



MISSED CONNECTIONS

WHAT SEARCH ENGINES SAY ABOUT WOMEN

On occasion, I ask my university students to follow me through a day in the life of an African-American aunt, mother, mentor, or friend who is trying to help young women learn to use the Internet. In this exercise, I ask what kind of things they think young black girls might be interested in learning about: music, hair, friendship, fashion, popular culture?

by Safiya Umoja Noble | art by Julianna Johnson



I ask them if they could imagine how my nieces' multicultural group of friends who are curious to learn about black culture and contributions (beyond watching rap music videos or Tyler Perry movies) might go to Google to find information about black accomplishments, identities, and intellectual traditions. I ask them to think about the book report they might write, or the speech they might give about famous black girls involved in human and civil rights movements in the United States and across the world. I remind my students that to be black is to encompass more than an African-American identity, but to embrace an affinity with black people in the diaspora, that it is our identification with others of African descent in Africa, the Caribbean, Latin America, Europe, and all parts of the globe. I remind them of the reclamation of the word "black" that my parents' and their grandparents' generations fought for, as in "Black Is Beautiful." I ask them to imagine a 16-year-old, or even an 8-year-old, opening up Google in her browser and searching for herself and her friends by typing in the words "black girls."

Someone inevitably volunteers to come forward and open a blank Google search page—a portal to the seemingly bottomless array of information online—intending to find accurate and timely information that can't easily be found without a library card or a thoughtful and well-informed teacher.

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Last semester, SugaryBlackPussy.com was the top hit. No matter which year or class the students are in, they always look at me in disbelief when their search yields this result. They wonder if they did something wrong. They double-check. They try using quotation marks around the search terms. They make sure the computer isn't logged in to Gmail, as if past searches for pornography might be affecting the results. They don't understand.

I consider myself far from prudish. I don't care if someone types "porn" into a search engine and porn is what they get. I do care about porn turning up in the results when people are searching for support, knowledge, or answers about identity. I care that someone might type in "black girls," "Latinas," or other terms associated with women of color and instantly find porn all over their first-page results. I care that women are automatically considered "girls," and that actual girls find their identities so readily compromised by porn.

At the moment, U.S. commercial search engines like Google, Yahoo!, and Bing wield tremendous power in defining how information is indexed and prioritized. Cuts to public education, public libraries, and community resources only exacerbate our reliance on technology, rather than information and education professionals, for learning. But what's missing in the search engine is awareness about stereotypes, inequity, and identity. These results are deeply problematic and are often presented without any way for us to change them.

Last year when I conducted these exercises in class, the now-defunct HotBlackPussy.com outranked SugaryBlackPussy.com, indicating that the market for black women and girls' identities online is also in flux, and changes as businesses and organizations can afford to position and sustain themselves at the top of the search pile. These search engine results, for women whose identities are already maligned in the media, only further debase and erode efforts for social, political, and economic recognition and justice.

While preparing to write this article, I did a search for "women's magazines," having a hunch that feminist periodicals would not rise to the top of the search pile. After looking through the websites provided by Google, I gave up by page 11, never to find *Bitch* magazine. This search raises questions about why "women's magazines" are automatically linked to unfeminist periodicals like *Cosmopolitan* and *Women's Day*. (Not coincidentally, these titles are all owned by the Hearst Corporation, which has



the funds to purchase its way to the top of the search pile, and which benefits from owning multiple media properties that can be used for cross-promotional hyperlinks that mutually push each other higher in the rankings.) These titles are the default for representations of women's magazines, while alternative women's media—say, those with a feminist perspective—can be found only via searching by name or including purposeful search terms like “feminist.”

Try Google searches on every variation you can think of for women's and girls' identities and you will see many of the ways in which commercial interests have subverted a diverse (or realistic) range of representations. Try “women athletes” and do your best not to cringe at the lists of “Top 25 Sexiest Female Athletes” that surface. Based on these search results, constructions of women's identities and interests seem to be based on traditional, limited sexist norms, just as they are in the traditional media. What does it mean that feminism—or, barring a specific identification with that term, progressivism—has been divorced from the definitions or representations of “women” in a commercial search engine? That antifeminist or even pornographic representations of women show up on the first page of results in search engines by default?

