



Search Engines and Privacy

Description

About Search Engines

Recent events regarding Facebook have heightened awareness about internet usage and privacy. Facebook has admitted culpability in allowing the spreading of false information and personal data mining by third parties with little to no supervision on their part. Many people found this shocking, but I found it to be predictable. Facebook is no more or less than a collection of users and their information and a way for them to connect and share information with others as they choose. What is more shocking in my opinion is not the workings of Facebook which has always been clear that it is world wide garage sale of information; but rather the private workings of the major search engines. Search engines are free because they let advertisers gather information to do marketing to the people who most want to see their products. This, in and of itself is not a bad thing.

For example, when I am looking for a used car in a certain price range and with certain features, I do not want to see all cars. I want to see only those that I can afford and am willing to purchase. After this I want all the choices possible, so I can buy the best car for my purposes that I can afford. In this way search engines are very helpful. I type keywords in a bar and up comes the most relevant choices for me according to the search engine's logarithm. Search engines are always tweaking their logarithms to try to come up with the best answers for us. This is why companies pay big bucks to people that know how to manipulate websites to be as close to the top of the search list as possible. This field of work is called Search Engine Optimization (SEO). Businesses know that being on the first page of results is critical and that the closer to the top of the list your website is, the more conversions and money you make. It's as simple as this. The more people you can get to click onto your website, the more chance someone will buy your product, the more money you can make. This is the economics behind Facebook and Search Engines.

This is why unscrupulous people try to hack into your email account and steal all your contacts or into your Facebook account and collect your friends contact info. They are simply collecting contact information to sell to marketers or finding people they can trick into clicking something so they get

credit and thus payment from a marketer or business. The more contacts and friends you have, the more enticing you are to them. It is the scourge of our age, which of course is the age of the rise of the internet. Search engines also make a lot of money from mining your personal information and selling it to marketers. This is why they are free and their workers make so much money. Again, this in and of itself is not necessarily a bad thing. They get money and we get something very powerful for free. This is the unspoken bargain you are making when you use most search engines.

What I find most disturbing about the major search engines is that there seems to be a monopoly among the top three or four and really the top one. I am not going to mention it's name, but you all know who it is. It has almost become synonymous with looking something up. The problem is that the more power you have the more temptation there is to cheat. So for instance, if you know the top choices in your search list provide the most income for those businesses what if you started partnerships with certain businesses and then shifted your logarithm to give them an advantage? What if you decided you wanted to black ball certain businesses or sites because they were against your opinion or interests. What if the government or a foreign power coerced you into faking results to favor a particular political viewpoint of one type or another. If there are many players, then the possibilities of these infractions decreases. But when there is only one major player, then the possibility of major infractions goes way, way up.

Possible Responses to the Current Climate

Choose the browser that reflects your personal preferences. You get to choose what browser you use to surf the web. The major ones are also deeply connected to one search engine or another. Google owns and runs Chrome. Windows owns and runs Explorer. Apple owns and runs Safari. The browser will inevitably reflect the business model of its owner. Do the math.

Set your browser's default search engine to the one of your choosing, not the browser's choosing. The browser will default to a specific search engine. It wants you to use the one that is most profitable to its owners. All browsers have a way for you to set your preferences. Find where that magic place is and choose the search engine of your choice or set the home page to be the search engine of your choice and not the browser's. Put your browser in its place.

Choose the search engine that fits your needs. You do not need to use the same search engine all the time. Try different ones. Personally, I use dogpile.com ([link here](#)) because it is as old as I am and it consolidates search results from several search engines into one. If I don't get the results I like I always have the choice to use another search engine as well. For instance, it is not as good as some others when searching for copyright free images for my web work. In addition to this, I realize my personal data is being collected and sold in this arrangement. If I wanted to keep my personal data to myself I would use either the [DuckDuckGo.com](#) search engine or the [StartPage.com](#) search engine.

Use a search engine that hides your personal data. There are several search engines that have risen in the last few years that claim to hide your personal data while you search. DuckDuckGo.com ([link here](#)) is a good choice, but the results may not be as robust as the ones you find on Google, especially if you are looking for images. StartPage ([link here](#)) is another interesting alternative. It uses results from Google but claims to keep your personal data safe by acting as a kind of middle man. I read good things about it, but have not read the fine print and remain suspicious of its Google

connection.

Do not download or sign into apps with social media accounts without careful scrutiny. While it is very convenient to sign in with a social media account, you are creating access to your personal data and your contacts by a third party. Remember free games are not really free. The creator of those games is making money from you and your information or choices. They may also be creating back doors to your information. Look closer at that window that flashes up asking you to give permission to an app. It is asking for access to your equipment and data. Ask yourself: Does this game really need access to my camera? Do I really want this app to know my location at all times? Does this app have enough credibility to give it access to all my contacts or Facebook friends? It seems common sense but would you let someone inside your home without knowing their name or purpose? Don't be a baby. Use your little gray cells, as Hercules Poirot would say.

Pay attention to political movements with regards to privacy and the internet. Imagine a world in which one entity could control what information you received and in what priority you received it. Can you even imagine the money and power that would come with this capability? Governments and businesses alike would be drooling to control such a power, as well as other more sordid characters. The good news is that there are also decent, God fearing people who are aware of these issues and working to keep people and businesses accountable. Make it your job to know and support these people. Pay attention to politicians who wade into this arena for good or for bad. Also pay attention to announcements of any major policy shifts of the services you choose to use. The devil is in the details as they say. Knowledge is power. You blessed to live in a country where you are free to make choices. Arm yourself with knowledge and make good choices.

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