Deconstructing Google bombs: A breach of symbolic power or just a goofy prank?

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Deconstructing Google bombs: A breach of symbolic power or just a goofy prank?

by Clifford Tatum

Abstract

In this study I compare two Google bombs using Melluci's (1996) social movement framework. Viewing the Google bombing practice as a social movement provides an informative lens from which to analyze the nature and goals as well as the results of this form of online collective action. The empirical basis for this research relies on analysis of the content and context of Google bomb hyperlinking using an approach informed by Beaulieu's (2005) notion of sociable hyperlinks. From this study I conclude that the Google bombing practice is an online protest technique not unlike the "media mind bomb" developed by the late Bob Hunter of Greenpeace (2004) fame. In the case of Hunter's mind bombs, sounds and images were used to form alternate constructions of reality in the news media. Similarly, Google bombs are constructed by manipulating the relative ranking of an Internet search term and thereby creating alternate constructions of reality through collective action online.

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Introduction

The practice of Google bombing is a collective hyperlinking strategy intended to change the search results of a specific term or phrase. In this study I compare two Google bombs; the "miserable failure" and the "Jew." The "miserable failure" Google bomb promoted George W. Bush's home page to the number one Page Ranking resulting from a search of the phrase "miserable failure." The "Jew" Google bomb was a successful effort to demote an anti–Semitic Web site from the number one Page Rank resulting from a search of the term "Jew." This effort resulted in the promotion of the wikipedia.org definition of "Jew" (Wikipedia, 2005) to the number one position.

Adam Mathes first coined the term "Google bombing" in an April 2001 online article, entitled "Filler Friday: Google Bombing" (Mathes, 2001). In this article Mathes describes how he discovered part of the technique Google uses to calculate Page Rankings. Mathes' discovery was based on the perpetuation of linking the words "internet rockstar" to the Web site of his friend, Ben Brown. There were earlier reports of influencing Google's ranking order when it was noted in 1999 that the search query for "more evil than Satan" would return Microsoft's home page (Spring, 1999).

Google bombing is a collective hyperlinking strategy intended to change the search results of a specific term or phrase.

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However, the technological understanding of manipulating Page Ranking was not widely understood until a few years later. Indeed, the coining of the phrase "Google bomb" facilitated mimetic diffusion of the rank influencing techniques, something that is now referred to as search engine optimization (SEO) in the more mundane circles of commoditized Page Rank manipulation.

Analytical framework

Generally speaking the Internet is a more liberalized form of mediated communication that challenges power over symbolic representations of reality. Indeed, the Internet is seen by some as a place where multiple and pluralistic notions of reality co–exist (Rogers, 2005). In this study I define symbolic media power as the power of media institutions in constructing mass–mediated symbols of reality (Bourdieu, 1991). This is the idea that media institutions such as television, radio, and the press, possess a disproportionate power in the creation and dissemination of representations of reality (Couldry, 2000). From this perspective, symbolic representations tend to be generalized in terms of dominant ideologies and racial, social, and gendered stereotypes.

The underlying assumption with regard to this study is that the Internet has the potential to democratize the production of symbolic resources. As an example of this potential, the practice of Google bombing illustrates the ability of online collective action to breach the boundary between media power and more pluralistic constructions of reality.

Couldry (2000) talks of the asymmetrical distribution of symbolic power, the power of creating, distributing, and/or perpetuating symbolic representations of reality, as overwhelmingly in the hands of a very few. He explains that the fundamental asymmetry of the media is the distinction between those who have access to events as they happen, those who have a role in representing events, and the "majorities and minorities" who consume representations of these events (Stuart Hall in Couldry, 2000). According to Couldry, this is not simply a technical or political issue but is "an asymmetry in people's ability to constitute social reality itself" [1].

The practice of strategic hyperlinking to change the outcome of Internet search results is both a specific means to an end and a disruption of this asymmetry of media power. I define the practice of "Google bombing" as a case of online collective action. More specifically within the rubric of collective action I examine two Google bombs to determine whether or not they can be defined as a social movement. In his book, *Challenging codes: Collective action in the information age,* Melluci [2] defines a social movement as comprising three analytical dimensions:

> "A movement is the mobilization of a collective actor (i) defined by specific solidarity, (ii) engaged in a conflict with an adversary for the appropriation and control of resources valued by both of them, (iii) and whose action entails a breach of the limits of compatibility of the system within which the action itself takes place."

