Essay

Google, Google Search and Libraries: Debates on Ethics

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This essay presents a discussion on Google Search and its implications to Library and Information Science, with a focus on the aspects regarding the ethics of the online private search engine within libraries. Initially, I attempt to define the nature of Google Search as a pervasive tool for exerting control over the Web content through the PageRank algorithm and the advertising program AdWords. Then, I highlight the significance of such a tool to Library and Information Science, pointing out Google’s mission as a library’s mission, the blind faith conferred to Google Search’s results, librarian’s anxieties about user’s failing to distinguish between a library catalogue and Google Search’s results page. Finally, I suggest some debates on the ethics regarding Google Search and libraries: the problem of ethics always lagging behind innovations in digital technologies; a possible explanation to the general failure in trying to regulate Google; the opaqueness of Google Search’s technology and the company’s strategy to conceal its means as bad faith; and a last point on the misleading notion of Google as ‘competition’ for libraries based on arguments that focus on the nature and ethics of each of the organisations. The essay is strongly based on Siva Vaidhyanathan’s ‘The Googlization of Everything: and why we should worry’ and on one of its main arguments: that we may have surrendered too much control over information to a single private company, and why we should worry.

the nature of google search

The day when we routinely google the location of physical objects (‘where are my car keys?’) is very close.
Luciano Floridi

In his work The Googlization of Everything, Siva Vaidhyanathan talks about a ‘power vacuum’ in the Web, before Google was ‘invited to fill it’ by us. The image of a chaotic, almost anarchist Web, where no clear hierarchy and no rules or code of conduct were followed nor needed, provides an exciting picture of a new medium, but also a bit frightening one. It does make us imagine an unbound, absolute library, which collects unorderly all kinds of texts and images, with no owner of its space, and no librarian to help make sense of it all.

As we can imagine, and as we already know the outcome of such circumstance in the short history of the Web, the utopia could not last. So we ‘invited Google’ to fill this power gap, and it exerts its power by controlling, deciding, ranking, filtering, displaying, and distributing online information.

Essentially, Google’s tool for exerting control in the Web is its own search engine, Google Search. It was not the first online search engine, and it is not the only one that still exists, but the company’s ability to becoming pervasive granted a certain degree of omnipotence to it. We seem to have awarded Google Search with our full
trust in its functionalities. It has become etiquette not to ask simple queries to fellow humans if you have not asked Google first.

But what does Google Search actually do when it provides results to the terms we type in its clean, simple, straight-forward website search box? Claiming to be ‘organising the world’s information and making it accessible and useful’, for each search typed in, Google’s search tool activates an extremely complex and equally fast mechanism to present a neat list of ‘answers’ to the user’s terms: the original Google’s PageRank scoring system, set by a secret algorithm, ranks websites/results by their ‘relevance’ in the Web, defined (by Google) as how much a website is linked to others; the more heavily linked, the more relevant, and up it goes on the results list. Until earlier this year, Google provided the PageRank score of every website for public view, so anyone could actually check one’s website ‘relevance’, according to Google’s perspective—which claims to be the same as the public’s perspective, as the hyperlink criteria would actually reflect the number of clicks, and therefore the public’s endorsement. The PageRank score became a valuable information as people tried to push their websites higher in the results lists and increase the chances of being clicked on. It’s now an information only Google holds.

PageRank is part of the process of providing the results; Google AdWords is the other. It works as an auction, with advertisers offering different prices to keywords, aiming to appear as one of the first ads among the other results to a determined, desirably popular, search keyword. Alexander Halavais, in his book Search Engine Society, refers to this dynamic that happens on Google Search as ‘attention economy’: ‘The web surfer is not just a target of various persuasive messages, but rather someone who is providing attention in return for information. That attention is a valuable commodity’ (Halavais 2009). This trading nature of information seeking through Google Search is also highlighted by Vaidhyanathan, who refers to the advertisers as ‘Google’s real customers’, and we (users and searchers) as Google’s ‘product’: ‘We—our fancies, fetishes, predilections, and preferences—are what Google sells to advertisers’ (Vaidhyanathan 2012); therefore, Google’s core business is advertising and ‘consumer profiling’.

