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As Google Goes, So Goes the Nation

By GEOFFREY NUNBERG

You don't get to be a verb unless you're doing something right. Do a Google search on "ford," for example, and the first batch of results includes the pages for the Ford Motor Company, the Ford Foundation, the Betty Ford Center, Harrison Ford and Gerald R. Ford — all good guesses at what a user would be looking for, particularly considering that Google estimates its index holds more than 16 million pages including the word.

Google now conducts 55 percent of all searches on the World Wide Web. People have come to trust the service to act as a digital bloodhound. Give it a search term to sniff, and it disappears into the cyber wilderness, returning a fraction of a second later with the site you were looking for in its mouth.

A high place in Google's rankings can have a considerable value for commercial sites. Some go so far as to pay other sites to link to them to raise their standing.

And a high Google ranking can also have a lot of clout in the marketplace of ideas. It seems to confer "ownership" on a particular word or phrase — deciding, in effect, who gets to define it. It's easy to read these results as reflecting the consensus of an extended Internet community, with the power to shape opinion and events. As James F. Moore, a fellow at the Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard Law School, wrote in an article on his blog posted March 31, the Internet has become a "shared collective mind" that is coming to figure as a "second superpower."

Sometimes, though, the deliberations of the collective mind seem to come up short. Take Mr. Moore's use of "second superpower" to refer to the Internet community. Not long ago, an article on the British technology site The Register (theregister.com) accused Mr. Moore of "googlewashing" that expression — in effect, hijacking the the expression and giving it a new meaning.

It had actually originated in a Feb. 17 article by Patrick E. Tyler in The New York Times that referred to the United States and world public opinion as the "two superpowers on the planet." Shortly after that, the phrase "second superpower" was adopted by organizations like Greenpeace and was used by Kofi Annan, the United Nations secretary general, to refer to antiwar opinion. But Mr. Moore's article was linked to by a number of bloggers sympathetic to his ideas, and quickly became the first hit returned when someone searches Google for "second superpower."

There was nothing underhanded in Mr. Moore's ability to co-opt ownership of the phrase in the rankings; it follows from the way Google works. Its algorithms rank results both by looking at how prominently the search terms figure in the pages that include them and by taking advantage of what Google calls "the uniquely democratic nature of the Web" to estimate the popularity of a site. It gives a higher rank to pages that are linked to by a number of other pages, particularly if the referring pages themselves are frequently linked to. (The other major search engines have adopted similar techniques.)
When you search for a common item like "ford" or "baseball," the engines naturally give the highest rankings to major sites that are linked to by hundreds or thousands of other pages. But when searches are more specific — whether "second superpower" or "Sinatra arrangers" — the rankings will mirror the interests of the groups that aggregate around particular topics: the bloggers, experts, hobbyists and, often, the crackpots.

Not long ago a German friend of mine went to Google for help in refuting a colleague who maintained that American authorities engineered the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, citing as evidence, among other things, the delay in sending American fighter jets aloft that morning. My friend did searches on a number of obvious strings, like "9/11 scramble jets intercept." But almost all the pages that came up were the work of conspiracy theorists, with titles like "Guilty for 9-11: Bush, Rumsfeld, Myers" and "Pentagon surveillance videos — where are the missing frames?"

"To judge from the Google results, there's plenty of evidence for a conspiracy and little to the contrary," my friend said.

That's the sort of result that often leads people to complain that the Web is full of junk or that the search engines aren't working as they should. From the standpoint of the search engines, however, this is all as it should be. The beauty of the Web, after all, is that it enables us to draw on the expertise of people who take a particular interest in a topic and are willing to take the trouble to set down what they think about it. In that sense, the Web is a tool that enables people who have a life to benefit from the efforts of those who don't.

But given the "uniquely democratic" nature of the Web, it shouldn't be surprising that the votes reported by the search engines have many of the deficiencies of plebiscites in the democracies on the other side of the screen. On topics of general interest, the rankings tend to favor the major sites and marginalize the smaller or newer ones; here, as elsewhere, money and power talk.

And when it comes to more specialized topics, the rankings give disproportionate weight to opinions of the activists and enthusiasts that may be at odds with the views of the larger public. It's as if the United Nations General Assembly made all its decisions by referring the question to whichever nation cares most about the issue: the Swiss get to rule on watchmaking, the Japanese on whaling.

THE outcomes of Google's popularity contests can be useful to know, but it's a mistake to believe they reflect the consensus of the "Internet community," whatever that might be, or to think of the Web as a single vast colloquy — the picture that's implicit in all the talk of the Internet as a "digital commons" or "collective mind."

Seen from a Google's eye view, in fact, the Web is less like a piazza than a souk — a jumble of separate spaces, each with its own isolated chatter. The search engines cruise the alleyways to listen in on all of these conversations, locate the people who are talking about the subject we're interested in, and tell us which of them has earned the most nods from the other confabulators in the room. But just because someone is regarded as a savant in the barbershop doesn't mean he'll pass for wise with the people in the other stalls.

Geoffrey Nunberg, a Stanford linguist, is heard regularly on NPR's "Fresh Air" and is the author of "The Way We Talk Now."