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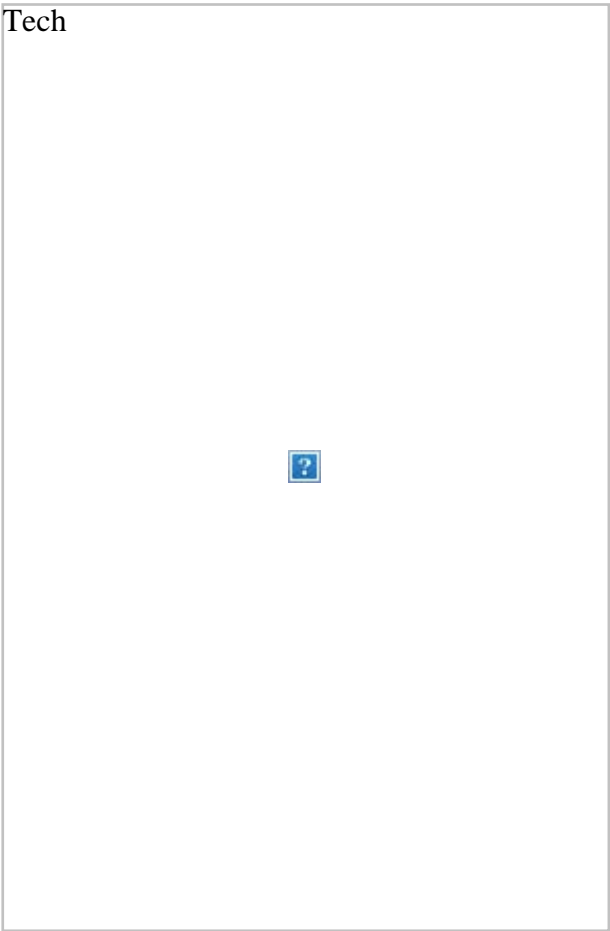
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Meet Mr. **Anti**-Google

A crusading webmaster says the popular search engine's page-ranking algorithm is "undemocratic."

By Farhad Manjoo



Aug. 29, 2002 | Daniel Brandt is a 54-year-old webmaster in San Antonio, Texas, and he's not a fan of Google. He knows that opinion puts him in the minority. Some people have insulted him for it, and others -- mostly webmasters -- have told him please shut up, lest Google get upset. "I've heard all the stories about Google -- how the former cook for the Grateful Dead serves up their lunches," he says, reciting a point of the Google mythology. "I know people love them, and I've been

censored on some of the webmaster forums when I get too upset at Google."

But Brandt doesn't care, and he's not going to stop saying it, even if people get mad at him: Google's no good. Brandt believes that the search engine is unfair, and it doesn't -- as many people think -- return the best search results. Brandt runs [google-watch.org](#), a new site that he hopes will act as "point of reference for privacy advocates, journalists and bloggers" who want to know the truth about Google.

What is the truth according to Brandt? Google's [PageRank](#) algorithm, the celebrated system by which Google orders search results, is not, as Google says, "uniquely democratic" -- it's "uniquely tyrannical." PageRank is the "opposite of affirmative action," he has written, meaning that the system discriminates against new Web sites and favors established sites. More than that, says Brandt, Google is a careless custodian of private information. When you search for something at Google, it saves your search terms and associates them with a [cookie](#) that is set to live on your machine for 36 years. Brandt fears that law enforcement officials could muscle Google into divulging all the terms you've ever searched for. Those terms could be "a





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window into your state of mind," and are therefore a clear violation of your privacy, he says.

Brandt is not a disinterested party; the dispute between Daniel Brandt and Google is personal. He has spent thousands of hours building a Web site that he believes is both useful and important, and Google, in its algorithmic blindness, has given Brandt a lower page rank than he thinks he's entitled to. Brandt finds it genuinely hard to believe -- and even personally insulting -- that Google won't give him more credit.

For people who love Google and who feel that they can't live without it -- for the vast majority of us, that is -- Daniel Brandt's arguments seem absurd. Because he has a personal stake in the squabble, he's pretty easy to dismiss: He doesn't like his Google rank, so it's not surprising he doesn't like Google. But Brandt has spent a lifetime questioning the secret machinations of people in positions of authority, and he's taking on Google in that same spirit. Google has become an authority on the Web, he says, so powerful that we need to watch it closely.



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Few people would disagree that Google is an unavoidable part of the Web, a site that you can't ignore if you want to make it big online. Search engine optimizers -- folks who make it their business to get sites good results in search engines -- have taken profitable advantage of this fact, and indeed some are finding novel ways to make Google's power work for them, including one man who is trying to effectively "sell" page rank, a practice that could possibly hurt Google's effectiveness.

For philosophical as well as technical reasons, Brandt sees PageRank as Google's central flaw, and he says that Google should abandon the system -- and if it doesn't, people should force it to. "You could almost argue that without good search engines the value of the Internet would be extremely diminished," he says. "They are to the Internet as your power company is to your daily life. In that sense Google and other large search engines -- they ought to be thought of as public utilities. Some sites report that more than half or 75 percent of their referrals come from Google -- those are scary numbers."

Brandt's call is not new, says Danny Sullivan of [Search Engine Watch](#). "It's what people said about Yahoo in like 1997," he says. "It was very difficult to get listed in Yahoo, and people couldn't get a response out of the company. And they said, 'If I can't get in there maybe they need to be regulated.' I think it's that way with Google now because they seem all-powerful."

He's right; Google does seem all-powerful. It's been four years since the search engine came online, and in those years, while the whole industry has crumbled around it, Google, somehow, has only become bigger, better and more popular. To someone like Brandt, someone not unfriendly to conspiracy theories and wary of the "power structure," the Web according to Google must be a hard thing to bear. And bizarre as it may seem to go after a service as loved as Google is, on evidence as thin as Brandt offers, isn't it more surprising that it's taken this long for someone to snap up the google-watch.org domain name? Google seems indomitable, and Brandt's fight is, certainly, doomed from the start. But perhaps it's time someone took on Google -- even if just for the fun of it.



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