

0.1 Citation

Van Couvering, Elizabeth. "Is relevance relevant? Market, science, and war: Discourses of search engine quality." *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 12.3 (2007): 866-887.

0.2 Summary

The author conducted a study to understand the motivating factors that drive search engine producers (SEP) to make changes to the engine. Between November 2002 and May 2004, the author interviewed eleven SEPs, including senior engineers and technical executives who direct future code development. These interviewees worked at every major and minor search engine on the market: Google, Yahoo!, MSN, Ask Jeeves, AOL, and more. Each individual was interviewed over the phone for 1-2 hours in a semistructured, in-depth format. Questions probed for specific instances of change to the search engine and inquired for the motivation behind that change. The text transcript of each interview was categorized to identify themes, from which the author determined two major schemas that motivate the development of search engine technology:

1) The Market Schema

Throughout these interviews, the most common category of motivator was the market schema, which includes revenues, costs, competition, and other business issues. In explaining this motivation, interviewees regarded their search engine as a commercial service competing for users in the marketplace. Thus, the primary motivator is financial profit and that metric is linked to search engine quality via the concept of customer satisfaction. Many of the changes were motivated by the resulting increase in profit for the company.

2) The Science/Technology Schema

The second most common category of motivator was the science schema, which includes experimentation, measurement, feasibility, and objectivity. It also included discussion of solving "big" and "interesting" problems for their own sake. This motivator defined quality as relevance, or the ability to answer a user's question. Many of the changes were motivated by the improved quality of search results, which would in turn boost customer satisfaction.

These interviews also revealed a subjective component of the search engines in the form of censorship, blacklists, whitelists, and topic-specific weights. This censoring was often dictated by executives to respond to current events in the world, but it is arbitrary and not scientific. Still, these practices are accepted by the SEP because they strive to boost relevance.

This paper impacts the Internet business world because it describes the convoluted environment in which they compete for clicks. For many companies, the search engine is the primary portal through which consumers are reached. Unfortunately, this paper shows that the portal is controlled by employees working to maximize profit of the SE or develop an interesting technology, but certainly not to maximize profits of the online businesses who depend on the search engine. Moreover, this paper shows that search engines constantly evolve their ranking functions to meet business needs, respond to competition, and even promote current events. Modern Internet businesses must actively monitor and effect their position within the search engine rankings in order to maintain a steady flow of customers.