

## Another risk from Search Dominance

An Amsterdam conference on search engines floated the idea that any one search engine is going to distort users' experience, because it provides only one way of looking at the world. The conference sponsored in November, 2013, by the Society of the Query, brought together sociologists, teachers, historians and artists to demonstrate the astonishing possibilities of search – and the risks of relying on a single company.

The two-day conference was convincing in demonstrating how search has become increasingly important from the arts lofts of Brooklyn, New York, to classrooms in Denmark and to tiny villages in India.

Researchers found that the biases of the Google search formula – its algorithm – leads to strange quirks. Because a single search engine will have its biases, there is no way to get a second opinion if one search engine holds dominance. And that affects outcomes.

For example, students in the hamlet of Almora, India, in the Himalayas, were given an assignment on western art. Professor Payal Arora of Erasmus University in Rotterdam found (and documented in her book [Dot Com Mantra](#)) that their Google searches turned up little or nothing prominent about the Mona Lisa or Nightwatch, but endless pictures of horses and riders in the Old West -- and that's what showed up in their essays.

The dominance leaves a need for other approaches. University of Virginia professor Siva Vaidhyanathan, (author of "[The Googlization of everything \(and why we should worry\)](#)") explained that in pharmacology crank medicine replies often show up at the top of searches, suggesting that there was room for a series of new vertical search engines in medicine and other fields which are poorly served. But with the dominance of one company it is difficult for rivals to get a toehold and compete.

Another major concern echoed by a number of speakers is the secrecy which surrounds Google's approach to ranking services, which makes research difficult.

As Min Jiang, professor at the University of North Carolina, said: "Google is not being forthcoming...they never tell you how a search engine works."

This matters because search has become not only the essential access tool to customers for businesses and services for consumers, but also increasingly important in education. One speaker described classrooms in Denmark where students are required to use search during examinations; another speaker described a book he has written (in Dutch) to teach grammar school children how to use search, and to avoid its pitfalls.

Two professors conducted an experiment to better understand the rules for ranking. Rene Koeneg, a professor at the Karlsruhe Institution of Technology in Germany, and Erik Borra, at the University of Amsterdam, tracked the term "9/11". They found that from 2006 until 2011 conspiracy sites were the largest category returned in the top 10 results. That changed radically in early 2011, when Google did a so-called "early panda update" of its search criteria. Google said it had improved the ranking of "high quality" websites; as a result conspiracy sites suddenly faded from view, the researchers said.

That pointed to the power of Google's choices, with no check or balance. But what to do? The speakers had some ideas but no clear alternative. FairSearch thinks that a good start is for law enforcement to require fair competition across search so that Google applies the principle of equal treatment to all services, so that users are not disadvantaged by the whims of a dominant company.