# Google’s Law

Greg Lastowka

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Google’s Law

Greg Lastowka*

“[W]e expect that advertising funded search engines will be inherently biased towards the advertisers and away from the needs of the consumers…”

- Sergey Brin & Larry Page (1998)¹

“The economic success we continue to enjoy is the direct result of our ability to marry our user experience to the information that advertisers want to communicate.”

- Larry Page (2006)²

Introduction

Google has become, for the majority of Americans, the index of choice for online information. Through dynamically generated results pages keyed to a near-infinite variety of search terms, Google steers our thoughts and our learning online. It tells us what words mean, what things look like, where to buy things, and who and what is most important to us. Google’s control over “results” constitutes an awesome ability to set the course of human knowledge.³ It is not surprising that the commercial exploitation of results is also the sole source of Google’s wealth.

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³ Who’s Afraid of Google?, THE ECONOMIST, Aug. 30 2007, at __ (noting that there are other major search engines, “[b]ut Google, through the sheer speed with which it accumulates the treasure of information, will be the one to test the limits of what society can tolerate.”).

As this paper will explain, fortunes are won and lost based on Google’s results pages, including the fortunes of Google itself.5 Because Google’s results are so significant to e-commerce activities today, they have already been the subject of substantial litigation.6 Today’s courtroom disputes over Google’s results are based primarily, though not exclusively, in claims about the requirements of trademark law. This paper will argue that the most powerful trademark doctrines shaping these cases, “initial interest confusion” and “trademark use,” are not up to the task they have been given, but that trademark law must continue to stay engaged with Google’s results.

The current application of “initial interest confusion” to search results represents a hyper-extension of trademark law past the point of its traditional basis in preventing consumer confusion. Courts should reject initial interest confusion doctrine due to its tendency to grant trademark owners rights over search results that could easily operate against the greater public interest.

On the other hand, the recent innovation of “trademark use” doctrine improperly relieves trademark law of any role in the supervision of the shape of Google’s search results. While the law should be cautious in how it regulates new technologies such as Google,8 as Justice Cardozo once noted, major technological changes often call for the transformation of law.9 Where new technologies threaten new harms to society, the law must respond. As will be explained below, trademark law should retain its ability to confront, with common law flexibility, the abuse of power in Google’s results.

If, as Lawrence Lessig has argued, computer code has a regulatory force tantamount to law,10 the absence of any state involvement in the shape Google’s results will effectively cede the structure of our primary online index to “Google’s law.” Given Google’s meteoric rise to prominence and its current role as our primary online index, the

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5 Who’s Afraid of Google?, THE ECONOMIST, Aug. 30 2007, at __ (“Many small firms hate Google because they relied on exploiting its search formulas to win prime positions in its rankings, but dropped to the internet’s equivalent of Hades after Google tweaked these algorithms.”).
7 I have argued this before. See F. Gregory Lastowka, Search Engines, HTML, and Trademarks: What’s the Meta For?, 86 VA. L. REV. 835, 857-58, 877 (2000) (arguing against the extension of initial interest confusion doctrine to search results).
9 Benjamin N. Cardozo, The Nature of the Judicial Process 62 (1921) (“[T]he great inventions… have built up new customs and new law.”).
10 Lawrence Lessig, Code And Other Laws Of Cyberspace 3 (1999).
law should be vigilant. Google may enjoy substantial public goodwill, but what is best for Google will not always be what is best for society.11

Part I of this article describes the history of Google and its business model. Google is not the only search engine today, but it is the leading search engine in terms of United States market share. Additionally, Google is playing the most important role today in search engine litigation. It is a unique search engine in many respects. During its evolution, Google followed a very different path than many of its competitors. Today its competitors are largely imitating its model, yet are unable to dethrone its centrality in search. Understanding how Google rose to prominence is essential to understanding its motives and how it might act in the future.

Part II of this article sets forth the contemporary law pertaining to search results. It begins with a short discussion of recent (failed) attempts to regulate Google’s results through laws other than trademark. It then describes current theories of trademark law. It concludes by summarizing how trademark law has been applied to search engines, starting with early “meta tag” cases and concluding with Google’s current attempts to insulate itself from liability under an expanded doctrine of “trademark use.”

