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EDITORIAL OBSERVER

Behind the Rise of Google Lies the Rise in Internet Credibility

By VERLYN KLINKENBORG

For the past few months, it has seemed as if every week has brought more news about Google, the search engine invented in the mid-1990's by a couple of Stanford graduate students. Microsoft has offered, in vain, to buy the company and is now developing its own proprietary search engine, in part by looking for soft spots in Google's patents. Yahoo has introduced a Google-like search tool of its own and dumped Google's. Meanwhile everyone is waiting for Google's initial public offering, an event that many people hope will begin a new round of I.P.O.'s, a round that carries us back in equity and optimism to the late great tech bubble at the end of the last century. Microsoft and Yahoo want their share and more of the nearly \$1 billion in ad revenue that Google generates. Investors want their share and more of Google stock. Most of the rest of us — at some 200 million searches a day — just want to keep Googling.

An early form of Google became available to Internet users in late 1998. Its rise to dominance in the search business came about for a number of reasons. One is the quality — expressed as relevance — of the search results it yields, quality that depends in part on the sophistication of Google's search algorithm but also on the sophistication of its users, who are growing wilier all the time.

Google has also been tireless in exploring new ways to search the Web. Through a catalog search tool and Froogle, its product search service, Google has morphed into a shopping engine. It has also turned into a news search engine, and has added the ability to search for images and to search by location. It now indexes more than four billion Web pages, updating every few weeks.

Plenty of people who want their Web sites to be listed near the top of Google search results have already figured out how to use Google's algorithm — its logic for getting results — to their own advantage. So the algorithm evolves, creating a Google Darwinism.

But what has really carried Google to the top is a change in our perception of the Internet. Some of the predictions made for the Internet in the late 1990's were as outlandish as they sounded, especially the economic ones. But a surprising number of predictions about how we would use the Web are being fulfilled.

Google has found ways to make advertising pay without making advertising obtrusive — something the big-banner portals are only now starting to figure out. It has changed the way we shop, travel and get basic information about our economic and cultural climates. Perhaps the most fundamental difference since those early days is an enormous change in the usefulness and credibility of what one can find on the Internet.

Make no mistake. The Web is still a place where you find every kind of fraud, deceit, obscenity and insanity — more of it than ever, in fact. But the Internet has also turned into a stunningly important archive of documents of all kinds, partly because it is now so easily searchable. The Web has moved from the periphery of a good

researcher's awareness in 1998 to the very center of it in 2004. In doing so, it confirmed what has always been true, that a good researcher is also a skeptical researcher.

Had the Web grown to be the farrago of nonsense it once seemed to be, a haystack with only a few needles, no one would have bothered to create a search engine, much less use it. But the Web is now a haystack full of needles. Once Google's motto might have been "Seek and ye shall find." Now it's really "Find and ye shall seek again."

What Google also reflects is our changing sense of the dynamism of the Web. Nothing captures how statically we used to see the Internet as well as "information highway," an old phrase that embodies pure linearity and the smell of asphalt. That stasis is also captured in the increasingly outmoded notion of an Internet portal like AOL, much of whose dynamism comes from offering a Google search bar. The fact is that many of us have grown comfortable within the amorphousness of the Web. We no longer need a breakwater like AOL when a good search engine promises to make the sea itself our home.

Sometimes the best metaphor for the Internet seems to be the population of earth itself, in which every human is a Web page related by kinship and conversation to all the other Web pages on earth. Sometimes the metaphor is a globe papered over with hyperlinked Web pages from which, more and more, tiny beacons arise, beaming updates to our computers like the old RKO tower. Whatever the metaphor, the only certainty is that we're going to need help finding anything for a long time yet to come.

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