Could Google pick the next president?

The Post's Craig Timberg on the political power of search engines

Google's motto is 'Don't be evil.' But what would it mean for democracy if it were to become 'Don't be neutral'?

That's the question political scientist Robert Epstein has been asking in a series of experiments designed to test the effectiveness of search engines as political tools. In one experiment, his colleagues and he manipulated search rankings to make a specific candidate more appealing, and tracked how much traffic he received. In another, they looked at how the order of search results changed the likelihood of a user clicking on a particular link.

Epstein and some others say the government's power here lies in its ability to manipulate search results, which can then influence public opinion and even elections. Epstein points to a handful of examples where Google's power has been evident, such as the time they were able to increase the visibility of a candidate for a local office.

But there are also concerns about Google's power. Some worry that its algorithms could be used to manipulate search results in ways that are unfair or unethical. Others argue that Google should be more transparent about how it ranks its results.

Epstein argues that this is an important issue that we need to consider as we think about the role of technology in our democracy.

Recess Reading

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