INSTANT RESULTS WITH LINGERING EFFECTS: HOW GOOGLE CAN BIAS OUR SOCIAL CONVERSATIONS

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Introduction

Google boasts that its Autocomplete function has saved users over 100 billion keystrokes or about two to five seconds per search ("About Google" n.p.). For benign searches, such as "how to tie a tie," such might be the case. But what about searches that are politically charged or address important social issues faced by societies across the world?

Many controversial terms appear in immigration discussions in the United States. These terms include *anchor babies*, *illegal* (in contrast to *undocumented*), and *alien* (in contrast to *immigrant*). In such cases, Google's word suggestions hold the potential to bias searchers into using certain vocabulary, thereby creating the possibility of constricting how social conversations occur around these topics and what information directs the conversations. Google attains this level influence through the technologies it implements to make our lives easier, such as the Autocomplete function, and through the mass dependence people have developed on it over the years.

This pilot study attempts to discover the ways in which Google can bias searchers into privileging one set of terms over the other, particularly in regards to undocumented immigration in the United States. By examining three standard functions of Google – (1) Google Autocomplete, (2) related search results, and (3) the actual results themselves – we shall see how Google can shape society's vocabulary (and therefore ideas) about immigration and undocumented immigrants. Particularly, we shall see how Google often directs users toward the word *illegal* over the word *undocumented* and how this biasing can have negative repercussions in immigration discussions. I argue that the simple act of repeatedly displaying specific words or phrases holds the potential to influence how people research, learn, and discuss a specific topic, thereby shaping or constricting social conversation.

Politically-Charged Immigration Words

In the social and political conversations that occur regarding undocumented immigration to the United States, many words have become politically charged. As mentioned earlier, some of the words that appear in the immigration debate in the United States include *illegal*, *undocumented*, *alien*, *immigrant*, *wetbacks*, and *anchor babies*, just to name a few. With the phrases *illegal immigrant* and *undocumented immigrant*, debate swirls around which one serves as the most neutral and accurate description of immigrants who enter the United States without authorization. Respected news organizations, such as the Associated Press and the *New York Times*, prefer to use the word *illegal* over the word *undocumented*. They point out, "When you enter the United States without permission or overstay a visa, you break a law… the word 'illegal' simply means against the law" (Navarrette n.p.). They argue that the word *illegal* does not dehumanize immigrants. Instead, "It describes an action as much as it does a person. An illegal immigrant is someone who immigrates illegally" (Navarrette n.p.). However, people on the other side of this debate believe that the words used in association with immigration are imbued with certain meanings that convey specific ideas to those involved in immigration discussions. For instance, when it comes to the word *illegal* being used in conjunction with immigration, the National Association of Hispanic Journalists (NAHJ) argue that the term implies much more than crossing a border without papers. In 2010, the organization issued a statement, declaring, "Using the word [illegal] … crosses the line by criminalizing the person, not the action they are purported to have committed" (Rubio 51). Other organizations agree with the NAHJ's stance, claiming that the term *illegal* dehumanizes people (Demby) and conveys the idea of a dangerous, criminal activity (Martin). In addition, they fall back on the statement from Nobel Prize winner Elie Wiesel, "No human being is illegal," which seems to be the connotation when *illegal* is attached to the word *immigrant*. After all, if a person breaks the law by driving over the speed limit, that person is not called *illegal*, as unauthorized immigrants are when they cross the border. In addition, groups such as the NAHJ argue that the term *illegal* has been highly racialized and associated increasingly with Latina/os, causing the term to lose any neutrality that the Associated Press claims it still contains. As a result, they argue that the word *undocumented* removes the racialization that has come to surround the word *illegal*, making *undocumented* the more neutral of the two.

