

Study Sees Slant to Search

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A new study reopens a debate about whether Google's search results lean liberal, a bias that could influence public opinion.



An analysis by onlinesearch marketer CanIRank.com found that 50 recent searches for political terms on Google surfaced more liberal-leaning webpages than conservative ones, as rated by a panel of four people.

Alphabet Inc.'s Google denies allegations of bias. "From the beginning, our approach to search has been to provide the most relevant answers and results to our users, and it would undermine people's trust in our results, and our company, if we were to change course," a Google spokeswoman said in an email.

The company says its search results are "determined by algorithms using hundreds of factors" and "reflect the content and information that is available on the internet."

The CanIRank analysis has weaknesses, most notably its reliance on four people's judgments. Moreover, the findings are somewhat mixed: The searches surfaced more pages rated as "liberal" than "conservative" on a 5-point scale, but more pages were rated "very conservative" than "very liberal."

Still, the report's findings may fuel concerns about the influence of a handful of internet companies and their oftenopaque computer programs. Facebook Inc. is battling accusations that it widely circulated false news stories during the presidential campaign.

"We're talking about a historical level of control over the public sphere," said Zeynep Tufekci, a University of North Carolina professor who studies technology's impact on society. Google's search engine prioritizes certain websites over others, she said. "The question of how this works... is a healthy question to raise for a democracy."

The CanIRank analysis echoes a study from the University of Maryland in December that found searches for the names of Democratic presidential candidates displayed more supportive websites than did searches for Republican candidates.

Google has faced accusations of a liberal slant. During the summer, a pop-culture site claimed Google's autocomplete feature hid negative suggested searches for Hillary Clinton, which Google denied.

The University of Maryland and CanIRank analyses are among the few, if only, attempts to measure any potential bias in Google results.

CanIRank, which helps websites rank higher in Google results, in October conducted Google searches on desktop computers for 50 political terms— from “abortion” and “ISIS” to “hillary clinton illness” and “donald trump lies”— and collected the first 40 results for each search.

A panel of four people—two conservatives and two liberals with backgrounds in politics and on-line search—then ranked each page on a political spectrum on a one-to-five-point scale, with five being the most conservative.

The panel ranked each page on its own merits, meaning one Wikipedia page or Wall Street Journal article could be ranked differently than another.

The company said the panel agreed unanimously on nearly half the pages, and were within one point on the spectrum for nearly 90% of them.

Of the roughly 2,000 pages analyzed, the panel rated 31% as liberal and 22% as conservative. The remaining 47% of pages were rated neutral, including many from government or mainstream news websites.