And it is doing just fine. Google’s has been succeeding in its business tremendously, being able to make stockholders, advertisers and users happy—and a great part of this success is related to its ability to be everywhere, seamless: pervasive. Google Search is inside people’s browser address bars, transforming it into an instant Google Search box; it is in Google’s own browser, Google Chrome; it is what runs other websites search tools; it is all over Google’s new products, the Pixel phone and Google Home: shout out loud your search, and Google will work it out for you. Floridi’s prediction about Google finding our car keys just turned into reality.

Google started out as a website search engine, and by making us users very satisfied about its services, has then taken over our everyday activities as well. We seem to have forgotten (with Google’s help) that we are talking about access to information, though; have we already surrendered too much control of it to this one company? Google Search pervasively filters the content of the Web for us. And by doing so it also governs it—is it also governing our lives in a broader sense, given the significance of information to our society?
significance of google search to library and information science

'About 14,600,000 results (0.37 seconds)'

Google Search, on its results to the search terms 'digital literacy'

When talking about searching before the search engine, Halavais points out that it was in libraries that most of practices and technologies regarding information retrieval were developed: 'The use of computing systems in libraries has formed an important basis for how search engines now work. ..., and many of the techniques now used by search engines were first used by library indexes'. There are many similarities between what Google Search is doing with the World Wide Web content and what libraries have been doing for thousands of years with books and other documents; amazingly, Google’s mission 'is to organise the world’s information and make it universally accessible and useful', which could perfectly be any ambitious library’s mission as well.

Even though Google Search may have in fact originated from the academic world and its needs of indexing, finding, and linking specific information online, Google grew to become one of the most important and most powerful digital technology companies in the world, generating big revenue each year (mainly from its advertising business), and establishing itself as a pervasive online tool that few can imagine how it would be possible to operate in the Web without it; it has become part of the digital culture. Google Search users can be said to have faith and trust in its service, which often functions as an 'oracle' (Halavais 2009); ruling 'by the power of convenience, comfort, and trust' (Vaidhyanathan 2012), Google Search offers impressively quick results event to the most complex of searches, such as 'What is God' (a search I did myself, retrieving half a million results in 0.51 seconds).

Google Search’s success in producing straightforward and speedy answers apparently for free bestowed its great popularity, but librarians were among the ones worried not only about the blind trust users have in Google Search’s results, but also about the rise of a supposed culture of immediatism among students—who were apparently getting used to quick and easy answers provided by Google, and losing ability to reflect critically and carefully on issues by themselves or by using information resources other than Google. Many issues regarding the usage of the Google Search tool in libraries were raised with great concern in academic writing, including: the possible difference between knowing and understanding, and how online search engines cannot be said to facilitate understanding, but just provide information and maybe knowledge (Lynch 2016; Buss 2016); the faith in Google Search’s results as accurate and unbiased, reflecting lack of instruction and academic experience (Perruso 2016); the wide usage of Google Search as research tool even when the user or student is aware of its bias and has library resources available (Perruso 2016; Introna & Nissenbaum 2000; Vaidhyanathan 2012). All these challenges posed to libraries by Google, as well as the company’s clear and ambitious mission to organise the world’s information, have helped to establish Google as ‘competition’ to libraries, to use a term frequently found in Library and Information Science literature; this idea of Google ‘competing’ with libraries and how they should deal with it (fight back, partner with, or fully embrace?) has been the focus of a large part of the debate about Google and libraries.
Also, in the librarianship field, the issues around Google and Google Search were, and still are, part of a greater digital technologies and digitisation frenzy, with many libraries facing intense pressures to go digital and to replace parts of its physical collections with digitised versions, inciting debates over preservation processes by digital means in libraries (Darnton 2008; Conway 2010). Many librarians considered Google as too big a ‘competitor’ to battle against with regards to digitisation initiatives, and preferred to embrace its initiatives—the Google Books enterprise enjoyed both this go digital turmoil and the advantage position Google Search had already conquered of cultural phenomenon.