How Google Functions

Google could be said to participate in this debate on immigration vocabulary with the word choices it provides to users. When discussing representation, meaning, and language, Stuart Hall writes, "It is us – in society, within human cultures – who make things mean, signify. Meanings, consequently, will always change from one culture or period to another" (62). With its near omnipresence in our lives, Google has served as one means through which we, as members of society "make things mean, signify." Google's algorithm regularly updates the search results to show what the online culture has deemed the most relevant information to people's searches. Google's algorithm evaluates websites according to several different criteria. A couple of these criteria include the presence of a search word on a website, as well as how many other websites have, in effect, "voted" for a particular search result by linking to it or even tweeting about it. Google's dependence on linking – weighing the importance of links from one website to another – could be seen as its evaluation of the language and its

meanings as defined by Internet culture. For example, if a person searches for the word *horse*, then Google will bring back results that the Internet culture has determined to represent a *horse*. More often than not, the representations of objects provided by the Internet culture through Google correspond to the representations that have been established through society offline, outside of the realm of the Internet. However, sometimes these representations do not align. In fact, the representations provided by the Internet culture can be downright offensive. A couple illustrations of this are the ape image that appeared with a Google search of "Michelle Obama" a few years ago, as well as the anti-Semitic sites that used to appear in the top results with a search of the word "Jew" ("Google Explains"). A more amusing example for some would be when the search "miserable failure" brought back results for former President George W. Bush (Sullivan, "Google Kills"). While some of these instances, such as the Bush one, were achieved through purposeful manipulations of Google's ranking factors, most of time Google's search results – even the most offensive ones – are true representations of what the Internet culture has deemed to be the meaning of different words or phrases *at that particular moment in time*. I emphasize this last part, because Google's search results are constantly changing. A website that could rank in the top 10 results one day might not rank the next – another website deemed more relevant or a better representation by the Internet community replaces it. While this explanation creates a gross oversimplification of the complex ranking process Google implements, I use it to illustrate the role of the Internet culture in assigning meaning and significance to different terms and phrases.

With the above explanation of how Google returns search results, it seems that the search engine serves merely as a reflection of society and what it thinks. It could be thought of as a large World Brain, if you will. Google typically takes this stance – "It's not us; it's them [the Internet Culture]" – in many of the lawsuits in which it is tried for character defamation, among other things (Khalid). In many respects, Google's stance in these matters is true. Autocomplete suggestions are based, in part, on the most popular searches done by other users, on user location, and on what the algorithm deems to be relevant (Sullivan, "How Google"). The "Searches related to" section includes searches that other users have gone on to perform after conducting the same keyword search, as well as any phrases that Google's algorithm considers to be synonyms to the search. However, placing all responsibility on the Internet culture simplifies the matter far too much and fails to recognize that Google might also affect how users approach and research different subjects, such as the topic of immigration and undocumented immigration, which will be examined in this study. It would be very easy to fall into a chicken or egg – or in this case, Google or user – type of debate through this study. However, the purpose of this study is not to determine who holds the upper hand in deciding search results. Instead, it will attempt to examine the immigration vocabulary that Google presents and encourages searchers to use, thereby revealing how Google participates in influencing – or constricting – the conversations around unauthorized immigration.

People conducting searches in Google are presented with information from Google throughout their search process. First, as a person starts typing a term into the search engine, Google automatically offers suggestions for completing or changing the search. This feature is known as Google Autocomplete. Once users have entered their desired

search phrase, Google presents them with a list of results. Even after completing a search and providing users with the most relevant results (according to the system's algorithm), Google still presents users with alternate search terms that they might want to explore. These suggestions appear under the label "Searches related to [search phrase]."

Though Google may not create the terminology it displays in its search results and suggestions (the search engine, after all, compiles and interprets information it finds on the Internet or receives from users), I argue that the simple act of repeatedly displaying specific words or phrases holds the potential to influence how people research, learn, and discuss a specific topic, thereby shaping or constricting social conversation according to the vocabulary that it teaches searchers to use. One of the potential ways in which Google and the information it provides might shape social conversations include the vocabulary it encourages searchers to use. This study will show how Google often guides users to use the term *illegal* instead of *undocumented*. In the case of unauthorized immigration, Google's use of *illegal* in lieu of *undocumented* could be said to constrict social conversations around this topic and lead to the continued perpetuation of this politically charged word and therefore the negative ideas often associated with it.