Google's search process is based on identifying and assigning value to various types of information through web indexing. Many search engines, not just Google, use the artificial intelligence of computers to determine what kinds of information should be retrieved and displayed, and in what


SEARCH ENGINE RESULTS DON'T ONLY MASK THE UNEQUAL ACCESS TO SOCIAL, POLITICAL, AND ECONOMIC LIFE AS BROKEN DOWN BY RACE, GENDER, AND SEXUALITY—THEY ALSO MAINTAIN IT.

order. Complex mathematical formulations are developed into algorithms that are part of the automation process. But these calculations do not take social context into account.

If you were to try my classroom experiments for yourself (which I imagine you may do in the middle of reading this article), you may get a variation on my students' results. The truth is, search engine results are impacted by myriad factors. Google applications like Gmail and social media sites like Facebook track your identity and previous searches to unearth something slightly different. Search engines increasingly remember where you've been and what links you've clicked in order to provide more customized content. Search results will also vary depending on whether filters to screen out porn are enabled on your browser. In some cases, there may be more media and interest in non-pornographic information about black girls in your locale that push such sites higher up to the first page, like a strong nonprofit, blog, or media source that gets a lot of clicks in your region (I teach in the Midwest, which may have something to do with the results we get when we do Google searches in class). Information that rises to the top of the search pile is not the same for every user in every location, and a

variety of commercial advertising and political, social, and economic factors are linked to the way search results are coded and displayed.

Recently, the Federal Trade Commission started looking into Google's near-monopoly status and market dominance and the harm this could cause consumers. Consumer Watchdog.org's report “Traffic Report: How Google Is Squeezing out Competitors and Muscling into New Markets,” from June 2010, details how Google effectively blocks sites that it competes with and prioritizes its own properties to the top of the search pile (YouTube over other video sites, Google Maps over MapQuest, and Google Images over Photobucket and Flickr). The report highlights how Universal Search is not a neutral search process, but rather a commercial one that moves sites that buy paid advertising (as well as Google's own investments) to the top of the pile. But many analysts watching the antitrust debates around Google argue that in the free market economy, market share dominance and control over search results isn't a crime. In a September 2011 Businessweek.com article, reporter Mathew Ingram suggested that “it would be hard for anyone to prove that the company's free services have injured consumers.”



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But Ingram is arguably defining “injury” a little too narrowly. Try searching for “Latinas,” or “Asian women,” and the results focus on porn, dating, and fetishization. “Black women” will give you sites on “angry black women,” and articles on “why black women are less attractive.” The largest commercial search engines fail to provide relevant and culturally situated knowledge on how women of color have traditionally been discriminated against, denied rights, or been violated in society and the media even though we have organized and resisted this on many levels. Search engine results don’t only mask the

unequal access to social, political, and economic life in the United States as broken down by race, gender, and sexuality—they also maintain it.

You might think that Google would want to do something about problematic search results, especially those that appear racist or sexist. Veronica Arreola wondered as much on the *Ms.* blog in 2010, when Google Instant, a search-enhancement tool, initially did not include the words “Latinas,” “lesbian,” and “bisexual,” because of their X-rated front-page results: “You’re Google. I think you could figure out how to put porn and violence-related results, say, on the second page?” But they don’t—except where it’s illegal (Google will not surface certain neo-Nazi websites in France and Germany, where Holocaust denial is against the law). Siva Vaidhyanathan’s 2011 book, *The Googlization of Everything: (And Why We Should Worry)* reminds us why this is an important matter to trace. He chronicles recent attempts by the Jewish community and the Anti-Defamation League to challenge Google’s priority ranking of anti-Semitic, Holocaust-denial websites. So troublesome were these search results that in 2011 Google issued a statement about its search process, encouraging people to use “Jews” and “Jewish people” in their searches, rather than the pejorative term “Jew”—which they claim they can do nothing about white supremacist groups co-opting. The need for accurate information about Jewish culture and the Holocaust should be enough evidence to start a national discussion about consumer harm, to which we can add a whole host of cultural and gender-based identities that are misrepresented in search engine results.

Google’s assertion that its search results, though problematic, were computer-generated (and thus not the company’s fault) was apparently

a good enough answer for the ADL, which was “extremely pleased that Google has heard our concerns and those of its users about the offensive nature of some search results and the unusually high ranking of peddlers of bigotry and anti-Semitism.” A search for the word “Jew” today will surface a beige box from Google linking to its lengthy disclaimer about your results—which remain a mix of both anti-Semitic and informative sites.