**ethical debates over google search (and other google enterprises) relevant to library and information science**

‘The powerful always have the ways and means to use knowledge toward their own ends. … The issue of access to knowledge is thus central to the prospects for expanding the public sphere and thereby contesting the claims of the powerful to all the instruments of power.’

Siva Vaidhyanathan

the urgency for debates on ethics of digital information technologies

In *The Cambridge Handbook of Information and Computer Ethics*, the philosopher of information Luciano Floridi presents this ‘new branch of applied ethics’ dedicated to the investigation of how ICTs, by impacting our lives so broadly, deeply, and quickly, demand our attention to the ethical implications of its use; it seems that there is a great contrast between the widespread use of ICTs in our daily lives, and our understanding of what they actually mean, or even how they work. As Floridi puts it, ‘in ICTs, we often innovate first, then try to regulate, and finally seek to understand what is actually happening’ (Floridi 2010). And leaving ethical debates lagging behind while developing newer and powerful ICTs can be dangerous, ‘because we use them recklessly, use them too much, and design daily life around them’ (Vaidhyanathan 2012).

When it comes to Google, one of the most pervasive ICTs companies today, these worries are timely, maybe a little late, even. Probably the biggest issue preventing us from pausing to reflect more deeply about the ethics of Google Search, along with its pervasiveness, is the idea that it is good in virtue; the notion that it is our good friend against disinformation and alienation, and a proof that it is so is its tremendous ability to make our lives easier and to deliver quickly to us the information that we need—capabilities very few could deny Google has. It is clear that Google is the case of an ICT that ‘has brought enormous benefits but also greatly outpaced our understanding of its conceptual nature and implications’ (Floridi 2010), and that the company benefits from this circumstance by becoming even more pervasive—and wealthier—, in an escalating cycle of influence and amplification. It is then an act of resistance to be able to ask apparently simple questions such as: What am I actually doing when requesting answers to Google Search?; How does it go about picking and ranking what to show as results?; How did it end up in my browser URL bar?; How searching with Google Search is different from using an online library catalogue?; and mainly: ‘We ask many things of search engines, what do they ask in return?’ (Halavais 2009)
benefiting from policy vacuums

The many undeniable advantages and useful tools Google Search provides (which makes us understandably do not wish to go back to a world where it doesn’t exist) should not stop us from claiming the need to regulate such a powerful mechanism that mediates our access to the Web. As early as 1985, philosopher James Moor talks about policy vacuums generated by the logical malleability of computers; by providing people with possibilities of doing genuinely new things, the use of computer technology would also present ethical issues unseen before, which should be addressed by a new computer ethics (Bynum 2010).

In the case of Google, cultural influence and power, omnipresence, and the singularity of scope and wealth are characteristics that challenged attempts to regulate the company’s actions within the Web environment; its definition as a new and unique technology defies any ability of controlling from the outside. And even though Google Search clearly does bear great authority and power over Web content copying, indexing, presenting and delivering, which are powers that should be closely monitored and governed, it is able to work freely in many ways, in great part of the world. In the face of this policy vacuum, market forces were able to spill and fill it, just as what happened and still happens in many other instances of the World Wide Web. Google, then, uses its image as ‘public utility’ just as far as it is in its interest, that is, only to expand the pervasiveness of its agency; when it comes to be regulated as an actual ‘public utility’ should, though, Google can safely resort to its ultimate nature of a marketing for-profit venture with no social responsibilities whatsoever, ignoring the fact that ‘opting out or switching away from Google services degrades one’s ability to use the Web’ (Vaidhyanathan 2012), and concealing the matter that Google Search and other Google applications are becoming more and more indiscernible from the Web itself by users.

google search’s black box & bad faith

In a 2008 keynote speech at a programmer’s conference, the then vice president of Google Marissa Mayer explained about their search engine: ‘It’s very, very complicated technology, but behind a very simple interface. ...Our users don’t need to understand how complicated the technology and the development work that happens behind this is’ (Vaidhyanathan 2012). Google Search’s box, then, is an intentional tip-of-the-iceberg which conceals almost all of its complicated mechanisms from the user, who is left thinking that what happens in the backstage of the search is some kind of magical, scientific miracle. So much of Google Search’s technology is hidden away from the average Web user, such as the condition that, by default, any post to your blog or any new webpage created is actually copied and kept by search engines, so they can index and retrieve it when needed.