Methodology

I started my research by using the broadest of terms – *immigration* – and I worked from there. I proceeded with my searches, in part, based on the recommendations provided by Google. If the search "immigration" recommended "illegal immigration" as a related result, then "illegal immigration" served as the next keyword phrase to be examined. Since this study is interested in Google's role in regards to unauthorized immigration, preference was given to searches that led in that direction. If a search for "immigration," for instance, yielded recommendations such as "immigration history" or "immigration facts" in addition to "illegal immigration" and "undocumented immigration," the phrases "illegal immigration" and "undocumented immigration" were selected over the other two.

With each search, I took a screenshot of the autocomplete suggestions and of the page 1 results in Google (capturing the title tags, URLs, and descriptions, and related search results, as well as any images, that showed up in search results). While the search results themselves, as well as Google Autocomplete, were used to evaluate the vocabulary and information being disseminated through Google, the related search results served as the main source for most new search phrases that were examined. After clicking through on related search suggestions from Google and capturing the search results and suggested searches for those terms, I also initiated searches for those terms in Google, so I could capture the Google Autocomplete suggestions that they generate. Obviously, I was not able to pursue and study all recommended searches, as the potential number of searches could be endless. Instead, I ended up focusing on a small sample of searches – four for each country. The search phrases for the United States were: "immigration," "illegal immigration," "illegal immigration pros and cons," and "undocumented immigrants." For Mexico and the Dominican Republic, the search phrases were: "inmigración," inmigración clandestina," inmigración ilegal," and "inmigración indocumentada."

After the initial phase of searching and recording the results and recommendations for these different immigration terms, I proceeded to conduct the same keyword searches once a week for 12 weeks (three months) to account for any changes that occurred in the search results. This process started the first week of February 2013 and ended it the last week of April 2013.

This study takes a comparative approach by examining the US Google search results side by side with Google results in Mexico and the Dominican Republic. Examining how Google presents results and suggests additional searches in Mexico will help provide some perspective on how conversations around undocumented immigration occur outside of the United States. The Dominican Republic searches serve as a balance to Mexico, revealing if online immigration conversations occur differently in countries that do not contribute on the same scale to the unauthorized immigration flows to the USA.

To receive the same results that searchers in those countries would receive, I utilized the Google search engines for these countries (http://www.google.com.mx and http://www.google.com.do). To help ensure that my results would not automatically be adjusted to reflect an address in the United States, I also changed my address to represent one coming from the country from which I wanted to perform a search. By addressing these two factors, the results I received from Google should represent the results a local user in those countries would receive. For both Mexico and the Dominican Republic, I conducted my searches in Spanish.

Results

The initial review of collected data from the US reveals a pattern that could bias users into using the terminology "illegal immigrant" over "undocumented immigrant." From the first search of "immigration," users are introduced to the word "illegal," with the word "undocumented" or "unauthorized" not being offered as alternatives. Only when users purposefully enter "undocumented immigrant" or "undocumented immigration," are they provided suggestions along such lines. Even then, the word "illegal" is regularly shown to users, a stark contrast to the manner in which "undocumented" fails to appear unless the user enters the word.

In contrast, the Google results and suggestions for the search query "inmigración" in Mexico and the Dominican Republic do not show the same types of uni-lateral results for "inmigracioón ilegal." Instead, "inmigración ilegal" appears alongside other alternatives, such as "inmigracioón clandestina." In addition, in both countries, "inmigración ilegal" is associated with the search results "xenophobia" and "inmigración legal," among other things. The mixing of words from both sides of the immigration debate holds the potential to shape the users' perspective on the topic much differently than if they only received suggestions with the word "ilegal," which can carry with it racialized ideas. As a whole, the Google results and search suggestions for immigration phrases in the Dominican Republic and Mexico seem to provide a more balanced, unbiased perspective than what US-based users receive.

While Google as a company may not consciously choose to present biased results (in that the algorithm evaluates and ranks websites), the provided results can still reinforce racialized ideas, thereby potentially inhibiting (though not eliminating) the ability for new, less controversial terminology to arise and thus changing the direction of the debates on immigration. Cognizance of how the search engine works can enable users in being more savvy with their searches and how they approach using Google.

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