

An Ethics Bounty System Could Help Clean Up The Web

On Nov 3, 2021



In May 2021, Twitter user [@capohai shared](#) a screenshot of a Google search for “what do terrorists wear on their head,” which returned, as the first result, the Palestinian keffiyeh scarf. At the same time, [the French senate had just voted to prohibit women under 18 from wearing hijabs](#) in public, and President Macron’s LREM political party had pulled support from candidate [Sarah Zemmahi](#) for wearing a hijab in a campaign ad. How many others asked Google the same question and took its response as validation of their own prejudices or as an objective statement of fact? How many others were hurt by the results?

The outrage over Google’s tacit equation between Palestinians, headscarves, and terrorists spilled from social media [into the news](#), but

when the same search is performed today, the keffiyeh is still the top result.

It makes sense that @capohai turned to Twitter because one of the only options for most people who notice tech companies' unethical behavior—privacy breaches, furthering hate speech and disinformation, biased behavior, and more—is to post about it on social media. But as this example shows, the retribution model does not work to actually correct ethical violations.

Looking at the bigger picture, there have been calls for greater regulation of the tech industry, which is deeply necessary, but legislation may take a long time to pass and be implemented and is generally insufficient to stop the unforeseen ethics failures endemic to technology. Since algorithms tend to express our (bad) values in unexpected ways that require constant updating and fine-tuning to correct, regulations, no matter how deftly and broadly written, cannot foresee and stop all future issues.

But there is an option that does not rely on either social media outrage or new regulation. Tech companies are actually *already* configured for handling ethics issues at scale. They just need to adapt their existing bounty system.

Right now, hundreds of companies and organizations, great and small, offer bounties ranging from thousands to millions of dollars to those who find vulnerabilities in their code that bad actors could exploit. Google's bounty program even covers applications sold through its Play store. Apple, which only recently began a bounty program (with compensation of up to a million dollars for the most serious types of exploits) takes a similar approach. In its [program notes](#), the company states that it will "reward researchers who share with us critical issues and the techniques used to exploit them," providing public recognition and matching donations of the bounty payment to charities.

Imagine how much better the products and services of Silicon Valley could be if these companies grouped ethics violations under “critical issues and the techniques used to exploit them” and began offering corresponding bounties. After all, ethical violations can cause just as many problems for a company and users as a bit of leaked code. The above language wouldn’t even need to be changed. And the ethics bounty program could use the rest of Apple’s rules, which include: 1) You must be the first to report it, 2) you must clearly explain and show evidence of what happened, 3) you can’t disclose it publicly before Apple gets a chance to patch it, and 4) you can get a bonus if the company inadvertently reintroduces a known problem into a new patch.

For users, a bounty system would encourage people to search for ethics violations and report them more quickly. For companies, this system could help them locate and address problems before they cause harm to more customers, generate negative press, and potentially destabilize governments. Granted, some companies may be unfazed by negative press, the loss of customers, and the furthering of prejudices, but they are still likely to be motivated by the long-term stability and goodwill such a program could create. Having a public record of responding thoughtfully to ethics issues in the past can also help a company if it wants to recruit talented workers and grow into other markets and industries.

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Google's algorithms discriminate against women and people of colour

[Jonathan Cohn](#) April 24, 2019 6.59pm EDT

At the start of Black History Month 2019, Google designed its daily-changing homepage logo to include an image of African-American activist [Sojourner Truth](#), the great 19th-century abolitionist and women's rights activist. But what would Truth say about Google's continual lack of care and respect toward people of colour?

While bringing more attention to Sojourner Truth is venerable, Google can do better. As a professor and researcher of digital cultures, I have [found that a lack of care and investment by tech companies towards users who are not white and male allows racism and sexism to creep into search engines, social networks and other algorithmic technologies.](#)

Whiteness over-represented

For instance, when I search for "woman" or "girl" via Google's image search, the vast majority of results are pictures of thin white women (with the notable exceptions being a woman in a hijab, a white woman without a nose and a disabled girl).

Google Images search results for "woman".

The search bar shows "woman".

Filter options: All, Images (selected), Videos, News, Shopping, More, Settings, Tools.

Collections and SafeSearch buttons are available.

