IS SEARCH NEUTRAL?

James Grimmelmann
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In this talk

* Two arguments for search neutrality
* Eight theories of what it might mean
* Withering criticism of all of the above
* Difficult questions
WHY NEUTRALITY?
The normative appeal of neutrality

* Editorials and tech blogs make “neutrality” sound like apple pie
* Few articulate the moral assumptions baked into their arguments
* Academics have two reasonably well worked-out theories:
  * **Users**: not in a position to check up on a search engine
  * **Websites**: need the search engine to be able to reach audiences
* Both of these are really about protecting users!
THEORIES OF WHAT “NEUTRALITY” MEANS
Scott Cleland: “Second, Google’s ultra-secret search algorithm [sic] reportedly has over 1,000 variables/discrimination biases which decide which content gets surfaced, so it can be found and monetized, and which content gets effectively hidden ‘at the back of the arena.’”

- Theory: neutrality requires no distinctions among websites

- This is nonsense; the point of search is to make distinctions
Objectivity

* Foundem: “Throughout Foundem’s three and a half year penalty, Foundem continued to rank normally in Yahoo and Bing.”

* Theory: there are correct and incorrect search results

* What is the objectively correct #1 result for “apple”?

* Search is subjective.

* How does Foundem—or anyone—know that its “normal” rankings in Yahoo! and Bing were right?
Bias

* AT&T: “Google’s algorithms unquestionably do favor some companies or sites.”

* Academics worry about “systematic and unfair” discrimination in favor of some people or viewpoints and against others

* Saying that a distinction is biased if it is “unfair” is circular

* Search is clearly political, so the responsibility is weighty, but

* The web itself is biased in this sense, and so are users; it’s not clear you can isolate the bias entirely in the search engine
Traffic

- StudioBriefing: “We are in no position to battle Google on this. And without Studio Briefing being included in Google search results we cannot draw sufficient readers to remain viable.”

- But if the IKEA ferry stops running to Red Hook, do the food vendors at the Ball Fields have a legal right to complain?

- Taken seriously, traffic would say that websites have a right to the pageviews of unwilling users.

- If Google mistakenly overranks a site, why should it have to continue that overranking forever?
Relevance

* Foundem: “the principle that search engines should have no editorial policies other than that their results be comprehensive, impartial and based solely on relevance”

* Why is this not a tautology?

* Would you tell a boxer to “punch harder”?

* I can tell a relevance-enhancing story about all kinds of controversial rankings changes. For example, most vertical-search sites are utterly worthless. Good riddance to them!
Self-Interest

Consumer Watchdog: “Google now inserts results from Google Maps into the first page of results from most Google searches, driving enormous traffic toward Google Maps and away from competitors.”

Some things can be good for Google and good for users.

Google products have market share almost in direct proportion to their quality. Google Maps really is awesome.

Bribes are bad, but Google doesn’t take them ... right?
Transparency

* Foundem: “Search Neutrality can be defined as the principle that search engines should be open and transparent about their editorial policies …”


* What about disclosure to regulators?

* How do you plan to explain eigenvectors and clustering algorithms to lawyers, judges, and 20-something poli sci majors?
Manipulation

* Foundem: “By introducing special treatment for particular site names manually fed to the algorithm (such as ‘whitelists’), objectivity is lost, and the opinion becomes undeniably subjective.”

* This seems to be about:
  * Changes affecting very few sites.
  * Making changes intending to affect known sites directly.
  * Google makes manual changes, so nu? But is it relevant?
DON’T RELAX JUST YET
Search engines don’t get a total free pass

* Other laws still apply: copyright, trademark, privacy, etc.

* “Neutrality” shouldn’t short-circuit the antitrust analysis, but that doesn’t mean there aren’t antitrust issues

* In other work, I’ve been skeptical about Google Books

* Raw shakedowns would be much more problematic

* Stealth marketing is not okay
Manipulation, redux

- Udi Manber, 2008: “At Google we do not manually change results.”


- Why do Googlers focus on “automatic” processes?
Some half-baked theories

- Thinking of web search as a pure information retrieval problem
- Useful way of avoiding {moral, legal} responsibility for results
- Company-wide supercrunching ideology
- Solving the general case is a habit of highly effective coders
- Seeking an impersonal point of view is the right thing to do
QUESTIONS AND CONVERSATION