Part III criticizes the current application of trademark law to search engines. It argues that the judicial innovations of both “initial interest confusion” and “trademark use” are inconsistent with the traditional purpose of trademark law and the new realities of the e-commerce marketplace. It concludes that a simple focus on the “likelihood of confusion” standard, which some courts have already supported, is overdue. It concludes by explaining why, despite the fact that trademark law today will likely permit Google’s current practices, Google’s bid for the carte blanche freedom permitted by “trademark use” doctrine should be rejected by courts. In its relatively new role as a protector of the social value of indices, trademark law must retain the ability to curb potential abuses of the commercial power enjoyed by Google.

I. Google

“I may use [Google] to check the spelling of a foreign name, to acquire an image of a particular piece of military hardware, to find the exact quote of a public figure, check a stat, translate a phrase, or research the background of a particular corporation.”

- Garry Trudeau12

11 Who’s Afraid of Google?, THE ECONOMIST, Aug. 30 2007, at __ (“ Pretending that, just because your founders are nice young men and you give away lots of services, society has no right to question your motives no longer seems sensible.”).

For the majority of the United States population, Google currently functions as the central Web index. The verb “to Google” is often understood to mean “to search for information on the Web.” Google’s popularity has also made it mind-bogglingly wealthy. In the summer of 2007, only three years after its IPO and nine years after its incorporation, Google was valued at over $160 billion dollars (greater than the $65B value of Disney and the $71B value of Time-Warner combined).Google’s founders, Sergey Brin and Larry Page, were typical graduate students ten years ago and today are multi-billionaires. At work on Google’s California campus are at least 700 newly minted multi-millionaires in the company’s employ. Even the name “Google” has become a form of wealth. According to one study, the Google brand, which has grown with hardly any traditional media advertising, is worth over $60 billion and has displaced Coca-Cola to become the most recognized trademark in the world.

How did Google become so wealthy? In short, by selling advertisements. Over 99 percent of the company’s revenues come from Google’s sale of advertising. Considering the history of Google, this seems like a very strange state of affairs. As the quote from Google’s founders at the start of this article demonstrates, Brin and Page were once convinced that advertising should play no part in Google’s business model. They believed that a search engine funded by advertisers would be “inherently biased towards the advertisers and away from the needs of the consumers.” Google was created to fulfill a need for a search engine that was “transparent and in the academic realm.”

Yet, as will be explained below, despite receiving all its revenues from an influence they feared offered only contamination, Google is still guided (perhaps haunted?) by an anti-advertising ethos. The company’s informal corporate motto “Don’t Be Evil,” may

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15 More specifically, they are billionaires who roam the world in a Boeing 767 with a custom couch. Verne Kopytoff, Lacrym jet lands in court, SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE, July 11, 2006, at C1.

16 Quentin Hardy, Close to the Vest, FORBES, July 2, 2007, at 40.


20 Id.

be viewed as naïve for a corporation, but Google’s unconventional public statements suggest that its founders still believe that part of what makes Google so special is its refusal to condone “bias.” According to the company’s website: “Google’s mission is to organize the world’s information and make it universally accessible and useful.” 22 Google’s 2004 SEC filing in advance of its IPO included a “letter from the founders” to prospective stockholders that began:

Google is not a conventional company. We do not intend to become one. Throughout Google’s evolution as a privately held company, we have managed Google differently. We have also emphasized an atmosphere of creativity and challenge, which has helped us provide unbiased, accurate and free access to information for those who rely on us around the world. 23

Google thus presents a fascinating contradiction between its profit model and its self-conception. It claims an unconventional interest in providing the world with “unbiased, accurate and free” information, yet it also generates its billions of dollars a year in corporate wealth almost exclusively through exposing the world to paid advertisements. Making this apparent contradiction more interesting is the fact that Google is the central player in contemporary litigation over what search engines may and may not do. In this litigation, Google often seeks to cast itself as a defender of public values combating the overreaching claims of intellectual property owners.

A. Before Google

The Internet, since its earliest inception, has been a means of storing and sharing large amounts of data. However, reams of information devoid of an organizing indexical scheme can be useless for all practical purposes. The same is true with the digital files on the Internet, which are made even more difficult to index by their scattered and anarchic mode of production and hosting. 24 Providing a reliable and useful public index to the data on the Internet has long been a problem.

