

The Moral Bias Behind Your Search Results

Andreas Ekstrom's TED Talk

https://www.ted.com/playlists/514/the_inherent_bias_in_our_tech

Reflection Prompts

- In your own words, introduce and summarize the TED Talk
- Do companies have a responsibility to monitor their product? Provide an example that supports your stance.
- Do you agree with Google's decision to interfere on behalf of Michelle Obama and Google's decision to not interfere on behalf of Anders Behring Breivik?
- One of Google's many products is information. Do they have a responsibility to monitor and curate (design) their product?
- Does Google have a responsibility to filter information to its users or does it infringe on the access to information?

Transcript

So whenever I visit a school and talk to students, I always ask them the same thing: Why do you Google? Why is Google the search engine of choice for you? Strangely enough, I always get the same three answers. One, "Because it works," which is a great answer; that's why I Google, too. Two, somebody will say, "I really don't know of any alternatives." It's not an equally great answer and my reply to that is usually, "Try to Google the word 'search engine,' you may find a couple of interesting alternatives." And last but not least, thirdly, inevitably, one student will raise her or his hand and say, "With Google, I'm certain to always get the best, unbiased search result." Certain to always get the best, unbiased search result.

Now, as a man of the humanities, albeit a digital humanities man, that just makes my skin curl, even if I, too, realize that that trust, that idea of the unbiased search result is a cornerstone in our collective love for and appreciation of Google. I will show you why that, philosophically, is almost an impossibility.

But let me first elaborate, just a little bit, on a basic principle behind each search query that we sometimes seem to forget. So whenever you set out to Google something, start by asking yourself this: "Am I looking for an isolated fact?" What is the capital of France? What are the building blocks of a water molecule? Great -- Google away. There's not a group of scientists who are this close to

proving that it's actually London and H30. You don't see a big conspiracy among those things. We agree, on a global scale, what the answers are to these isolated facts.

But if you complicate your question just a little bit and ask something like, "Why is there an Israeli-Palestine conflict?" You're not exactly looking for a singular fact anymore, you're looking for knowledge, which is something way more complicated and delicate. And to get to knowledge, you have to bring 10 or 20 or 100 facts to the table and acknowledge them and say, "Yes, these are all true." But because of who I am, young or old, black or white, gay or straight, I will value them differently. And I will say, "Yes, this is true, but this is more important to me than that." And this is where it becomes interesting, because this is where we become human. This is when we start to argue, to form society. And to really get somewhere, we need to filter all our facts here, through friends and neighbors and parents and children and coworkers and newspapers and magazines, to finally be grounded in real knowledge, which is something that a search engine is a poor help to achieve.

So, I promised you an example just to show you why it's so hard to get to the point of true, clean, objective knowledge -- as food for thought. I will conduct a couple of simple queries, search queries. We'll start with "Michelle Obama," the First Lady of the United States. And we'll click for pictures. It works really well, as you can see. It's a perfect search result, more or less. It's just her in the picture, not even the President.

How does this work? Quite simple. Google uses a lot of smartness to achieve this, but quite simply, they look at two things more than anything. First, what does it say in the caption under the picture on each website? Does it say "Michelle Obama" under the picture? Pretty good indication it's actually her on there. Second, Google looks at the picture file, the name of the file as such uploaded to the website. Again, is it called "MichelleObama.jpeg"? Pretty good indication it's not Clint Eastwood in the picture. So, you've got those two and you get a search result like this -- almost.

Now, in 2009, Michelle Obama was the victim of a racist campaign, where people set out to insult her through her search results. There was a picture distributed widely over the Internet where her face was distorted to look like a monkey. And that picture was published all over. And people published it very, very purposefully, to get it up there in the search results. They made sure to write "Michelle Obama" in the caption and they made sure to upload the picture as "MichelleObama.jpeg," or the like. You get why -- to manipulate the search result. And it worked, too. So when you picture-Google for "Michelle Obama" in 2009, that distorted monkey picture showed up among the first results.

Now, the results are self-cleansing, and that's sort of the beauty of it, because Google measures relevance every hour, every day. However, Google didn't settle for that this time, they just thought, "That's racist and it's a bad search result and we're going to go back and clean that up manually. We are going to write some code and fix it," which they did. And I don't think anyone in this room thinks that was a bad idea. Me neither.

But then, a couple of years go by, and the world's most-Googled Anders, Anders Behring Breivik, did what he did. This is July 22 in 2011, and a terrible day in Norwegian history. This man, a terrorist, blew up a couple of government buildings walking distance from where we are right now in Oslo, Norway and then he traveled to the island of Utøya and shot and killed a group of kids. Almost 80 people died that day.

And a lot of people would describe this act of terror as two steps, that he did two things: he blew up the buildings and he shot those kids. It's not true. It was three steps. He blew up those buildings, he shot those kids, and he sat down and waited for the world to Google him. And he prepared all three steps equally well.

And if there was somebody who immediately understood this, it was a Swedish web developer, a search engine optimization expert in Stockholm, named Nikke Lindqvist. He's also a very political guy and he was right out there in social media, on his blog and Facebook. And he told everybody, "If there's something that this guy wants right now, it's to control the image of himself. Let's see if we can distort that. Let's see if we, in the civilized world, can protest against what he did through insulting him in his search results."

And how? He told all of his readers the following, "Go out there on the Internet, find pictures of dog poop on sidewalks -- find pictures of dog poop on sidewalks -- publish them in your feeds, on your websites, on your blogs. Make sure to write the terrorist's name in the caption, make sure to name the picture file "Breivik.jpeg." Let's teach Google that that's the face of the terrorist." And it worked. Two years after that campaign against Michelle Obama, this manipulation campaign against Anders Behring Breivik worked. If you picture-Googled for him weeks after the July 22 events from Sweden, you'd see that picture of dog poop high up in the search results, as a little protest.

Strangely enough, Google didn't intervene this time. They did not step in and manually clean those search results up. So the million-dollar question, is there anything different between these two happenings here? Is there anything different between what happened to Michelle Obama and what happened to Anders Behring Breivik? Of course not. It's the exact same thing, yet Google intervened in one case and not in the other.

Why? Because Michelle Obama is an honorable person, that's why, and Anders Behring Breivik is a despicable person. See what happens there? An evaluation of a person takes place and there's only one power-player in the world with the authority to say who's who. "We like you, we dislike you. We believe in you, we don't believe in you. You're right, you're wrong. You're true, you're false. You're Obama, and you're Breivik." That's power if I ever saw it.

So I'm asking you to remember that behind every algorithm is always a person, a person with a set of personal beliefs that no code can ever completely eradicate. And my message goes out not only to

Google, but to all believers in the faith of code around the world. You need to identify your own personal bias. You need to understand that you are human and take responsibility accordingly.

And I say this because I believe we've reached a point in time when it's absolutely imperative that we tie those bonds together again, tighter: the humanities and the technology. Tighter than ever. And, if nothing else, to remind us that that wonderfully seductive idea of the unbiased, clean search result is, and is likely to remain, a myth.

Thank you for your time.