

Wikia search: Transparency Is a Weapon with a Loaded Future

By Fabrizio Ferraro



What makes Wikia Search a potentially innovative project is neither its human intervention nor the quality of its search results. Its potential competitive advantage is its transparency, which could end up making it the most reliable in terms of the neutrality of its results.

Nevertheless, Wikia Search has started off on the wrong foot. “One of the biggest disappointments that I have had the unfortunate duty to report on,” blasts the write-up published on the influential technology blog TechCrunch. Most media articles and blogs reflect similar sentiments. The reaction is shocking since it was these same media sources that have created the most expectations about the new “social” search engine called upon to challenge Google for its throne.

Reviewers have been especially merciless with the paltry results returned by the new search engine compared to those offered by Google. Another unpopular aspect is that the much-heralded human intervention in the sorting of search results is not available in this initial version. Such opinions overlook the fact that this is a pre-launch, although Wales and his team indeed could have thought twice before launching such a rudimentary version on January 7.

One of the problems with Wikia Search is that it has been announced as a search engine that will incorporate the human factor into Internet searches, unlike the automated mechanisms used by its top rival. However, resorting to the social component in searches is nothing new. Google, for instance, uses PageRank, a system of algorithms that calculates the relevance of each website from the entire Internet. This procedure takes into account such aspects as the number of links pointing to each page and the amount of times each link gets clicked. Although it uses complex mathematical operations, the data are a product of tracking the movements made by Internet users.

Keys

1 Wikia Search is based on the concept of *wiki*, a term that refers to websites fueled by content that the users themselves provide. The best-known example is Wikipedia, which Nielsen ranked ninth among the sites most frequently visited by American Internet users in late 2007.

2 The Wikia Search engine employs an open-source technology that, in contrast to that used by rival sites, lets the users themselves contribute by making improvements to the algorithms that sort the search results.

3 The credibility of search engines has come under fire by those suspecting that pressure from advertisers may influence their results. With that scenario, the commitment to transparency proclaimed by Jimmy Wales’ new project could end up creating more trust in the neutrality of its results than that of its rivals’ results.

Another difficulty the new search engine will have to overcome is that in addition to rivaling Google and the other search engines, it will also have to compete with news voting sites, such as the US-based Digg and the Spanish site Meneame, as well as the social bookmarking sites like del.icio.us. These systems are also based on user participation however they organize the information in a different manner. The categories system used by news portals and sorting based on tags that use social scoreboards clearly reflect the interests of Internet users, which means Wikia Search is not going to have an easy time trying to catch up with these communities that already have several years' head start on the business of sorting information on the Internet.

Amazon, the project's primary investor, knows from personal experience just how important it is to have the confidence of Web users. In 1999, The New York Times printed a story saying that the virtual bookstore charged publishers to include their books on its home page without notifying visitors to that effect, a move that hurt its credibility. The possible influence of corporate pressure in the search-engine results also raises suspicions. Yet nonetheless, its importance as a filter for accessing information demands strict neutrality among its results. With this scenario, the real innovation of Wikia Search is that just like the free encyclopedia Wikipedia, it lets the public see how its sorting processes work.

Can this project spearheaded by Jimmy Wales—whose business model is the same as that of his competitors, advertising—become an example of transparency in the sorting of Web content? It is still too soon to know whether this competitive advantage will materialize or if it will be enough to establish itself alongside its powerful rivals.