Internet search, however, is a relatively new development. For the first 20 years or so of the Internet’s history, there were no “search engines” of the sort we know today. ARPANET, the original network that evolved into the Internet, was created by the funding

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of the United States military in the late 1960’s.\textsuperscript{25} During the 1970’s and 1980’s, ARPANET grew in size and merged with similarly structured decentralized computer networks. The end of all these mergers has been labeled the “Internet”: a great decentralized, worldwide network of networks organized around a common communications protocol.\textsuperscript{26}

There were already over 1,000 Internet hosts as early as 1984, yet there were no automated search and retrieval programs that facilitated access to the files on these systems.\textsuperscript{27} Although email usage and online “bulletin boards” were popular in the 80’s, there were no tools that could be used to browse the totality of the network. The problem was not with understanding the concept of search. Computer programmers were well acquainted with retrieving data in response to queries. The Unix “grep” command, for instance, was (and is) a common means of finding lines in data files that match targeted text strings.\textsuperscript{28} Other Unix commands, like “finger,” were (and are) used to query networked systems for information.\textsuperscript{29} Yet it was not until 1989 that the Internet’s first true “search engine” was created.\textsuperscript{30}

“Archie” was a software tool that stored monthly indices of the many files that were made available for public access on the Internet. Archie used a Unix-derived interface that was challenging to non-programmers and required users to run a separate retrieval program (FTP or file-transfer protocol) to obtain files. Yet Archie was a revolution. For the first time, the Internet community could “see” much of its own information. Soon, multiple hosts were using the Archie software to index and search for hosted files.\textsuperscript{31}

Archie was quickly surpassed, however, by the World Wide Web. There were only 26 Web servers in 1992, but by 1996, the number had grown to over 340,000.\textsuperscript{32} (Today

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{25} See generally KATIE HAFNER & MATTHEW LYON, WHERE WIZARDS STAY UP LATE (1996) (recounting the history of the internet).
\item \textsuperscript{26} Id. 246-56 (explaining the origins and growth of the TCP/IP protocol).
\item \textsuperscript{27} J. R. OKIN, THE INTERNET REVOLUTION 323 (2005).
\item \textsuperscript{28} JOHN STRANG, ET AL., LEARNING THE UNIX OPERATING SYSTEM 93 (2001) (describing the “grep” command).
\item \textsuperscript{29} ARNOLD ROBBINS, UNIX IN A NUTSHELL 91 (2005) (describing “finger” command).
\item \textsuperscript{30} “Archie” was the result of efforts by a group at McGill University in Canada. NATIONAL RESEARCH COUNCIL, SIGNPOSTS IN CYBERSPACE: THE DOMAIN NAME SYSTEM AND INTERNET NAVIGATION 296 (2005) (explaining the origins and technology of Archie); Shea ex rel. American Reporter v. Reno, 930 F. Supp. 916, 928 (S.D.N.Y. 1996) (“To locate files available for copying, a user can contact an “Archie” server--a remote computer capable of searching directories for file names containing a particular string of characters on FTP servers permitting anonymous retrieval.”).
\item \textsuperscript{31} NATIONAL RESEARCH COUNCIL, SIGNPOSTS IN CYBERSPACE: THE DOMAIN NAME SYSTEM AND INTERNET NAVIGATION 296 (2005).
\end{itemize}
there are over 90 million websites.\textsuperscript{33} By 1994, Web traffic had surpassed FTP traffic.\textsuperscript{34} The Web took file-sharing a quantum leap forward by providing authors with a simple scripting language (HTML) and readers with a universal retrieval application (the “browser”) that could piece together text, graphics, and other files, while allowing seamless cross-server navigation via hyperlinks.


B. Google’s Business

In 1997, Google founders Sergey Brin and Larry Page were graduate computer science students at Stanford. They wanted to build a search engine. To many observers, the project must have appeared naïve and quaint. Brin and Page came at least three years late to the search engine game. They had no funding to purchase hardware.\textsuperscript{36} And more importantly, it was not clear why they thought their project was worth pursuing. In dot-com business circles, it was believed that while the technology of Internet search was not ideal, it wasn’t worth improving.\textsuperscript{37}

But in fact, the search engines of 1997 were far less useful than Google is today. Generally, they failed to provide users with relevant results.\textsuperscript{38} And the companies that held themselves out as search engines were not that interested in making their search engines better. The conventional wisdom of the major search engines was that given their power