The questions that guide this study are; does the Google bombing practice as a form of collective action meet Melucci's definition of social movement? If so what is at stake, what are the goals, and what is the result of the action? The objects of this study are two Google bombs: a comparative case study of the "miserable failure" and "Jew" Google bombs.

Deconstructing Google bombs

The case of the "miserable failure" Google bomb

When Dick Gephardt, in September 2003, referred to George W. Bush as a "miserable failure," mass media carried the story and in doing so framed the story as simply campaign rhetoric. However, the term coined by Gephardt during his presidential campaign was co–opted by mass media consumers and bandied about the Internet in a battle of symbolic meaning. Left–wing oriented bloggers linked the words "miserable failure" to Bush's bio page — at http://www.whitehouse.gov/president/gwbbio.html — on the whitehouse.gov Web site and eventually increased its Google Page Ranking to the number one slot resulting from a search of the words "miserable failure." Not satisfied to let their leader be defaced in cyberspace, right–wing bloggers began a campaign to displace Bush as the number one ranked "miserable failure"

by collective linking, or Google bombing, the Web sites of Michael Moore, Jimmy Carter, and Hillary Clinton.

To isolate the participants engaged in the "miserable failure" Google bomb, I conducted a "links" search in Google's advanced options. Searching for all of the pages linked to the George W. Bush bio page yielded 2,690 links, a much more manageable and specifically relevant collection than the 275,000 links returned with the search term "miserable failure." The collection of pages linked to George W. Bush's bio were comprised of two main categories, those that legitimately linked to his page, such as governmental agencies, educational institutions, and news articles, etc. and those that were linked to the words "miserable failure," such as personal Web pages, blog sites, independent media, and in some cases to commercial sites. Interestingly, within this second category, several other Google bombs that link to Bush's bio page were revealed.

To code the 2,690 in–links, I first paired this number down to approximately 1,000 hyperlinks by eliminating duplicate domain names. There were numerous instances where multiple "miserable failure" links to Bush's bio page were created under a single domain. The coding results reveal that 43 percent of links to the Bush bio originate from .gov sites and are a category of entirely legitimate linkages. However, another 43 percent come from blog and/or personal Web pages, most of which are Google bomb participants. The remaining 14 percent of links to Bush's bio page fall into six additional origination categories; .edu/school, info/directory, protest/activist, independent media, mainstream media, or commercial. This 14 percent is a mixture of legitimate links, Google bomb links, and discussion of the "miserable failure" Google bomb phenomenon.

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It would be misleading to see this as a close battle, between blog sites and government sites, for the dominant position in mobilizing and controlling symbolic resources on the Web. Whereas the .gov–originated Web links have a relatively consistent linking strategy at a macro level — *i.e.* Bush is good (or at least not bad) — much more is going on within blogs, personal sites, and protest/activist sites than meets the eye. For example, in addition to "miserable failure," there are four distinct Google bombs identifiable solely from linking to the Bush bio page. As stated above these include the "unelectable," "worst president ever," and "failure" Google bombs, each of which currently holds George Bush as the number one ranked search result. With regard to the "miserable failure" effort, it should be noted that there are also several counter–bombing movements. Individuals are linking "miserable failure" to politically left–oriented targets, such as Jimmy Carter, Michael Moore, and/or Hilary Clinton.

The case of the "Jew" Google bomb

The "Jew" Google bomb began shortly after the discovery, in March 2004, that a search for the word "Jew" in Google would yield an anti–Semitic Web site, jewwatch.com, as the number one search result. Interestingly, there is no indication in the data that jewwatch.com became the number one ranked return other than by the internal linking structure within their site. That is, they achieved this position entirely by themselves. Steven Weinstock, a New York real estate agent, was the first to discover that searching the word "Jew" returned the jewwatch.com site in the number one position (Becker, 2004).

