From the Editor in Chief...

What’s Your PageRank?

Fred Douglass • IBM T.J. Watson Research Center • douglis@computer.org

I’ve never much paid attention to the ins and outs of search engines. From early search engines such as AltaVista (initially from Digital Equipment) to the current and long-time leader, Google, I’ve simply taken them for granted.

In my last column (“The Search for Jim, and the Search for Altruism,” May/June 2007), I mentioned that I was taken aback by the idea that someone would essentially post a classified advertisement offering some small payment to anyone who would link to a particular page. The page linking to it had to be established — for instance, a blog that had been around for a few weeks and posted to with regularity — but it didn’t require any specific ranking by the prominent search engines. (This practice has some similarity to “blog spam,” the practice of posting comments to blogs solely to link to a particular site, but is voluntary on the blog owner’s part.)

After the column appeared, I learned that this subtle bribery is essentially in the noise compared to more overt and widespread forms of compensation for linkage. However, that compensation isn’t bribery — it’s called advertising. What’s the difference?

Ads vs. Bribery

Let me back up. I know that advertising has supported Web sites for many years — to quote Seinfeld (one of the best US TV shows of all time), “not that there’s anything wrong with that.” Advertising has been wonderful for the Internet because it’s enabled the growth of many services that simply couldn’t survive as pay-as-you-go operations. In fact, if Google weren’t one of the preeminent intermediaries for online advertisements, I doubt it would’ve grown as rapidly as it has or been able to offer as many services as it does. It not only makes money displaying ads on its own sites — alongside search engine results, for instance — but also, as I understand it, is a veritable advertising agency with its adwords program (https://adwords.google.com).

So, Google and other companies take money to put links on pages people will see (search results, mail, and so on). These links are targeted based on the content being presented, and they’re usually not too obtrusive. One model is to charge advertisers only when users click on the links, which provides a direct relationship between the cost and the benefit the advertiser perceives. Another practice is to label the advertisements clearly so that viewers can tell the difference between endorsements and ads — something that is also common in other media such as magazines and radio in cases where an ad’s status might be misconstrued.

Switch back to my “bribery” comment. Let’s forget about random users being paid tiny amounts to link to specific pages in the hope of driving up traffic to those pages, and think about ways to have bigger impact. Just as magazines and other periodicals with large circulation can command larger fees for running a printed advertisement, Web sites with strong reputations (that is to say, high PageRanks, a metric Google uses to designate a page’s importance) can command higher fees for running ads. These ads serve a double purpose. A visitor to the Web site might see the ad and follow the link; additionally, the link from the high-ranked site to the sponsored site improves the sponsored site’s ranking. Users don’t even have to follow the advertisements for the site placing them to benefit.

What’s the right way to display these links? I have to give Google credit again for a good model. When I read mail in their Gmail system, they have a column to the right of the screen labeled “Sponsored links,” followed by a few pointers. Sometimes these pointers leave me in stitches, given that they key on some word out of context, but usually they’re pretty relevant. I find that sponsored links alongside search results in the regular Google search engine are almost always well targeted.
What’s the wrong way? Some sites place multiple links on their home pages without labeling them as advertisements or keeping them subtle. In fact, I know of one site, in particular, on which some things off to the side of the page are quite relevant but unobvious, whereas the ads are front and center. I wonder two things. First, how many people actually follow the links? Second, have the folks at Google, Yahoo, MSN, and so on caught on to this particular paradigm and adjusted their rankings of the sponsored links accordingly? (Once they do — if they haven’t already — advertisers will, of course, just find other ways to have the impact they do — if they haven’t already — sponsored links accordingly? (Once and adjusted their rankings of the Google, by the way, gets special billing as a “patron” sponsor.) I’m sure that most, if not all, of these sponsors already have high rankings for their sites; it seems to me that their inclusion on the home page is just a combination of appreciation and recognition of their support, as well as a simple form of advertising. That’s a model worth following.

Build Reputation, Don’t Dilute It

So, what’s the bottom line? Page ranking is clearly a good idea. Perhaps even better ones will come along, but reputation will always be an important element in identifying important pages. Voluntary links add reputation, whereas advertisements cloaked as regular links dilute reputation. Several search engines and blogging sites annotate “untrusted” links (such as those inserted in blog comments) with rel=“nofollow” so that their reputations don’t directly improve reputations of the sites they link to. I understand from my colleague David Carmel at IBM Haifa that the major search engine providers hope to extend this model to paid links. Authenticity in Web links could even fall under the model of the US’s CAN-SPAM act (see www.ftc.gov/cbc/online/pubs/buspubs/canspam.shtml), which could prohibit “link spam” the same way it targets email spam. Either way, the key will be to require annotations in HTML links to distinguish paid content from other links, and legitimate organizations should follow that protocol even if those who link because of a miniscule payment through an online brokering system don’t bother.

W hat’s next? Web pages certainly aren’t the only places where money taints reputation. Actors and other luminaries take money to endorse products, some of which they actually use, but when I hear someone pitching something worthless, they lose my respect and devalue their future endorsements. Respect for an individual or an organization is more easily lost than gained.

Going forward, we have to deal with virtual spam and new and different ways to inflate reputation for money. I heard from Carmel as well that in the virtual world Second Life, some people will pay to cause avatars to spend time in certain locations: the more people at the location, the better its reputation. Next, I suppose we’ll see avatars of famous people imparting extra reputation compared to the rest of us? Finally, returning to PageRank, you can go to www.mygooglepagelanck.com to see what your site’s is. If it’s high, maybe someone will pay you to link to them. I prefer to take the high road, myself. And besides, it’s only a matter of time before the ranking gurus ignore these spurious links, just as they ignored past attempts to stack the deck. They’re onto you.

Acknowledgments

The opinions expressed in this column are my personal opinions. I speak neither for my employer nor for IEEE Internet Computing in this regard, and any errors or omissions are my own.