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Search engines: omnipotent helpers or omnipotent overlord

The first search engine was called Archie and was made in 1990 by Alan Emtage. Though it was not like Google is today. It's only searching ability was having the words you typed in line up with websites. The popularity of it spread and the University of Nevada ended up making a similar style one that worked on plain text files instead and called it Veronica. Soon they got more advanced with JumpStation gathering info about the title and header from web pages. Unlike JumpStation though RSBE spider was the first to use a ranking system. After a decade it became clear that people could advertise on search engines and started doing so. As Google became the main search engine businesses still get searching partnerships for their sites.

Search engines aren't as transparent or as neutral as people would believe. There are three main ethical points that people seem to challenge search engines on for biased search results. They are search engines favoring some sites over others, search engines censorship from governments or the search engines themselves, and search engines follow what you search and store it also known as cookies.

If you asked anyone on the street if they thought that the search results for you and them would be the same if you both search 'clothing stores' they would probably say it'd be the same without knowing about how biased search engines really are. When they started using Google every one accepted the social contract that Google would try to get them the best results and the best way of doing that is to record what that individual has searched or done on the internet. To be more specific about which problem is okay for search engines versus which it shouldn't be doing comes down to the three issues above.

Try to take the social contract ethical view and apply it to each grievance of search engines. Starting with the idea of cookies, in normal life where no internet existed the concept of cookies would not even hold up in a court most likely. This is the internet though, and Herman T. Tavani puts it perfectly with saying, "information about individual, which was once difficult to find and even more difficult to cross-reference, is now readily accessible and collectible through the use of on-line automated search facilities such as Internet search engines." That is the bad side of the idea of cookies though. If Google sold the information it had about the people who use its search

engine, then Google is defiantly in the wrong since people's right to privacy has been violated. Sadly, it isn't as cut and dry as that. Since Google is free and anyone can use it you can either search in a more positive way like companies might do when thinking of hiring someone or in a very negative way like a stalker would do. So it all boils down to the intent of the searcher. Though it leans mostly to the ethical side more than unethical. So point one for search engines being biased.

Using the same ethical view, you can look at the idea that search engines favor some sites over others. With a minor understanding of search engines this must be true to get you the most relevant information possible. This idea ties in with cookies in that showing us 'relevant' sites might exclude sites that are better for us to see as a person rather then what is relevant. Eli Pariser went on a TED talk and discussed this idea of a filter bubble and how that could affect the information we receive. He had two friends Google Egypt, this was during the social unrest that was happening at the time, and found one friend had news about the riots and the other had information pages like Wikipedia. He goes on to say, "the internet is showing us what it thinks we want to see versus want me might need to see." This idea is not dangerous right now but in a few decades could lead to severe problems in the of free information. The way that social contract theory words how to evaluate things makes this not an issue. No one's rights are violated and everyone is getting information in what they most likely want. So a very sketchy point for search engines biased results.

What about the idea of censorship? That can easily affect what results two different people get. China, North Korea, and Germany all sensor their internet to many different degrees. The quick and easy way for social contract is to say that people's right to information has been violated by the government but Google will sensor their results when its necessary. Currently if you searched 'how to join ISIS' you will be redirected to an image page of cute animals instead. The idea there is to save people in the long run by protect people by 'limiting' ISIS's numbers. While this might work it still violates the right to information. Thus we must give the last point to the anti-bias searches.

If we take a look at the same problem through the idea of Kantianism instead of the social contract we will end up with slightly different results, like the difference between Eli's friends' searches. So starting with censorship even Google's helpful ISIS to puppies redirect Kantianism still says that is wrong and that people should use their own reason to save them from themselves. Though an argument could be made that the biased search results themselves is censorship. Hinman states that, "the flourishing of deliberative democracy is dependent on the free and undistorted access to information." So with Hinman's description of biased results being a weird form of censorship then Kantianism says that biased results based on this idea is unethical.

What about favoring some sites over others? What would Kantianism vote for on that? Herman Tavani at Stanford University has said that, "the interests of advertisers who sponsor search engines; and schemes used by tech savvy people and organizations to manipulate the ordered ranking of sites returned by search engines" is one major problem with biased site ranking. Looking at this with Kantianism no one is being used as a means to an end. The tech savvy people are just playing by the rules, even if it's really cheating the system, and the advertisers are paying for space like you'd pay for a billboard. That puts one point towards biased search engines.

Finally, we come to the idea of cookies. It was stated earlier that search engines will take what you have searched for in the past and turn around and use that to give you better search results. The problem with cookies is you don't know when you get them and sometimes scandals can happen with the information they collect. Facebook allegedly sold information they had on their users. While most of it was entered in by them they have adopted a cookie like policy to adjust your news feed to what they think you want to see. It is hard to believe companies aren't tempted to sell advertisers your profile they have on you, or have advertisers pay for their ads to show up on yours and like-minded people's searches. With that being said either the search engine is using you to make even more money or the advertisers are using the company to get to specifically you. That puts a point against biased searches.

In conclusion, the idea that popular search engines or news sources to present different search results to different users who use the exact same search criteria from

the social contract view is just barely ethical, but Kantianism says that it is not ethical from the three points given.

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