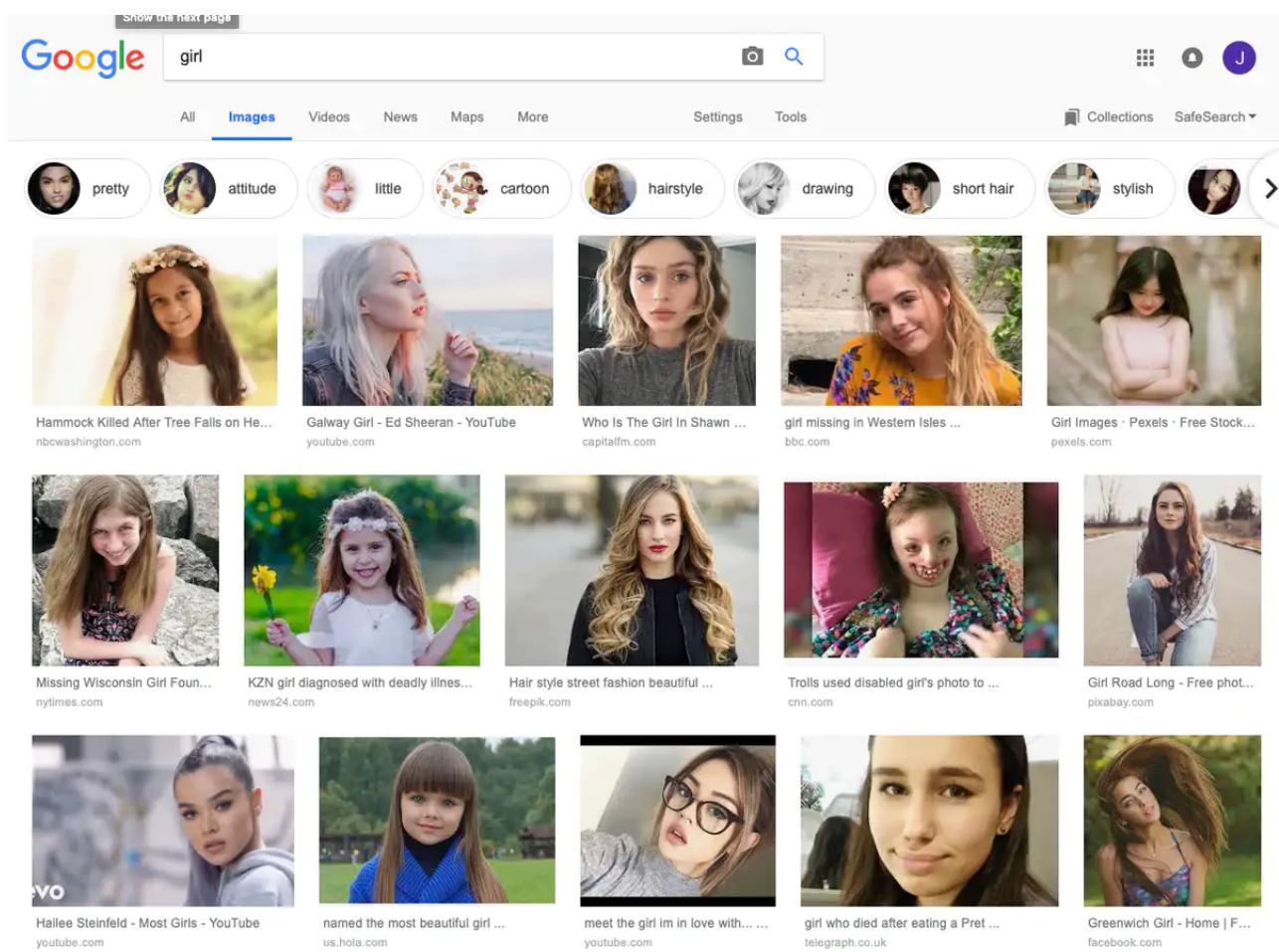
Image filters: beautiful, attractive, beach, middle aged, pregnant, cartoon, perfect, strong.

Search results:

- 3000 x 2000
Trump Has Affected American Wom...
time.com
- Woman hit by harasser in Paris talks t...
euronews.com
- Woman Mentally Rifles Through Frien...
local.theonion.com
- Selective Service System >...
sss.gov
- Closeup Photo of Woman With Bro...
pixels.com

- I don't "feel" like a woman. I am a ...
lifestitenews.com
- Wonder Woman 2' Will Be Rele...
forward.com
- prosthetic nose
news.com.au
- Seriously ill woman wrongl...
independent.ie
- The Pitfalls Of Dating A Married Woman ...
askmen.com

- How To Order Flowers for a Woman - ...
- Walgreens Pharmacist De...
Why you should vote for a woman in 2...
Cartoon' Woman Underwent Over ...
Best Vitamins Every Woman Should ...
- Why you should vote for a woman in 2...
Cartoon' Woman Underwent Over ...
Best Vitamins Every Woman Should ...
- Cartoon' Woman Underwent Over ...
Best Vitamins Every Woman Should ...
- Best Vitamins Every Woman Should ...



Screenshots of the author's search results.

People of colour are not completely absent, but they are underrepresented on Google's image search. For example of the first 50 images when searching for "girl," 46 displayed white girls, three were of Asian girls and only one included a Black girl. [These well-documented disparities in search-engine results](#) are in part due to the [dismal low number of Black women working at Google — only 1.2 per cent of their workforce](#).

