

The Seduction of the Searchbar

*“...and I found God down there;
in the dirt and grime,
between the screens
and it was ecstasy
between my veins
flourescent light on my face;
His light
all over me..”*

- poem fragment by DG

About one year ago I published a blogpost titled “[A Man Walks Into A Searchbar](#).” The post was actually written almost a year before then, in 2019, during my senior year of college. At that time I had just finished reading some Heidegger for one of my philosophy classes and was swept up in this idea of hyphenated words and descriptive vocabulary. Looking back at the blogpost now, it’s clear that I was in some very strange, esoteric mindset. I even had the gall to include a glossary of terms at the end.

Yet, two years after writing it and one year after “publishing” it, I still find myself thinking about the searchbar. I find myself concerned with the growing dissolution of central authority across all cultural institutions and am regularly thinking about how the framework I glued together with brute-force punctuation may yet have some value if written like a semi-normal person, not like someone who enjoys reading *Being and Time*. So, in the name of transparency, I’ll be clear: What follows is a rewrite of my old blogpost. I will leave out the hyphens, ditch the glossary, but maintain a voice of utter conviction. Afterwards, I will provide a contextualization my previous post was lacking. Let’s begin.

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When I walk into a Library looking for a book, I knowingly cede authority to the librarian behind the desk. I maintain some authority myself, some notions of themes or plots or character developments; I resolve to make the final decision based off something like intuition. Yet, I readily and completely acknowledge that the librarian is really the deciding factor. I remember as a child I would walk upstairs to the Children’s Section and ask the woman walking about: “what should I read?” She would ask questions about my reading history, ask about my interests, ask about what I liked and didn’t like. She would walk down the stacks and pull out books so that they hung over the edge of the shelf. As she did this she would describe the book, sometimes the plot, sometimes the “feel,” and would continue this pattern of pulling and describing until there were 6-10 books jutting forward from the uniformity. Sometimes I would take them all, sometimes I would only take a few, but I would always pick from her selection. Occasionally I would supplement with books I heard about at school, books that were new and had shiny plastic covers not yet greased and grimy, books that were arranged in a display with a placard. But, by and large, my choice was limited by the hand of the librarian. Zooming out further, my choice was limited by the walls of the library. Zooming out to the farthest extent, my choice was limited by the inter-library cataloging and loaning system of Western Massachusetts. I knew all this, accepted it, worked with it, and came to love it. After all, I read some very good books this way.

When the process worked, when the librarian’s considerations and my caprice aligned, I was always satisfied. But my desire was not obliterated in the presence of perfection. Say, for instance, I wished to

read some Fantasy/Magic novel. Say that the librarian gave me one to read. Upon finishing the book, I perhaps thought to myself “what a stellar Fantasy/Magic novel.” This did not mean that, in a few weeks time once I finished the series, I would not return for yet another Fantasy/Magic novel. This did not mean that my desire for Fantasy/Magic was absolved, removed, eradicated, or fulfilled completely as it saw itself echoed in reality. My desire remained intact, just abated. Softened. Temporarily satisfied. I knew that what compelled me to ask the librarian, look at book covers, read dust jackets, and search catalogs was not the search for some perfection. I recognized that I was working within brick walls, within a certain mile radius. I could palpably sense my limitations and perfection never even crossed my mind, only a temporal realization of an abstract desire for fantastical narrative.

When I use a searchbar, I feel like God commanding chaos to his whim. Despite growing up and hearing the metaphors of the internet as a “digital library,” my experience of pixels differed radically from my experience of paper. For one, there was no librarian. There was Google. My librarian had a desk. She had long hair, she had a slow walk, she had lines in her face and a distinctive shade of eyeliner beneath her eyes. If she pulled a book from the shelf I thought looked bad (which wasn’t uncommon) and I later found to be different and difficult, I would not reframe my interests. I would not return with my finger bookmarked into a page and say “nono, you misunderstand. THIS is my reading history; THESE are my interests. Got it?” I would think to myself “she missed on that one. Let’s try another.” Sometimes she had me read books I did not like initially but grew to appreciate. Sometimes she was right and I was wrong. I knew that. She was, after all, a librarian.

Google is an image so saturated it is equivalent to nothingness. Google does not allow for understandings of limitations. Google is never wrong. I can sense the outcry: “Google never wrong?? You should see the search results I get sometimes!” I insist: Google is never wrong. This is because Google simply *provides*. Google simply *parses data; assesses profile; returns link*. When you see a bad search result, how often do you scroll to the 5th page, to check if Google’s ranking algorithm is wrong? How often do you switch browsers, to see if Google’s indexing is mistaken? How often do you open an encyclopedia or call a friend because Search Engines as an entire epistemological framework are ill fitted to your pursuit of some desire? No, do not lie to yourself. When dissatisfied in your pursuit, you never consider Google to be wrong – you consider your *mastery* of Google to be insufficient. When I do not find the news article I want, that describes this event the right way, I do not switch browsers, scroll, or open a book. I change my search terms. *Obviously*, I change my search terms. This is the methodology of using search engines. Refine, rephrase, and adapt. If Google was a Librarian I would not take my screen filled with incorrect hyperlink and refresh the page, look again. That would be madness! No – I would say “THIS is what I want. THIS word is a better keyword. Try Again.”