\textsuperscript{33} Id.
\textsuperscript{34} Id.
\textsuperscript{36} One of the more humorous parts of the early Google story is about Page and Brin begging, borrowing, and appropriating hardware and processing power from other Stanford departments to build their search engine. See DAVID A. VISE & MARK MALSEED, \textit{The Google Story} 2-3, 40 (2005) [hereinafter GOOGLE STORY]; JOHN BATTELLE, \textit{The Search} 77-78 (2005) [hereinafter THE SEARCH].
\textsuperscript{37} More sobering is the fact that Google’s race for ever-larger mountains of hardware never ended, and today is funding a mammoth and secretive project in the Oregon wilderness alongside the Columbia River. Google’s investments in physical infrastructure for search are so huge that they may help it maintain its market position against new entrants. See Daniel Terdiman, \textit{Jostling to get inside Google’s Oregon outpost}, CNET NEWS.COM, JUNE 29, 2006, http://news.com.com/Jostling+to+get+inside+Googles+Oregon+outpost/2100-1030_3-6089518.html (last visited Sept. 1, 2007).
\textsuperscript{38} GOOGLE STORY \textit{supra} note 36, at 46-47; THE SEARCH \textit{supra} note 36, at 83-84.
as “hubs” of the Internet, they should become information and entertainment “portals.” Portals would negotiate deals with traditional media companies in order to secure the best content (which they believed would not be free). Portals therefore attempted to make deals with major media companies to get access to “premium” news, services, information, and entertainment. While they pursued this goal, they sought revenues from advertising.

Improving search technology was actually inconsistent with the portal philosophy. The greatest profits, it was thought, would come from “stickiness,” i.e., keeping people on the portal’s website, showing them ads, and channeling them toward premium partnered content. Providing a better index of content “outside” the portal would simply be rewarding competitor portals and sending user eyeballs and advertising dollars away.

![Figure 1](http://web.archive.org/web/19990110025551/www.excite.com)

Perhaps fortunately for Google, the graduate students Brin and Page had the felicity of lacking the finances and commercial instincts required to play the portal game.

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39 GOOGLE STORY supra note 36, at 46-47; THE SEARCH supra note 36, at 83-84. The presumption that the free Web would be useless was probably the biggest mistake most dot-com investors and businesses made. See generally Dan Hunter & F. Gregory Lastowka, Amateur-to-Amateur, 46 WM & MARY L. REV. 951 (2004) (explaining the social and historical roots of the presumption and how “amateur” copyright practices defy it by providing much of the social utility of the Web).

Brin and Page, at least initially, had a strong aversion to advertising, which they believed detracted from their goal of improving the search experience.  

Google launched with a near vacant, fast-loading home page that constituted a complete rejection of the portal approach. It was radically centered on the user experience and expressed the anti-advertising philosophy of the founders. This focus on the user helped define and popularize Google’s brand reputation for fast and focused user-centered search. The austere original design remains today, at a time when each white pixel on the home page is worth a fortune.

![Image of Google's original home page](http://web.archive.org/web/1999042318355/http://google.com)

**Figure 2**
The 1999 default google.com beta homepage is clearly focused on user search to the exclusion of all else. Google’s current home page is almost equally minimalistic.

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42 GOOGLE STORY supra note 36, at 78 (explaining how many Google beta testers confronted with the search engine’s page did not believe it had loaded). The pure and popular whiteness of Google’s homepage has concerned some. One company today offers a black Google homepage that utilized Google’s search function. Blackle claims that it has conserved over 100,000 Watt hours of energy by turning off the white lights. See Blackle—Energy Saving Search, http://www.blackle.com/ (last visited Sept. 1, 2007).


44 See James Caufield, *Where Did Google Get Its Value?*, 5 LIBRARIES & THE ACADEMY 555, 562 (2005) (“[W]hat differentiated [Google] from other search engines was its willingness to adopt at least some of the traditional values of libraries and other information services.”).
But the key appeal of Google was not a blank home page, but the quality of its results. Google’s technological advance, which Page later patented, was essentially a way of letting the Web speak for itself. Rather than relying exclusively on algorithmic science to parse data and calculate relevance, Page came up with a simple formula that determined the popularity of Web Pages. “PageRank” (a play on Page’s last name) took every hyperlink written on the Web to be a kind of “vote” for the importance of the Web page it pointed to. The application of PageRank to search results allowed the most popular Web pages to float to the top of Google’s results. Combined with link analysis techniques, PageRank made Google’s search results noticeably better and allowed users to obtain more relevant results in response to their search terms.45

