

# BOOK REVIEW: SEARCH ENGINE SOCIETY (ALEXANDER HALAVAIS)

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This book commences with the assertion that Google, and search engines in general, are not as neutral as they may seem. The author begins with a comprehensive overview of the history of the technology, before proceeding to explain its technical organization. Essentially, he contends that the proliferation of information achieved through the use of algorithms, which rely on traffic via hyperlinks, amongst other processes, to determine what is most relevant to different searches. Commercial considerations also play a role; pages returned in searches favour advertisers' interests so that search engines can continue to be profitable.

Throughout the book, Halavais makes a brave attempt to explain the technological processes that underlie how search engines search. This said, without prior knowledge of such processes, some parts of this content can be difficult to follow. Although diagrams are occasionally used to allow readers to visualise the organisation of search engines, the written explanations of the technology are often complex. Beyond this, Halavais' analysis of the social processes of searching. He suggests that this requires a type of learned literacy, rather than innate skill or knowledge. The wide range of searchable topics, and the constant state of flux in which search engines exist, often makes this literacy a challenge to obtain and is often framed by a predominant American influence, as this is where the majority of search engine technology is situated. Majority groups are accorded power through the domination of Westernised Internet content, leading to a 'status quo' of information. Halavais draws on Barber's 1996 'McWorld' versus 'Jihad' to explain how this influence is increasingly challenged by 'glocalised' internet content that reasserts local culture (p. 93).

Throughout the book, there is a strong focus on the 'sociability' of search engines, an aspect of the book that is particularly thought-provoking. As search engines permeate social life so thoroughly, their existence is rarely questioned. Dislodging the perceived neutrality of search engines, as *Search Engine Society* does, it opens an intriguing space for discussion and thought. While there are often more questions raised than answers given in this work, the book encourages the reader to consider their view of the role of search engines in contemporary everyday life.

These considerations come to the fore in the author's discussion of censorship and privacy, and the power that companies such as Google have in determining what is and is not censored or made accessible. In turn, governments also have power, sometimes a con-

cerning amount, to persuade Google to censor or release particular information. Halavais raises difficult questions in relation to this: is censorship a necessary form of regulation, or does it delegitimize the entire premise of search? Further, even though searchers may be aware of the accessibility of their personal information, is their privacy jeopardized regardless?

The notion of search engine 'sociability' is made concrete in the final chapters, where the author discusses the origins of searching as a human-determined technology. Halavais suggests that search is an inherently social activity, as demonstrated by the 'search party' for instance, 'sociable search' is a way of collectively determining information, by ranking, or using social media such as blogs. This offers an alternative to algorithm-based search engines such as Google or Yahoo, as it relies on social interaction. A 'marketplace' for answers and knowledge is created, which relies on trust in peers, and consequently provides the means for collective networking and knowledge-making.

Given the pervasiveness of search engines, and the assumption that they neutrally permeate all aspects of society, this book offers a particularly fresh perspective. Halavais' consideration of some of the social aspects of search engines, as opposed focusing solely on technology, is particularly insightful. While information technology is often construed as a harmless convenience, *Search Engine Society* urges searchers to reconsider such a conception, and be wary of the very accessibility and pervasiveness that makes search engines convenient. Stimulating questions of power and politics are also raised, perspectives not often associated with the topic. It is Halavais' final question, however, that really invites further analysis of the operation and transparency of search engines in society: who will overtake Google?