
Private Search

Investigating users' agency over search engine learning

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Abstract

The flow of users' personal information online is something which should be controllable, transparent and unambiguous. Unfortunately, users' agency over their own data is increasingly being eroded, as the services which collect this data seek to monetize it to the greatest effect.

This project investigates the effectiveness with which a browser plug-in is able to detect, assess and defend against search-engine learning. Previous research has shown that detection, assessment and defence are all possible with the Google search engine in a scripted environment using the techniques outlined within this paper. This project shows that the results of the previous research no longer hold, and that using those techniques it is no longer possible to reliably detect search engine learning if it is occurring. We discuss possible sources for this difference of results and approaches which could be taken in future work.

As part of this project, a plug-in is developed for the Firefox and Chrome web browsers, and extensive tests are carried out to evaluate the potential of this plug-in.