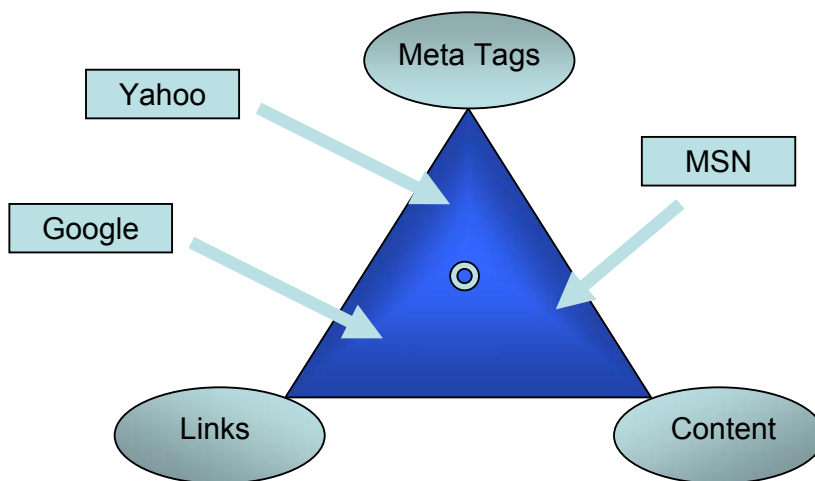




Simply Clicks - Key Influences in Search Engine Bias

What is most interesting is how different search engines appear to come up with completely different results for identical search queries. Apart from the algorithms in use this must also have something to do with the way each search query is interpreted.



Search Engine Results Pages - Analysis

Having analysed search engine results across a number of sites and categories, I have come up with my own understanding of how each of the engines is biased towards each of the three core components of organic search.

On Page Factors

“On page” refers to factors found on the target website pages themselves. Principally the meta tags and written content. On page factors are more easily changed. Within the meta tags the single most important factor is site title. All the engines use the site title to some effect. The site title is followed by the site description. Probably Yahoo utilises this to the greatest degree, followed by MSN. Google reads the site description and features it in its SERPs. However it is believed that Google places very little influence on the site description. The keywords meta tag carries virtually no influence on any of the engines. However, where the tag becomes useful is when it is used a device to ensure content is aligned with the title and description meta tags.

Off Page Factors

“Off page” refers to factors found off the page – principally inbound links from other sites. The origination of the inbound link (or IBL), the site page rank and content play an important role. In addition, the content of the anchor text is also important. Google is the most “off page” of the three major engines. Although the recent Jagger updates (see below) appear to have softened the extent of its off page bias.

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Overview

Yahoo appears to place more emphasis on the title and description meta tags – even if the keyword meta tags are ignored. MSN appears to be biased towards content – particularly that in the first paragraph. Lastly Google – as is common knowledge – is vastly more biased towards links and ratings of its own page rank system.

From a pragmatic standpoint it appears to me that both Yahoo and MSN tend towards a more commercial basis for the sites they select. Google because of its research origins feels – to me anyway – to have a more academic and voluntary bias.

Algorithm Volatility – and the Jagger updates

This is a dynamic environment. The relationship between the search engines changes all the time.

MSN is the newest of the search engines. Effectively it has only been an independent force since January 2005. During the early stages of its development there have been many changes to the way it weights various factors within its algorithm. Google has tended to alter its algorithm in order to negate the effect of SEOs cracking its code. The Google algorithm went through a major series of updates in October and November of 2005. These were known collectively as the Jagger updates. The updates appear to have devalued a range of inbound links. Bought links and reciprocal links from non-relevant sites appear to be the most obvious.

At around the same time Yahoo went through an update that appeared to place some increased emphasis on on page factors. The combined impact of the Yahoo and Google updates meant that they both moved perceptibly closer to MSN and closer to one another.

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