What is the result of this difference? Why is it important? In my example of getting a book from the library, I knew my limitations and did not search for perfection because I realized the imperfect implications of myself and my librarian. I accepted that dissatisfaction was a pattern incorporated into the greater fabric of my desire. I myself was being patterned; I had no control over the inner mandelbrots that composed my yearning for narrative nor the hand of the librarian pulling books from shelves. In Google, I only control myself and therefore view only myself as in control. I can try and hold onto some idea of imperfection but the sheer interface of million results per second does not allow for me to truly consider the nature of keywords, popularity, SEO, or indexing. Google is a fuzzy wall of the noise produced by white and blue frequencies, not the crackle of plastic at every carpeted step. It is impenetrable. When we use Google, we use it as if it was perfect, and ourselves the imperfect

conductor. I act as Moses raising his staff and parting the Sea of Information into neat blue boxes for my personal consideration. Over time, this results in a slow but inevitable opinion of superiority. It results in a sense of power.

With this power comes the obliteration of the unsatisfied desire. No matter what it is you're looking for, you will find the exact thing you want, if only you have the control and acuity to master the searchbar. You no longer search for potentiality; you search for confirmation. Suddenly that news article doesn't merely inform, it reveals something I knew to be the case. It becomes Perfect, like a Trump tweet. It becomes Flawless, like a TikTok with just the right leftist buzzwords in it. It becomes Obvious, like a perfectly crafted Facebook-rant. I, after all, *do my own research*. These tweets, these memes, these posts, these news articles – they are not a ceding of authority to another. This is the common discourse you will see: “Oh these people put all their trust into THAT? Those people just believe every word published in THIS?” That framework is mistaken. There is no faith in the mouthpiece, in the Librarian, in Google. There is faith in oneself. One's research. One's command of keyword.

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All right, maybe I am incapable of writing like a normal person. I accept this. Nonetheless, I believe the searchbar deserves our consideration. Acknowledgment of the egoistic autonomy and power that occurs in the vacuum of perfected desire seems to be lacking in a lot of discourse surrounding the degrading of authority in the digital age. When I refer to a “desire,” I am referring to a basic yearning for a lack. A compulsion to fill what is empty and in need of filling. When that desire becomes concrete in Perfection, it ceases to be lacking. Desire is a sieve; by its nature, it cannot be satisfied merely through fulfillment, for such fulfillment is impossible. Desire outstrips us. Yet, if that desire is already linked to a presupposed conclusion, it ceases to be our desire and becomes the bastard of our imagination and our reality. If I am in total control, I do not desire a lack, for I am not lacking. I desire myself. I desire my imagined reality. I do not discover – I find. This is what I mean when I refer to the obliteration of desire that occurs within a search-bar. I no longer *want* to stumble upon an answer to satisfy me; I am *certain* I will find what is already there. As the authorities of pre-digital ages suddenly reveal their clothes to be of the Emperor, one defaults to trusting only what is within their control: their searchbar.

The Post-Modern paradigm of dead authors is ringing truer with every Tucker segment. When slammed full in the face with an apparently objective infinity of information one struggles to maintain faith that their foundations are rooted in solid ground. One begins to consider the patternlessness of it all, the sloppy design, the shoddy set, the tropey narrative, the mascaraed eye. People begin to pine for honesty; they see nothing but the untruth of chaos. It is common to see the general public described as suffering from a surprising lack of central authority; usually we read the headlines paired with “echo chamber” or “rabbit hole” or “Qanon” or “dogecoin.” Rarely to do we see the face in a square say “Perhaps we should consider the fact that by using search engines as a means of gaining knowledge we are growing drunk with power. The omniscience of god is getting poured into our cerebrum at 500MB/s and we are drinking it up so fast we become consumed by the allure of self-reliance to mask our fear of drowning.”

