

Why the Web tells us what we already know

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The Internet is not the font of all knowledge, despite the plethora of information available at your fingertips.

Researchers from the University of New South Wales (UNSW) in Australia have found that while Internet searches do bring up a variety of useful materials, people pay more attention to information that matches their pre-existing beliefs.

“Even if people read the right material, they are stubborn to changing their views,” said one of the authors, UNSW Professor Enrico Coiera. “This means that providing people with the right information on its own may not be enough.”

The research considered how people use Internet search engines to answer health questions.

“We know that the web is increasingly being used by people to help them make healthcare decisions,” said Professor Coiera. “We know that there can be negative consequences if people find the wrong information, especially as people in some countries can now self-medicate by ordering drugs online. Australians can order complementary medicines online and these can interfere with other medications.”

“Our research shows that, even if search engines do find the ‘right’ information, people may still draw the wrong conclusions – in other words, their conclusions are biased.”

What also matters is where the information appears in the search results and how much time a person spends looking at it, according to the research which has been published in the Journal of the American Medical Informatics Association.

“The first or the last document the user sees has a much greater impact on their decisions,” said Professor Coiera, who is the Director of the Centre for Health Informatics at UNSW.

Dr Annie Lau worked with Professor Coiera to design an interface to help people make sense of the information which they are presented with and to break down these decision biases.

“The new search engine interface we have designed could be a part of any search engine and allows people to organise the information they find, and as a result organise their thoughts better,” said Professor Coiera.

While the research was conducted in the area of health, Professor Coiera said the results – and the technology – are applicable to other fields too.

The research on the interface will be publicly available within a year.

Source: University of New South Wales

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