To make matters worse, Google suggests that I narrow down my search results with adjectives ranging from "attractive" to "skinny" to "pregnant." In contrast, when searching for "men" (a category that also overrepresents whiteness), the first three adjectives are "cartoon," "hair style" and "old." These adjectives may be descriptive, but they also replicate the stereotype that women are primarily valued for their beauty and reproductive organs

and men are important for their personality and wisdom. [Stereotyping is endemic to most any digital technology](#) like Google that aims to replicate how humans already sort information.

Social media researcher and UCLA professor Safiya Noble has written most extensively on this topic. In her book [Algorithms of Oppression](#), she points out that Google suggests racist and sexist search results are the user's fault since they simply reflect our own cultural assumptions and previous search histories. Noble also illustrates how Google's algorithms skew their results in ways that prioritize advertisers and the white affluent audiences they are often trying to attract.

Safiya Noble on bias in algorithms.

[My research](#) has shown how these biased practices are unthinkingly adopted from earlier industries and technologies dominated by white men.

After reading Noble's work, many of my students decided to test Google out themselves. They found that while the specific searches that Noble performed now lead to reasonable results, many others do not. Google has clearly made a change since Noble conducted her research. Google has not publicly stated why they made this change, but the timing suggests it was in response to Noble's work.

What caught my student's eye was that Google's algorithms still appears to favour sexualized images of Latinas and Asian women and girls in both their search results and the images displayed. The student's informal search results featured scantily clad women — and seemed to do so much more than their white counterparts.

Suggestive autocompletion

The racism on Google is certainly not limited to the search result images it displays. It is also evident in its autocomplete function, which tries to guess what exactly you want to search for.

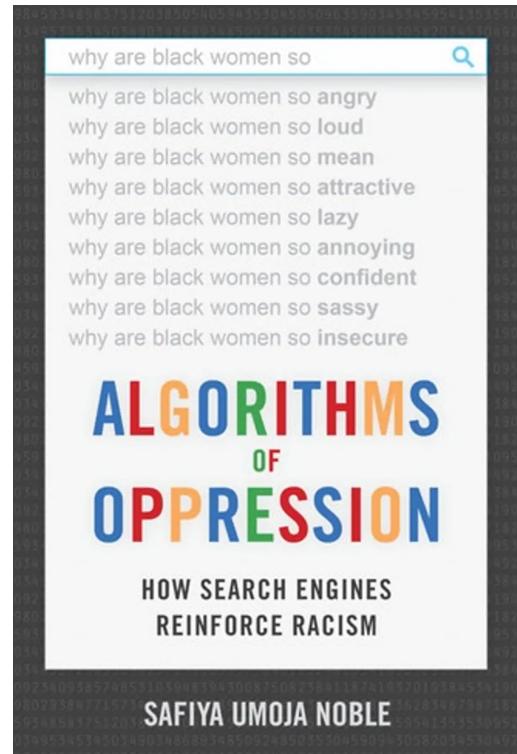
For years, searches for variations on "Black women," led to racist and sexist suggestions. Now Google simply no longer autocompletes with anything at all. For instance, now when I type "Why are Black women so" into Google's search bar — the search that is on the cover of Noble's book — it does not autocomplete at all.

This reduction of autocomplete functionality is Google's typical response when journalists and scholars point to blatant racism on its site. At this moment, Google no longer autocompletes, among other things, the phrases "blacks are," "asians are," "homosexuals are," "Latinos are," "Muslims are," and "Jews are" but does autocomplete "whites are," "Latinas are," "heterosexuals are" and "Canadians are."

This tendency to reduce rather than improve functionality when it comes to minorities goes beyond autocomplete. For instance, when people began pointing out that Google was [misidentifying Black people as gorillas](#) in 2015, Google's response was simply to no longer use "gorilla" as a descriptor at all; rather than fix their algorithm, they chose to break it more so now Google can also no longer identify gorillas.

Long-term fixes

At the beginning of 2018, *Wired* magazine and others pointed out that



Safiya Noble's 2018 book, 'Algorithms of Oppression.' [NYU Press](#)

[Google still could not accurately identify or label either gorillas or Black people.](#) Reducing functionality by simply turning off technologies may be a fine short-term response, but in the long term, the internet becomes a less welcoming and useful space for people of colour and women.

Considering Google's status as a monopoly and its [desire to continually present itself as a public good company](#), it is surprisingly muted when it comes to these vital areas it must improve on. The same is true for virtually every other major tech company, though some, like Facebook, are beginning to bow to public pressure by [kicking white nationalists off their sites](#).

This comes weeks after they were heavily criticized and sued for their role in the New Zealand Christchurch mosque attack. Given their long history of [censoring Black Lives matter posts rather than those made by white supremacists](#), and their desire to continue allowing Holocaust denials to be posted, this certainly feels like too little, too late.