The COVID vaccine provides a good insight into this phenomenon. Once one disallows for the absolute authority of some other agent, be that agent Fauci or the CDC or the WHO, once one thinks “I cannot trust that in of itself; I cannot see the foundations and must ensure the beanstalk is indeed rooted in soil. I must qualify it with my own research (on Google),” one necessarily places the authority

entirely within oneself, even if not realizing it. One decides to inject themselves with super-serum, hop onto the information highway, and figure it out all by themselves. One is not biased (how can blue links on white be biased?). They are super-powerful. They saw the so-called authorities and have pulled back the curtain to reveal a puppet pulling strings, itself controlled by an unknown Gepetto. They have a search bar and a well-rounded critical faculty. They have rationality, logic, the ability to decide for themselves. They have *control*.

This is seen in the Qanon movement as well. Q is not to be followed blindly; Q is not a prophet that people take at face value. Q drops, the term for the cryptic messages left on forums by Q, are meant to be deciphered. They are meant to be researched, filtered, analyzed. One does not simply trust the message. Rather, one takes the message and verifies it via one's own syntax and grammar control. One parses the information and *does the research themselves*. When the research is concluded, and the drop is verified or understood, that is not an acknowledgment of trust in that authority. It is a reiteration of one's own power.

This is not a phenomenon only in the fringes of anti-vaccination or political extremism. This is the inherent quality of using the searchbar. Our desires are affected by surveillance technology and algorithm; we are sure of that, and make jokes about it. But our desires are also affected by the phenomena of searching a database with a biased tool we do not comprehend and convincing ourselves that our diction is what yields our results. It may be easy to conceive of how distrusting authority would necessarily lead to an increased sense of personal competency, and even easier to point out moments where the distrust is for a commonly stable authority such as "medical professionals" or "the government." But the sense of power begotten from clicking and scrolling does not only arise from such blatant distrust. The medium of that which purports to receive desire and output answer gives rise to feelings of power whenever it is engaged. I seek the source of a meme; I read a good recipe for the bread I will make; I find the song from the movie I was thinking of earlier today; I learn what's happening with that whole whistleblower thing; I find out if that video I saw was real; I update myself on what's happening in Georgia; *I look into it*. In every case, to a varying degree, there is the necessary tactile filtering of exterior authority to an internal review process, conducted within a rectangle, as mundane as parting a sea with a staff before breakfast.

I know this perfection we seek is merely an abstract. Clearly, I do not believe in the perfect Fantasy/Magic novel. I just want a good book. Similarly, I know that Google gives me something more personalized than I can imagine. I know the perfect find doesn't exist, that I am not in control. I know that I am not using a smattering of monosyllables to single-handedly sift through the growing repository of all digital information. But, I struggle to hold such conceptions when staring into the void and calmly plucking the kilobytes I was looking for. *Aren't I* single-handedly using monosyllables to sift through digital information? Every time I get what I'm looking for, nod, close my browser and feel assured with my research, I am eroding my ability to engage with imperfection. My desire, so abstract and vaguely external in a Library, becomes equivalent with my apprehension. I do not simply want some answer to a query, some terminus to a desire. I *know* the answer I want is there. I *know* I get it with just the right keystrokes. Even before I search I am anticipating the dopamine water-slide of a satisfied browsing session. I know what I want to find, even if I continue to blunder under the illusion of asking.

But....I also know that I am becoming supernatural. I can feel that I am actually becoming godlike. My sense of power is not entirely unwarranted. I feel this on DuckDuckGo, I feel this on Yandex, I feel this

on 1337x – the search bar itself can get me drunk. It is undeniable that I am becoming more powerful as I integrate the search-bar into my mentality. As the “reliability” of the algorithms increases due to a mass harvesting of metadata (personal, intellectual, biometric, digital), my power grows more refined. As the scope of content they provide access to is broadened, as more is digitized, indexed, and highlighted, my power grows more prolific. I am, after-all, chugging liter after liter of ambrosia; it is making me more powerful than my ancestors could have conceived. I cannot escape inebriation, but I must strive to remember the value of balance. I must not allow myself to consider ambrosia to be water, to think of the power of the search bar as merely my own power over syntax.

[Google announced that they may reform the search-bar.](#) Instead, you will ask a question and receive an answer. An AI of some-sort, using some language processing to better understand your desire, will return an answer for you. Not an array of links corresponding to the relevance of nodes in your search query. An answer from an expert. “A conversation.” It would be foolish for us to think that this would yield a return to authority. That it would make me peel back the label of Michael Jordan’s Special Stuff to reveal the placebo. Google already tells me an answer, I just convince myself that it is actually MY answer. The Answer I retrieved. The Perfect realization of my desire. If Google actually returned an answer unto itself, as prose, I would struggle to consider that AI-powered result to be Google’s. No no. Let’s be honest. It would be mine. For I knew the perfect wording for the perfect question to receive my Perfect Answer. At that point, I think the illusion of separation between oneself and algorithm will finally collapse, and people won’t bother to describe notions of asking and receiving an answer. They will simply describe it as knowing.