Meghan Daum: I'm with Google

Search engines are seeing our inner shopper, but are we selling ourselves short?

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BECAUSE YOU'VE surely been wondering, you can now find out that Brisbane, Australia, is the city that most often googles the word "bestiality," and Toronto and New York are in a deadlock for searching the phrase "outside the box" (pity them both). You can also learn, for instance, that interest in Labradoodles spiked in 2004, and Fendi handbags hit their peak last year.

The reason you can know these things is the introduction of Google Trends, a search tool that allows you to check the popularity of any given keyword or phrase versus another. You can see how that popularity changed over the months, what cities most commonly google a word or phrase and whether interest is likely to increase or decrease over the coming months. Best of all, this information is presented in the form of a very serious looking graph, which means you can look up "Nicole Richie" at the office and appear to be hard at work on those P&L spreadsheets.

As David Leonhardt pointed out in a (much-googled) New York Times column this week, the whole phenomenon captures what techology writer John Battelle has called "the database of intentions." By learning what interests people, and by charting how that interest changes over time, we can, Leonhardt suggests, "predict the future" with "a digital crystal ball."

Well, sort of. Google Trends, still in its infancy, doesn't supply hard numbers, tends to be slightly out of date and doesn't yet provide top 40-style lists of the most popular searches. For that you have to go to Google Zeitgeist, which, according to its description, "provides a cumulative snapshot of interesting queries people are asking." The most popular query for this week, for example, was "Star Jones," followed by "Tour de France," "Wimbledon" and "Brandon Routh" (the star of "Superman 3"). Incidentally, "Korean missile" turned up a scant 645,000 hits and "Australian military" only 1,500, which is possibly why Australians are in a deadlock for searching the phrase "outside the box" (pity them both). You can also learn, for instance, that interest in Labradoodles spiked in 2004, and Fendi handbags hit their peak last year.

This is all great fun, but is this "database of intentions" really going to tell us something new about ourselves? It seems to me that so far the digital crystal ball has mostly helped us with our shopping.

Unlike a conventional crystal ball, which might (at least in the proper hands) tell me all sorts of warm fuzzy things about myself — such as "You live life to its fullest" and "You will soon meet an exotic stranger who will open up new possibilities" — the digital crystal ball suggests that I'm likely to shop online for marked-down sandals.

In fairness to the Internet (because even inanimate mega-phenomena deserve the benefit of the doubt), I'm not the easiest person to pin down. As a journalist with no discernible beat, I perform hundreds of searches a week, most of them having nothing to do with one another and many of them unrelated to any personal interest.
Type the letter "m" into my computer's Google box and it tries to beat me to the punch with any number of past searches, including "morning-after pill," "Madonna," "mesothelioma" and, oh yeah, "Meghan Daum" (come on, we all do it; it's natural and nothing to be ashamed of).

The curious thing about these "intentions" is the way they're increasingly defined not by what we plan to do but by what we plan to buy. Of course, a good capitalist would say these are one and the same; that our opportunities in life are directly proportional to the markets that keep opportunities in steady supply. But as much as we like to bandy about wry axioms such as "Shopping is the national pastime" and "Celebrity worship is the American religion," I wonder if we're selling ourselves short.

While it's true that (despite our claims to the contrary) we like to have decisions made for us — the fact that millions of people have handed their romantic fates over to online dating sites can attest to that — is it really wise to equate Internet hits with our deepest human impulses? Does Google know us better than we know ourselves?

Leonhardt writes that back in 2003, Battelle characterized Internet-search histories as "a placeholder for the intentions of humankind." This sounds majestic in a kind of Wagner-cum-Joseph Campbell way, but it also limits the definition of "intention" to that which is quantifiable. For all the desires we harbor that are measurable — buy that Balenciaga handbag (Fendi is so late '05), book that trip to Bhutan, learn to drywall — aren't there even more that defy statistical analysis?

How do you measure a person's intention to do meaningful work, build strong relationships or be a useful member of a community? How can a collective Internet-search history express values that we ourselves cannot always put into words?

Google can't be expected to have worked out all the kinks just yet. But there's reason for optimism. With technology moving so fast, it won't be long before we can type in "happy, fulfilling life" and be given a list of personalized recommendations for achieving one.

But here's a tip, Google. Look at our past behavior and tell us to do the opposite. Some histories are meant to be rewritten.