Web site shows search censorship in different countries

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Search engines might be created with the intent to give all users equal access to the same information, but a Web site created by researchers at the Indiana University School of Informatics visualizes how some countries' censorship laws affect search results. CenSEARCHip examines versions of Google and Yahoo used in the United States, China, Germany and France. It compares any two countries' results from a single engine's Web or image search using the same keywords.

The project was spearheaded by Filippo Menczer, associate professor of informatics and computer science; and Mark Meiss, a computer science doctoral student. CenSEARCHip largely was inspired by Google's decision in January to create a new version for China (google.cn) and adhere to the government's free-speech restrictions.

In announcing its decision, Google argued it would be more damaging to pull its services from the world's most populous country than to offer a localized search engine compliant with China's constraints. Yahoo and Microsoft's MSN.com also have submitted to the Chinese government's online restrictions.

"We wanted to explore the results returned by major search engines and in so doing to foster an informed debate on the impact of search censorship on information access throughout the world," says Menczer, an expert in Web intelligence and data mining applications.

When a user enters a keyword and then clicks on the "Web Search" or

"Image Search" button on the CenSEARCHip site, each side of the display highlights the results unique to that national version. For "Web Search," cenSEARCHip uses so-called "tag clouds" to highlight those terms that are most common in results from one version of the engine and least common in the other.

"For Web search the system downloads the top few pages unique to each country's results," explains Meiss, a researcher at IU's Advanced Network Management Lab, who constructed CenSEARCHip based on a prototype created by Menczer. As the pages are downloaded, a set of words of varying size appears in each half of the display.

"When comparing the U.S. and Chinese Google sites, users tend to get quite different results when searching political topics such as human rights and democracy," says Meiss. "In China, the blocked sites tend to be Western news media, political parties and the military, international organizations, militant Islamic groups, information related to Taiwan and Tibet and sites with pornographic content."

For example, the keywords "Tiananmen Square" yield starkly different returns. On the U.S. site, there are numerous text and image results referencing the Chinese government's bloody crackdown on pro-democracy protestors in 1989. The Chinese site version largely displays hotel and tourist information.

But limited access to information is not unique to Chinese search engines. Meiss says neo-Nazi Web "hate sites" are commonly blocked by Germany. Both Germany and France prohibit the online sale of objects that incite racial hatred.

"Search engines have become the main gateway to access information on the Internet. Therefore, their policies have a huge impact in forming opinions," Menczer says. "We don't yet have quantitative models of how

engines affect the complex dynamics of information diffusion, but ongoing research at the School of Informatics is probing these phenomena."

To access CenSEARCHip go to http://homer.informatics.indiana.edu/censearchip

Source: Indiana University

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