Two distinct movements resulted from this discovery. Weinstock started an online petition to remove jewwatch.com from the Google search results. He established, removejewwatch.com Web site where he was able to very quickly collect signatures in support of removing jewwatch.com from Google's search results. Google resisted this effort and finally wrote a letter explaining their rationale. The online letter is listed in the sponsored links above the search results for the term "Jew." In the letter, titled "Offensive Search Results" (see http://www.boycottwatch.org/misc/google.htm), Google explains that "views expressed by the sites in your results are not in any way endorsed by Google" and that the results for the term "Jew," although offensive, are the objective results of the search (Google, 2004).

Although the online petition ultimately failed, it helped mobilize the "Jew" Google bomb, which was initiated by Daniel Sieradski, editor of the Jew School, at http://jewschool.com/, a site devoted to Jewish fringe culture. Sieradski proposed the linking of the word "Jew" to the wikipedia.org entry for "Jew" at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jew. In roughly a month's time word of this effort spread through online discussions, primarily on blogs, and was successful in displacing jewwatch.com as the number one Page Rank in a Google search.

To isolate the linking action of the "Jew" bomb, I again conducted an in–links search using Google's advanced options. Searching for all of the pages linked to the "Jew" page in Wikipedia yielded 2,160 links. Again, this was a much more manageable and specifically relevant collection

than the 4,210,000 links returned with the search term "Jew." The links to the Wikipedia page revealed that the "Jew" Google bomb was orchestrated overwhelmingly through Web log, or blog, sites. Of the harvested links, 87 percent of in–links to the "Jew" entry in Wikipedia are blogs, 10 percent are from other Wikipedia pages, and the remaining three percent come from information sites, independent media sites, and an occasional commercial site.

Discussion

Melluci's definition of social movements has three distinct criteria. The first of these criteria is that a social movement "is the mobilization of a collective actor defined by specific solidarity." The data show that a specific solidarity exists among Google bombers, at least to the extent that their collective manipulation of Google Page Ranking results in a very specific and sought after outcome. However, Melucci offers several conditions of collective action that come close but do not meet the definition of a social movement. Of interest with regard to Google bombs is the condition of "collective action bordering on social movement" [3] but which is not a social movement. According to Melucci this borderline condition would be similar to the antagonistic practice of work slow down and the likes, which would be a form of "elementary resistance" [4] rather than a social movement.

In the case of the "miserable failure" Google bomb, the symbolic defacing of Bush's bio pages is part of a larger expression of dissatisfaction with Bush. As such, it would appear that the "miserable failure" Google bomb would fit nicely in Melucci's borderline condition of elementary resistance. It is a symbolic gesture that is part of a larger, widespread dissatisfaction that can be traced to anti–war campaigns, the then coming U.S. presidential election, and the anti–globalization movement to name only a few.

By contrast, the "Jew" Google bomb, although a reaction to anti–Semitism in part, is actually a direct response to the discovered search result condition. The "Jew" Google bomb was mobilized very specifically to displace jewwatch.com as the number one ranked search result for the term "Jew" and therefore does meet the specific solidarity part of Melucci's social movement definition.

This takes us to the second part of Melucci's definition, which is engagement in a "conflict with an adversary for the appropriation and control of resources valued by both of them" [5]. In the two cases considered for this study, a conflict is indeed present and characterized by engagement with an adversary. The Google bombing practice is an attempt at appropriating and controlling symbolic meaning of a Google Page Ranking. Supporters of the Bush administration are the direct adversaries of the "miserable failure" Google bomb.

For example, the political right of the blogosphere acknowledge the conflict and have mounted a counter attack by attempting to displace Bush as the number one "miserable failure" with Michael Moore, Jimmy Carter, and Hilary Clinton. Adversaries in the "Jew" Google bomb are also present. It is unclear whether the number one raking of jewwatch.com was actively sought after or was simply the result of their "normal" linking practice. However, since Wikipedia was moved to the number one position, a counter movement to Google bomb jewwatch back to number one position has emerged. As such, both the "miserable failure" and the "Jew" Google bombs meet the second part of Melucci's definition.

