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Is the lack of web link and search engine accountability the elephant in the room of online reputation?

Essay by [Chris Dellarocas](#), October 17, 2008 in response to [Is reputation obsolete?](#)

The majority of debate on online reputation and free speech has focused on questions that relate to content authorship and hosting (see for example, this [book](#) and related discussion [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)). There has been far less discussion about the responsibilities of those who link to harmful content as well as about the accountability of search engines, whose [page ranking algorithms](#) – themselves based on counting links – largely determine the extent of such content's impact. In this essay I argue that page ranking algorithms and people's linking decisions are at least as important components of online reputation formation as content itself and deserve to be made more visible and, perhaps, more accountable.

Links constitute the true currency of reputation on the web. Even the most malicious online content will remain largely unnoticed unless others choose to link to it. Links are all the more important since search engines, that ultimate arbiter of online relevance, use a page's link counts as the primary determinant of that page's ranking within a set of search results.

Linking to a piece of content constitutes a judgment on the part of the linker that this information is worth noticing. By the same token, a search engine's choice to employ a link-based page ranking algorithm constitutes a judgment that link counts are a fair method of determining web content's merit of being read.

Although linking is as deliberate and consequential an action as authoring, our social norms and legal structures have paid much less attention to it. Many web users who would never dream of posting certain types of content have far fewer qualms about linking to them. In cases of slander only the original creator of content bears legal responsibility. [Section 230](#) of the [Communications Decency Act of 1996](#) provides almost blanket immunity to the people who helped make this content visible by linking to it. Similarly, no responsibility is borne by the search engines, whose algorithms chose to list the content near the top of search results and greatly contributed to its negative impact.

Viewed from this perspective, the current lack of accountability with respect to linking and page ranking constitutes an important shortcoming of our fledgling [reputation economy](#). On the one hand it encourages irresponsible and sometimes malicious behavior. On the other hand it misses a great opportunity to turn the millions of web users into more intelligent and responsible information gatekeepers.

Let me be upfront in that I am not advocating more litigation. I believe that a lot can be accomplished through education and implementation of the right incentives into the technical architecture of the web.

The first step is education. Most people do not fully realize the implications and responsibilities that come from their choice to link to a piece of online content. Even fewer people fully grasp the way in which web links, stripped out of their original context and aggregated en masse, affect the decisions of page ranking algorithms. For example, a blogger who links to a racist article from inside a posting in which she strongly condemns it, is at the same time boosting that

article's [PageRank](#), improving its visibility on search engines and exacerbating its negative impact. Fully grasping the consequences of an individual's linking decisions is the first step towards using this powerful staple of our networked society with responsibility.

The second step is implementing incentives for responsible linking and page-ranking into the architecture of the web. For example, one can envision a set of mechanisms that keep track of the linking actions of websites (and, to the extent possible, individuals), and, on the basis of such actions, assign to them a publicly visible score that roughly translates to their "quality of judgment". Linking to content that proves to be beneficial increases the score; linking to content that proves to be harmful decreases it.

In a reputation economy, a person's quality of judgment is as valuable and important a trait as a person's reputation on any other dimension. In small communities people who spread false rumors quickly acquire a reputation for bad judgment and become ostracized or irrelevant. On the other hand, people who exhibit good judgment grow in esteem and are welcome everywhere. We need to build a similar set of checks and balances for the web.

Search engines must be subject to similar scrutiny. Their choices of page ranking algorithms are deliberate and, therefore, accountable. Plus they have very real consequences. It is my hope that public measurement of a search engine's "quality of judgment" will induce the creation of more responsible algorithms. At the minimum, it will alert users that these all-powerful gatekeepers of reality are not infallible.

Implementing these ideas will not be easy. There are several difficult challenges for which there are no easy answers. Here are just a few: Who gets to decide what content is beneficial and what is harmful? In limited cases (for example, content that has been proven to be libelous in court) making such judgments with a fair degree of objectivity is feasible; in the majority of cases, however, such decisions will be subjective. How should one take into consideration the context of a link? For example, when a blogger lambasting a libelous posting ends up boosting its visibility on search engines, is this an instance of poor judgment on behalf of the blogger or a failure of page ranking algorithms to properly take the context of the link into consideration? Who should bear the responsibility (or get the credit) for anonymous links posted as comments on eponymous blogs?

Despite their difficulty, these are challenges that we cannot ignore. In our networked society, linking and page ranking carry just as much weight as authoring. All three need to be exercised with caution and responsibility. Similarly, any discussion of free speech and online reputation must focus on all three.

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