

October 26, 2006

## A New Campaign Tactic: Manipulating Google Data

By [TOM ZELLER Jr.](#)

If things go as planned for liberal bloggers in the next few weeks, searching Google for “Jon Kyl,” the Republican senator from Arizona now running for re-election, will produce high among the returns a link to an April 13 article from The Phoenix New Times, an alternative weekly.

Mr. Kyl “has spent his time in Washington kowtowing to the Bush administration and the radical right,” the article suggests, “very often to the detriment of Arizonans.”

Searching Google for “Peter King,” the Republican congressman from Long Island, would bring up a link to a Newsday article headlined “King Endorses Ethnic Profiling.”

Fifty or so other Republican candidates have also been made targets in a sophisticated “[Google bombing](#)” campaign intended to game the search engine’s ranking algorithms. By flooding the Web with references to the candidates and repeatedly cross-linking to specific articles and sites on the Web, it is possible to take advantage of Google’s formula and force those articles to the top of the list of search results.

The project was originally aimed at 70 Republican candidates but was scaled back to roughly 50 because Chris Bowers, who conceived it, thought some of the negative articles too partisan.

The articles to be used “had to come from news sources that would be widely trusted in the given district,” said Mr. Bowers, a contributor at [MyDD.com](#) (Direct Democracy), a liberal group blog. “We wanted actual news reports so it would be clear that we weren’t making anything up.”

Each name is associated with one article. Those articles are embedded in hyperlinks that are now being distributed widely among the left-leaning blogosphere. In an entry at MyDD.com this week, Mr. Bowers said: “When you discuss any of these races in the future, please, use the same embedded hyperlink when reprinting the Republican’s name. Then, I suppose, we will see what happens.”

An accompanying part of the project is intended to buy up Google Adwords, so that searches for the candidates’ names will bring up advertisements that point to the articles as well. But Mr. Bowers said his hopes for this were fading, because he was very busy.

The ability to manipulate the search engine’s results has been demonstrated in the past. Searching for “miserable failure,” for example, produces the official Web site of President Bush.

But it is far from clear whether this particular campaign will be successful. Much depends on the extent of political discussion already tied to a particular candidate’s name.

It will be harder to manipulate results for searches of the name of a candidate who has already been widely covered in the news and widely discussed in the blogosphere, because so many links and so many pages already refer to that particular name. Search results on lesser-known candidates, with a smaller body of references and links, may be easier to change.

“We don’t condone the practice of Google bombing, or any other action that seeks to affect the integrity

of our search results,” said Ricardo Reyes, a Google spokesman. “A site’s ranking in Google’s search results is automatically determined by computer algorithms using thousands of factors to calculate a page’s relevance to a given query.”

The company’s faith in its system has produced a hands-off policy when it comes to correcting for the effects of Google bombs in the past. Over all, Google says, the integrity of the search product remains intact.

Writing in the company’s blog last year, Marissa Mayer, Google’s director of consumer Web products, suggested that pranks might be “distracting to some, but they don’t affect the overall quality of our search service, whose objectivity, as always, remains the core of our mission.”

Still, some conservative blogs have condemned Mr. Bowers’s tactic. These include [Outside the Beltway](#), which has called him “unscrupulous,” and [Hot Air](#), which declared the effort “fascinatingly evil.”

But Mr. Bowers suggested that he was acting with complete transparency and said he hoped political campaigns would take up the tactic, which he called “search engine optimization,” as a standard part of their arsenal.

“I did this out in the open using my real name, using my own Web site,” he said. “There’s no hidden agenda. One of the reasons for this is to show that campaigns should be doing this on their own.”

Indeed, if all campaigns were doing it, the playing field might well be leveled.

Mr. Bowers said he did not believe the practice would actually deceive most Internet users.

“I think Internet users are very smart and most are aware of what a Google bomb is,” he said, “and they will be aware that results can be massaged a bit.”

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