

Only thing clear about the new Transparency Act is that US senators are about to let Google keep manipulating your search results

by Michael Rectenwald



In June, whistleblower Zach Vorhies dumped internal Google documents exposing the company's shady practices and political agenda. Rather than investigate, US lawmakers are offering Big Tech political cover and a legislative decoy.

Internal [documents](#) and secret recordings continue to make abundantly clear what many already knew and others strongly suspected about Google and other digital goliaths; that

Google, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube and others manipulate their content and their users.

Stepping into the fray, Senator John Thune (R-S.D.) has [boasted](#) that his new bill – the [Filter Bubble Transparency Act](#) – is the silver bullet for bursting user information filter bubbles, the predictable information dead ends that reinforce users' pre-existing perspectives. He would have us believe that the use of personal user data by search engine algorithms is the real problem with the internet.

But this issue is the least of the problems that users face online. The bill's co-sponsors hope we've forgotten – or never knew – that Google and the rest are not the unbiased, politically neutral information sources or social media platforms that they (so poorly) pretend to be. Far from it.

Google [blacklists](#) sources and prevents them from appearing in news results or featured links. Google's blacklist is a manually curated file including over 500 websites that are excluded from news results.

Google applies [fringe ranking](#) to sites, downgrading those sites – but not The New York Times and The Washington Post – that promote "*conspiracy theories*" and "*fake news.*" Fringe ranking involves the manual grading of sites, although only those whose conspiracy theories or fake news stories fail to meet Google's criteria for credible, plausible narratives are downgraded.

Google and YouTube use "*hate speech*" labeling, downgrading sites and videos they believe contain "*hate speech.*" YouTube scoring is apparently based solely on whether videos [express](#) "[supremacism.](#)"

[Google](#) and [YouTube](#) use "*authoritativeness*" scoring to rank sites and videos. The authoritativeness score is necessarily based on whether a news site or video conforms to Google or YouTube's notions of credible and respectable views.

Last is the little-known fact that Google ranks websites against Wikipedia pages, treating Wikipedia as an unbiased and authoritative source. As Zach Vorhies told me in a private chat, *“the core issue is that sites are not being ranked according to user data, they are being ranked against Wikipedia.”* Websites are [downgraded](#) if Wikipedia pages contain negative information about them. Yet, as information age philosopher Jaron Lanier has [noted](#), Wikipedia is notorious for its left-leaning political bias and its overwriting of known facts to suit its agenda. The issue has been addressed on [Wikipedia](#) itself.

Together, Google’s site-ranking methods [favor liberal and left-leaning sites](#) – but Google goes even further by steering voters toward preferred candidates and, in an insider video, the company made clear that it [intends to intervene](#) in the 2020 presidential election.

The Big Tech giants manipulate data and users and under questionable pretences and using highly subjective criteria. And they’ve done most of these things, or so they hoped, without our knowledge or permission.

The proposed legislation doesn’t even mention –let alone address– these practices. Instead, it pretends to talk tough. Google, Facebook, and other major search and social media platforms would be required to give users an option to use *“input-transparent algorithms”* that don’t incorporate user data in search results. Platform providers would have to disclose when they use *“opaque algorithms”* that use such user-connected data. Whoopee.

While it may be true that, as Sen. Thune [suggests](#), the new internet bill was written to give users *“more control over what they see online,”* it leaves that control by and large in the hands of Google and other digital giants. The proposed bill deflects attention from the basis of this control – the manipulation of search results and use of other data-meddling

and scoring tactics by big digital players. Whether intentionally or not, the Filter Bubble Transparency Act serves as a diversionary device, allowing Big Tech to hide in plain sight.

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