The third criterion in Melucci's definition entails, "a breach of the limits of compatibility of the system within which the action itself takes place." This is more difficult to ascertain but is nevertheless present. There are two systems that have been breached. The first is the means by which Internet users access content and the Google search engine. The second system is the means of production of symbolic resources.

Searching has become the most effective — if not the only — way to access the public Internet. Google uses an algorithm to return search results ranked in order of relevance to search terms. This ranking, which is said by Google to be "objective," has symbolic meaning. Simply stated, search results — according to Google — are the most relevant Web content related to queried terms. A breach occurs when collective action manipulates these results. Both the "miserable failure" and "Jew" Google bombs breached Google's Page Ranking system. Furthermore, and perhaps more profound, both Google bombs breached a system of symbolic production.

Conclusion

By examining the two cases I conclude that individual Google bombs can manifest in Melucci's definition of a social movement. The "miserable failure" Google bomb meets only the second and third criteria and thus would not be considered a social movement. Because the "miserable failure" bomb is movement of symbolic resources in conjunction with a larger arsenal of expression of dissatisfaction with Bush, it fits under a condition that Melucci refers to as "elementary resistance."

However, the "Jew" Google bomb does meet all three criteria of Melucci's definition of a social movement. Upon discovery of the anti–Semitic site, jewwatch.com, as the number one Page Rank for the search term "Jew," an online collective actor was mobilized. Displacement of the anti–Semitic site occurred through engagement in a conflict over the appropriation and control of the number one Page Ranking.

Although these cases also instantiate Melucci's third criteria, which is a breach of the limits of compatibility of the system within which the action itself takes place, recent action by Google may eventually render Google bombing a thing of the past. In fact, Google has been promoting an html tag solution to hyperlinking strategies, which they term "search engine spamming." On the Google blog, they indicate that "when Google sees the attribute (rel="nofollow") on hyperlinks, those links won't get any credit when we rank Web sites in our search results" (Google, 2005).

What does it mean for a term or phrase to be the number one Page Rank for a given search?

It is unclear if this tagging proposal is having any impact. I can confirm, however, that as of July 2005 the ability to Google bomb still only requires surprisingly few participants, particularly when a given search term is not common. I recently gave a Google bombing assignment to undergraduate students in my summer course, Concepts of new media (http://comspot300.blogspot.com/2005/07/power-of-links.html), at the University of Washington [6]. They selected a social issue of importance to them and attempted to elevate that issue to a number one Page Rank. By searching for "issues that matter" you will find that they succeeded in establishing theseptemberproject.org — What's your library doing on September 11? — as the number one Page Rank for this term.

Whether on not Google and others find ways to prevent the manipulation of search results, many questions persist about the quality and plurality of searchable Web content. As the Internet increasingly becomes the place for information, what does it mean for a term or phrase to be the number one Page Rank for a given search? How do we know what we know when multiple realities simultaneously exist on the Web in the form of alternate accounts of the same issue?

Social construction as an epistemological approach to knowledge goes part way in addressing this — realities are constructed within contexts of space and time as well as culture. But what is the meaning of "local" on the Internet? How are multiple subjective realities identified? Access to the various accounts of reality on the Internet often involves the use of search engines such as Google and distributed knowledge networks such as Wikipedia. In part, the Google search algorithm is a popularity contest whereby the results of a any given query returns a rank order of results based on the popularity of the search term in Web content. Wikipedia is a consensus–based distributed knowledge network. In both cases, further research is required to determine how the Internet is changing the way we think about — and interact with — information and knowledge. **FM**

About the author

Clifford Tatum is a doctoral student in the Department of Communication at the University of Washington. He earned an MBA from Seattle University, and has extensive experience in project management, marketing research and analysis, systems integration, and international business related to the development of multimedia and telecommunications systems. Prior to joining the doctoral program at the University of Washington, Clifford spent a year teaching at Tianjin University of Commerce in Tianjin, China. His research interests are in distributed knowledge networks, the Internet as a diasporic medium, and online social resistance.
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Notes

1. Couldry, 2000, p. 7.

2. Melluci, 1996, p. 30.

3. Melucci, 1996, p. 31.

4. *Ibid.*

5. Melucci, 1996, p. 30.

6. comspot300.blogspot.com/ (7 July 2005).

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