GOOGLE GOBBLE

Dear Linux Magazine Reader,

Google has become a ubiquitous part of daily life – at least in my house. Of course, people who work with computers use Google to search out new drivers, howtos, and product information. But Google is present in other spheres also. Particularly interesting (or alarming, depending on your viewpoint) is the importance of Google to the academic endeavors of middle school students. When I was in school, I used to have to go to the library to write a report. Now you just sit at your desk and google up some facts.

Joe Casad, Editor in Chief

Everyone knows the Internet lets you do everything from your house, so children who work online spend less time meeting each other and playing hopscotch. Although this is a very important point, it is not really my point now. My point is more about the methods and motives.

The library is a collection of books that is assembled by a group of breathing humans (librarians), who presumably have a professional interest in ensuring that their choices are impartial and balanced. At the library you find a book, which has presumably passed an editorial board of living humans who deem the information worthy and relevant.

On the other hand, anyone can put up a website, and the website is then visited by special web crawler programs that index and prioritize the information for Google. You are probably thinking I'm going to say that Google replaces the professional judgments of editors and librarians with the algorithms of an automated crawler-bot. Actually, that may be part of the problem, but that isn't the worst of it. The real problem is that Google replaces the judgments of editors and librarians with the judgments of sales account managers.

Google received much press recently for their willingness to comply with Chinese censorship laws. That decision, of course, was not made by a "web crawler" but by a human with an interest in maximizing revenue by restricting the quality of the information. This particular episode has already made the rounds through the commentators, though, so I'm sure that no one is eager for a rehash. And actually I'm thinking about problems closer to home.

Have you ever entered the word "Linux" in the Google search box? As of this writing, the two sites that come up at the top of the list are the Solaris 10 page at *www.sun.com*, which talks about why you should use Solaris 10 instead of Linux, and the "Get the Facts" page at *www.microsoft.com*, which talks about why you should use Windows instead of Linux.

If you look carefully, you can see that these top two links in the search results have a slightly blue background tint, and some text all the way on the other side of the box (as far away from the title as possible) states that the entries are "Sponsored Links." They are not with the other sponsored links in the right-hand column but are, instead, mixed in with the regular search results on the left.

We can speculate on whether a middle school student who is doing a report on "Linux" will notice the slightly blue background and realize that the information at these sites come from biased sources with a financial stake in making sure no one pays attention to Linux. But the fact is, if Sun and Microsoft didn't have at least some expectation that the reader will treat this information as they treat all the other information in the search result, they wouldn't pay big money to be at the top of the list.

Joe