

Lawrence Solomon: Better off with Bing

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Googlegate: The search engine may be standing up to Chinese censors. What about Google's own censors?

By Lawrence Solomon

This week, Google announced an end to its long-standing collaboration with the Chinese Communists — it will no longer censor users inside China.

That's good of it. Maybe Google will now also stop using its search engine to censor the rest of us, in the Western countries.

Search for "Googlegate" on Google and you'll get a paltry result (my result yesterday was 29,300). Search for "Googlegate" on Bing, Microsoft's search engine competitor, and the result numbers an eye-popping 72.4 million. If you're a regular Google user, as opposed to a Bing user, you might not even know that "Googlegate" has been a hot topic for years in the blogosphere — that's the power that comes of being able to control information.

Despite Google's motto of "Do No Evil," it has long been controversial and suspected of evil-doing — and not just in its cooperation with China, or in protecting itself by hiding criticism of itself from unsuspecting Google users. In recent months, most of the evil-doing has focused on the Climategate scandal, the startling emails from the Climate Research Unit in the UK that show climate change scientists to be cooking the books.

For many weeks now, readers have been sending me emails describing how Google has been doing its best to hide information relating to Climategate, which has been the single biggest story on the Internet since the Climategate emails came to light on November 19. By Nov. 26, the term had gone viral and Google returned more results for "climategate" (10.4 million) than for "global warming" (10.1 million). As the Climate Scandal exploded, and increasing numbers of blog sites covered it, the number of web pages with Climategate continued to climb. On Dec. 7, Google's search engine found 31.6 million hits for people who searched for "Climategate."

Sometime around then, in early December, Google began to minimize the Climategate scandal by hiding Climategate pages from its users. By Dec. 17, the number of climategate pages that a Google search found dropped by almost 10 million, to 22.2 million. One day later Google dropped its find by another 8 million pages, to 14.1 million. By Dec. 23, Google could find only 7.5 million hits and on Dec. 24 just 6 million. And yesterday, when I checked, Google reported a mere 1.8 million climategate pages.

Bing, in contrast, didn't make climategate pages disappear. As you'd expect from a search engine that wasn't manipulating data, search results on Bing climbed steadily until they peaked at around 51 million, where they have remained since.

Starting in late November, Google has been keeping the public in the dark about Climategate in other ways, too. Ordinarily, when people begin keying in their search terms, Google helpfully suggests the balance of their text, through an automatic feature it calls Google Suggests.

At the very beginning of the Climategate scandal, before it became huge, Google Suggests worked as advertised. If someone typed in c-l-i-, Google would have shown them "climategate" on a list of options. Many people, in fact, learned about Climategate this very way, because most major media outlets had not yet picked up on the scandal. As Climategate rose in intensity, the term also rose in prominence on the Google Suggest list — anyone keying in c-l-i would see "climategate" at the top of the list.

But suddenly in late November, for reasons known only to Google, Google often would not suggest "climategate" to those who keyed in c-l-i. Even c-l-i-m-a or c-l-i-m-a-t-e-g-a-t weren't enough to solicit a suggestion. Bing, in contrast, did not and does not steer users away from climategate — it has consistently suggested "climategate" to those who keyed in c-l-i or even c-l.

For those whom Google can't steer away from "climategate," and who key in all 11 letters to learn about the eye-opening emails, Google goes the extra yard in keeping people in the dark — it dishes up a page that trivializes the scientific significance of climategate. Those who click on Google's "I'm feeling lucky" after asking for "climategate" find themselves on a Wikipedia page entitled "Climatic Research Unit hacking incident" that downplays the content of the emails and focuses on the "unauthorised release of thousands of emails and other documents obtained through the hacking of a server," the "illegal taking of data," the "Law enforcement agencies [that] are investigating the matter as a crime," and "the death threats that were subsequently made against climate scientists named in the emails."

For those who don't use Google's "I'm feeling lucky" feature, Google presents them with this one-sided Wikipedia page as the first item in its search results. Wikipedia actually has a page called "Climategate" that contains damning information about the scientists caught up in the scandal but its own censors won't let the public see it — anyone who tries to key in "Climategate" on the Wikipedia site will be instantly redirected to the Wikipedia-approved version of climategate, where the scandal is described as nothing more than "a smear campaign."

Why would Google want to tamp down interest in climategate? Money and power could have something to do with it. Search for Google and its founders and you'll see that they have made big financial bets on global warming through investments in renewable and other green technologies; that they have a close relationship with Al Gore, that Google CEO Eric Schmidt is close to Barack Obama.

But search for Googlegate and you'll also see that more than money is at stake. The accusations against Google of censorship are wide-spread, involving schemes to elect Barack Obama, attacks on Christianity (key in "Christianity is" and Google will suggest unflattering completions to the phrase), and political correctness (key in "Islam is" and nothing negative is suggested).

The bottom line? Google is as inscrutable as the Chinese, and perhaps no less corrupt. For safe searches, you're best off with

Bing.
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