These kinds of disclaimers about search results are not enough, and though our collective (and at times tormented) love affair with Google continues, it should not be given a pass just because it issues apologies under the guise of its motto, “Don’t be evil.” Just because search engines are shrouded in high-tech processes that may be difficult for the average Internet user to grasp doesn’t mean that the search methods of all the market leaders shouldn’t be examined. In addition, it is important that those who feel harmed by what goes to the top of a page-ranking system be heard in these processes. The question that the Federal Trade Commission might ask is whether search engines like Google should be probed about the values they assign to keyword combinations like “black girls,” “Latinas,” and other racial, gendered, and sexual-identity combinations, and whether saying they are not responsible for what happens through disclaimers should suffice.

The rapid shift over the past decade from public-interest journalism to the corporate takeover of U.S. news media—which has made highlighting any kind of alternative news increasingly difficult—has occurred simultaneously with the erosion of professional standards applied to information provision on



the web. As the search arena is consolidated to a handful of corporations, it's even more crucial to pay close attention to the types of biases that are shaping the information prioritized in search engines. The higher a web page is ranked, the more it's trusted. And unlike the vetting of journalists and librarians, who have been entrusted to fact-check and curate information for the public, the legitimacy of websites is taken for granted. When it comes to commercial search engines, it is no longer enough to simply share news and education on the web—we must ask ourselves how the things we want to share are found, and how the things we find have surfaced.

These shifts are similar to the ways that certain kinds of information are prioritized to the top of the search pile: information, products, and ideas promoted by businesses and sold to industries that can afford to purchase keywords at a premium, or URLs and advertising space online that drive their results and links to the top of the near-infinite pile of information available on the web. All of these dynamics are important for communities and organizations that want to make reliable information, education, culture, and resources available to each other—and not on page 23 of a Google search.

The Pew Internet & American Life consumer-behavior tracking surveys are conducted on a regular basis to understand the ways that Americans use the Internet and technology. An August 9, 2011, report found that 92 percent of adults who use the Internet—about half of all Americans—use search engines to find information online, and 59 percent do so on a typical day. These results indicate searching is the most popular online activity among U.S. adults. An earlier Pew report from 2005, “Search Engine Users,” specifically studied trust and credibility, finding that for the most part, people are satisfied with the results they find in search engines, with 64 percent of respondents believing search engines are a fair and unbiased source of information.

But in the case of a search on the words “black girls,” the results that come up are certainly not fair or unbiased representations of actual black girls. In a centuries-old struggle for self-determination and a decades-long effort to have control over our media misrepresentations—from mammies to sapphires, prostitutes to vixens—black women and girls have long been subject to exploitation in the media. Since we are so reliant on search engines for providing trusted information, shouldn't we

question the ways in which “information” about women is offered up to the highest bidder, advertiser, or company that can buy search terms and portray them any way they want?

When I conducted my classroom exercise this semester, Black Girls Rock!, a nonprofit dedicated to empowering young women of color, was ranked high on the first-page results, showing that there are, indeed, alternatives to the usual search results. This coincided with a national campaign the organization was doing for an upcoming TV special, meaning a lot of people visited their site, helping move them up to the front page. But not all organizations have the ability to promote their URL via other media. One of the myths of our digital democracy is that what rises to the top of the pile is what is most popular. By this logic, sexism and pornography are the most popular values on the Internet when it comes to women. There is more to result ranking than simply “voting” with our clicks.

Search engines have the potential to display information and counternarratives that don't prioritize the most explicit, racist, or sexist formulations around identity. We could experience freedom from such contrived and stereotypical representations by not supporting companies that foster a lack of social, political, and economic context in search engine results, especially as search engines are being given so much power in schools, libraries, and in the public domain. We could read more for knowledge and understanding and search less for decontextualized snippets of information. We could support more funding for public resources like schools and libraries, rather than outsourcing knowledge to big corporations. We need more sophisticated and thoughtful rankings of results that account for historical discrimination and misrepresentation. Otherwise, it appears that identity-based search results could be nothing more than old bigotry packaged in new media. **b**

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04/15/12 Update: after two years of research on the pornification of Black Girls in Google, and with the publication of this article, Google recently changed its algorithm and pornography is no longer the primary source of information about Black girls in a keyword search. Thanks, Google.