project](#) | [Audio](#)
[Letters](#) | [Columnists](#) | [Salon Plus](#) | [Salon Gear](#)

Reproduction of material from any Salon pages without written permission is strictly prohibited

Copyright 2004 Salon.com

Salon, 22 4th Street, 16th Floor, San Francisco, CA 94103

Telephone 415 645-9200 | Fax 415 645-9204

[E-mail](#) | [Salon.com Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Service](#)