

## **Call for Papers: International Journal of Information Ethics (IJIE) Special issue: Search Engines**

### **Introduction**

Search engines are the most used online services in the WWW. Since their first development in the midst of the 1990's they have become the most important tools for the majority of Internet users. The advantage of using search engines is that great, that there is almost no discussion about their moral dimension, although recent studies pointed out some problems (i.e. Machill et al. 2003). The forthcoming special issue of the IJIE should help to close this gap.

### **Possible Topics and Questions**

Please regard the following list – which was inspired by the findings of Machill et al. - as a mere suggestion. Any article will be welcome, as long as it provides a clear focus on search engines from the perspective of Information Ethics.

#### **1. Transparency**

To most users search engines are a “black box”, which is only to be evaluated by the usefulness of the results. One does not know, why which webpage is listed at which rank by a certain search engine. Also, one does not know, how search engines deal with the data provided by the users. It has to be stressed that there is a certain lack of transparency.

But from the point of view of owners and providers of search engines there might be good reasons to keep some technical aspects a secret. Beside the protection of their own intellectual property, the danger that a search engine is manipulated should be put into account. – Therefore, one can ask whether it is possible to hold up a general demand for transparency even with this background given?

#### **2. Filtering and (self-imposed) Censorship**

Most search engines use filter-technologies to maintain their online service. They may be used to block websites because of technical problems (i.e. when the website no longer exists), but also because of their content. Because of the general importance of search engines in the WWW, one might call this last form of filtering (self-imposed) censorship.

This form of censorship, “censorship” taken as a technical term for “blocking unwanted content”, may be regarded as desirable in certain aspects, for it may be used, for instance, to block morally unacceptable content or making it not to easy to get illegal copies.

From the perspective of Information Ethics it might be asked, if there is a reasonable distinction between acceptable and not acceptable forms of (self-imposed) censorship. Might there even be a moral duty for certain forms of censorship? And – visa versa – might there be a moral duty to make certain content public? Shall there be a duty to provide information about the criteria of censorship?

How about localized version of search engines? May filtering be considered as a sign of respect for the local tradition of dealing with knowledge?

#### **3. Spamming and Manipulating**

Because of the importance of search engines in the economy of attention, it is no surprise that some people try to produce a better position in the hit lists by using technical tricks. There is a wide spectrum of technical means to be used, which starts by exchanging links and does end with plain deception.

This kind of manipulation and promoting ones own website is mostly rejected because this methods are often used for "pure" commercial reasons or to promote morally unacceptable content. But, how should we judge such practices, when it is used for promoting morally acceptable or even desirable content? Is there any reason to condemn such forms of manipulations per se from the perspective of Information Ethics?

#### **4. Next Generation and Alternatives**

Search engines are going to be developed further. More and more they are integrated in other products, the data they process expands and the results are presented in different ways. Are their any principles of Information Ethics which allow us to judge this development? Can be given any good reasons to favor one kind of development and object against another?

In addition, what's about the economic background of search engines? Are non-commercial or non-profit, for instance, public funded search engines a desirable alternative to ensure the access to the unstructured data of the WWW?

Finally, it might be asked, if there are any limits in processing public data. Should all kind of data be searchable or are there any reasons against the processing of certain data (i.e. the whereabouts of persons)?

#### **The Rules of the Game**

Potential authors have to provide an extended abstract (max. 1500 words) until 31/01/2005 . The abstract should be written in the mother tongue of the author. An English translation of this abstract has to be included, if the chosen language is not English or German. The IJIE will publish articles in German, English, Spanish, French or Portuguese.

The abstracts will be selected by members of the editorial board of the IJIE. The authors will be informed at latest until 29/02/2005.

Deadline for the final article (3.000 words or 20.000 letters including blanks) is 30/04/2005. All submissions will be subject of a peer review. Therefore the acceptance of an extended abstract by the members of the editorial board does not imply the publication of the final text unless the article passed the peer review.

For more information about the journal see: [www.ijie.org](http://www.ijie.org)

A list of documents, which potential authors might find useful, can be requested by e-mail. Members of the ICIE will get a copy of the list via the ICIE mailing list.

#### **Contact**

Dr. Michael Nagenborg (Karlsruhe) manages the special issue as "guest editor". Please send the extended abstract by e-mail to:

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