POWER ON THE TIP OF YOUR FINGERS
JUST HOW POWERFUL CAN A SEARCH RANKING TOOL LIKE GOOGLE BE?
A RESEARCH ON GOOGLE SEARCH DURING THE INDIAN ELECTIONS BY SUVA PSYCHOLOGY PROFESSOR ROBERT EPSTEIN SUGGESTS IT CAN UNDECEIVE VOTERS.

ROSI DOVIVIERATA
SUVA

Search rankings are far more dangerous than media polls. At least that is the result of an ongoing research conducted by Psychology Professor at the University of the South Pacific, Robert Epstein. He says that with search rankings, candidates have no way to counter the results of such polls, which can indeed impact voting. Tested during the recent Indian election - Professor Epstein’s theory proved right.

He gave the following reasons why search rankings can determine the result of an election and somewhat make democracy meaningless:

1. Because of Google’s monopoly over search, unlike media polls, most of the search rankings in India (and, indeed, worldwide) are controlled by a single company. There is no possible way for opponents to balance the undue influence exercised by search rankings after one candidate has been favoured.

2. Because search engines are unregulated, biased search results can affect the opinions of undecided voters 24/7 for months before an election. I have developed a computer model showing how this type of influence can feed back to create an accelerating trend.

3. Search rankings carry with them the illusion that they are somehow completely objective, put in place by an entirely objective search algorithm. This is a fallacy which the public mistakenly believes is beyond human control. Call this “an aura of infallibility” that can carry such an aura at one time, but they no longer do.

4. This is critical: Search ranking manipulation can be completely hidden by sending customized rankings only to highly vulnerable individuals or deep in the graphic groups. It would be virtually impossible for regulators to detect such manipulation. Given the increasing use of customized rankings, this is quite a serious matter.

5. Biased search rankings can be created entirely by an algorithm without any human intent, planning, or direction. This means that the outcomes of many close elections are currently in the hands of a computer program. That is undue influence of an entirely new sort.

While a good number of Fijians are not online users, Professor Epstein believes that as years progress, the number is bound to increase.

"Any online search company needs to be regulated – there is no regulation to monitor such companies," he said.

"I know they are concerned about the study that we are doing and during a recent study, two people from Google’s home office participated in the study. So we know that they are watching us and they are concerned."

The ongoing research began in late 2012 with the first experiment in 2013. Professor Epstein will be elaborating on the study and its implications on the June 13 at the University of the South Pacific under the School of Governance.

Robert Epstein PhD is an American psychologist, writer, author, editor, and activist. He earned his PhD in Psychology at Harvard University in 1981, and was editor in chief of Psychology Today.

WHAT IS GOOGLE SEARCH
Google Search (or Google Web Search) is a web search engine owned by Google Inc. Google Search is the most-used search engine on the World Wide Web, handling more than three billion searches each day.

The order of search results is based on the relevance of the content to the search query. Google uses a ranking system called PageRank to determine the order of search results.

The main purpose of Google search is to return the most relevant results to the user. To achieve this, Google uses a combination of a variety of factors, including the content of the results, the user's location, and the user's search history.

GOOGLE GETS ‘LAST CHANCE’ TO SETTLE WITH EU
A host of small competitors - including TripAdvisor (Maa., UK), Opera (Scandinavian), Hotmaps (German), Foundem (UK), and AlexMaps (UK) - have filed complaints against Google Inc. (GOOG) before antitrust regulators in the European Union accusing the smartphone operating system and search giant of manipulating search results to boost its own offerings.

Google offers a variety of services, which are monetized through advertising. Microsoft Corp. (MSFT), an online advertising rival of Google's, is the largest firm to have complained to the EU about the alleged abuses.

Currently there are 16 complaints against Google. Stat Owls (source) and Net Market Share (source) both estimate Google to control roughly 61 per cent of the search market. Microsoft’s Bing is thought to be in second place with nearly 9 per cent.

In Europe Google’s market share is estimated to be even higher - approximately 86 per cent, according to comScore, another online statistics service.

An EU antitrust probe against Google was first launched in 2010, looking into the company’s alleged abuse of its dominant search service.

EU Competition Commissioner Joaquin Almunia says that like Google, the European Commission - Europe’s antitrust watchdog - is eager to avoid fines or trouble from non-compliance.

The EU investigation found Google did indeed abuse its dominant position.

But the EU is willing to avoid formal charges if it can get Google to agree to terms and conditions of a closely monitored programme of compliance.

In a letter Eric Schmidt, executive chairman, Mr Almunia writes: Google Inc. has repeatedly expressed to me its willingness to discuss any concerns that the Commission might have without having to engage in adversarial proceedings. This is why I am today giving Google an opportunity to offer remedies to address the concerns we have already identified.

In this letter, I offer Google the possibility to conclude in a matter of weeks with first proposals of remedies.

If Google comes up with an outline of remedies which are capable of addressing our concerns, I will instruct my staff to initiate the discussions in order to finalize a remedies package.

This would allow us to solve our concerns by means of a commitment decision - pursuant to Article 9 of the EU Antitrust Regulation - instead of having to pursue formal proceedings with a Statement of Objections and the adoption of a decision imposing fines and remedies.

David Wood, a lawyer for lobbying group ICCoM whose members include Microsoft, Foundem, and Hotmaps, explains that non-compliance or failure to respond convincingly will likely bring on formal charges. He tells the Associated Press, “This is effectively the Commission demanding remedies, failing that there will be a statement of objections (EU change sheet).”

Europe’s antitrust laws allow regulators to fine up to 10 per cent of a violator’s global turnover.

While the EU is best known for its massive billion-plus-dollar fines of Intel Corp. (INTC) and Microsoft Corp. (MSFT) for persistent antitrust violations, the region’s regulators have also made peace with other investigation subjects.

As Mr Almunia points out in his letter, threat to Google, International Business Machines, Inc. (IBM) faced a similar investigation in 2011, but was able to resolve it without formal charges being filed.

While Google disputes wrongdoing in the case, it may wish to follow IBM’s lead in order to avoid painful fines.

Even if Google settles, Mr Almunia says it will still face some other probes, such as an investigation into complaints that Google "snoread" on private communications on unsecured networks, using its “Street View” cars.