Thus, it can be understood that our very modern faith in science has implications to our faith in Google Search and its mechanisms: the idea that technology, which in this specific case relates to the application of very, very complicated algorithms, has the ability to give us ideal answers and solutions that were previously unattainable through human means. However, with time, it is becoming clearer that no mechanical input can be completely neutral, and that no algorithm is free from value in its generation and application; to be able to understand the ethics of such tools, it is essential that we first recognise that ‘science can create very powerful technologies, but it is not science alone that can help us manage them’ (Rumsey 2016).
But as algorithms become more intelligent, their natural opaqueness becomes ever more relevant: what we are not able to see and grasp and control expands by the day. The bad faith of Google Search relies on the idea that its users are not only unaware of its mechanisms, but are also believers that whatever backstage mechanism that may exist is the best one, considering their information interests. So Google is given a blind consent to pursue the interests it wishes through its algorithms: personalisation of the results, for example, which is advertised as a feature for convenience and utility, is above all a tool of advertising and efficient consumption.

the problem with the notion of google as ‘competition’ for libraries

Customising Web content so it is ‘adapted’ to what the user potentially wants to see is one of the most obvious market-oriented trends in the Internet today. When it comes to Google Search, which takes personalisation and friendliness seriously, this trend actually distances Google from the library: customisation is tailored essentially to buying and selling by market interests, while the library is essentially aimed at keeping and providing information independently—and often combatively—of market interests. Commodification of information is one of Google Search’s core business, and it is in great contrast with its library-like stated mission. Google and libraries are not on the same business, because fundamentally a library is not a business.

That is the problem with many librarians’ debates about Google Search: the notion that it ‘competes’ with libraries. Libraries do not compete with other organisations because they are non-commercial institutions with no market interest, and inserting market vocabulary to what a library does reinforces commodification trends in the public sphere. If there is something libraries have been ‘competing against’, it is market forces themselves, and the (negative) impact they have on user’s desires and habits and on government’s willingness to invest public funds in libraries.

Stunned by Google’s ‘competition’, librarians have made many kinds of wrong decisions, the clearest example being the compliance with the Google Books project, ‘without concern for user confidentiality, image preservation, image quality, search prowess, metadata standards, or long-term sustainability. ...They have been complicit in centralizing and commercializing access to knowledge under a single corporate umbrella’ (Vaidhyanathan 2012). The idea that, despite Google Book’s many defects, it is simply better to having it than not having it (Darnton 2009) is misleading because it implies that, whatever Google does, it doesn’t impact libraries: it does, as it claims in its mission to have the same role as libraries have in society. Confusing itself with libraries in that way, everything it does will impact libraries in some way. The library uniqueness in nature and ethics is what distinguishes it from Google, and it is what must be frequently discussed, defined and stressed these days.
conclusion

Search engines are undeniably essential to navigating the Web as it became immensely vast and deep. Google Search’s scope, though, goes well beyond indexing and retrieving online information: its pervasiveness and success established the company as one of the most profitable in the technology field, and we use its many services on a daily basis without fully understanding how it works. We also often forget that Google Search’s main business is advertising and consumer profiling, even though it is Google itself the great responsible for our ignorance about the company. Many ethical concerns emerge as a private, wealthy and influential company defines its mission as ‘to organise the world’s information and make it universally accessible and useful’, because, if it is not a library, then it is doing so with interests unknown to its users and the public. The library must emphasise its uniqueness and its nature as public good through information free of market interests; as a transparent institution that has access to information as an end in itself, opposed to organisations such as Google, which deals with information as means to an (enclosed, private, encrypted) end.

references


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