Google’s focus on improving relevance was closely tied to its anti-advertising stance. In the same 1998 paper where they explained how PageRank worked, Brin and Page also explained why Google was opposed to advertising. “[A]dvertising income often provides an incentive to provide poor quality search results.”46 Brin and Page explained that advertising-funded search engines would be inclined to simply direct users to their advertising partners. They hoped Google could avoid this conflict by avoiding advertising altogether: “[T]he issue of advertising causes enough mixed incentives that it is crucial to have a competitive search engine that is transparent and in the academic realm.”47

Yet in 2000, only three years after Google had launched, Brin and Page had accepted millions of dollars in venture capital while having no real business model. Beholden to their investors in a climate where other online ventures were reeling from the dot-com collapse, Page and Brin reluctantly began selling advertising under a program called AdWords.48 Their continued distaste for advertising was evident. There were no


47 Id.

48 The company recounts these steps more fully in its corporate history. See Google, Corporate Information: Google Milestones, http://www.google.com/corporate/history.html (last visited Sept. 1, 2007). Accounts of Google’s advertising developments can also be found in the two leading popular histories of Google. GOOGLE STORY supra note 36, at 93-102, 123-152; BATTELLE, SEARCH 121-129 (2005).
advertisements on the home page, which remained vacant. The ads, shown on results pages, contained no images, were printed in a uniform small text font, were shaded blue, and were segregated to the right side of the results listings under the words “Sponsored links.”

Yet when Google adopted advertising, it stole its most profitable idea from an unusual source: GoTo.com. GoTo.com, like Google, was a search engine launched in 1997. The business model of GoTo.com was, from a philosophical standpoint, diametrically opposed to the academic and anti-advertising ethos of Google. Rather than resisting advertising, GoTo.com offered users pure advertising.

GoTo.com sold its search results to advertisers under a “paid placement” business model. It auctioned placement under specific search terms. The highest bidder would achieve the highest placement in search results for a given term. So, for instance, a user who searched on GoTo.com for “running shoes” would be shown a page of advertisements ranked according to the amount of money each purchaser paid GoTo.com. Additionally, advertisers would pay GoTo.com only when users clicked on a hyperlink pointing to their page, thus ensuring that advertising payments were linked directly to the consumer traffic provided by GoTo.com.

Though the GoTo.com model was profitable for the company, perhaps for understandable reasons, a search engine limited to paid advertising did not generate a great deal of positive word of mouth. Instead, the majority of GoTo.com’s revenues were derived from licensing its “results” for “syndication” on other search engines. Essentially, GoTo.com would enter into deals with companies like AOL whereby it would buy screen space accompanying other search engine results and return a portion of its revenues to the hosting site.

With regard to its advertising efforts in its right-hand column, Google copied the GoTo.com model wholesale, ultimately settling a patent infringement lawsuit based on its appropriation of the practice. Like GoTo.com, Google sold placement to advertisers only under specific terms. Like GoTo.com, starting in 2002, advertisers paid Google only if and when users clicked on their ads. Like GoTo.com, Google’s AdWords terms were subject to an automated auction mechanism.

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49 For more information about the history of GoTo.com, see John Battelle’s colorful rendition of the history of the company and its founder, Bill Gross. The Search supra note 36, at 95-121.

50 GoTo.com was renamed Overture in 2001, and was later purchased by Yahoo!, Inc. It is currently known as Yahoo! Search Marketing. See Danny Sullivan, Pay Per Click Search Engines (CPC/PPC), SearchEngineWatch.com, Aug. 13, 2004, http://searchenginewatch.com/showPage.html?parent=2156291 (last visited Sept. 1, 2007).

51 The Search supra note 36, at 113-16.

52 Id. This model is very similar to what Google has done with AdSense. See infra Part I.E.

53 See The Search supra note 36, at 116.

54 In 2005, Google also allowed users to purchase CPM (cost per thousand impression) advertising.
In short order, AdWords became Google’s diamond mine. In 2001, Google turned a profit of $7 million. In 2002, profits rose to $100 million.\textsuperscript{56} Four years later, in 2006, Google posted revenues of $10 billion from AdWords-type advertising sales, compromising over 99 percent of its total revenues.\textsuperscript{57} AdWords revenues are, essentially, the sole source of Google’s wealth today. While Google may draw considerable media attention through its other promising assets, such as Google Earth, Google News, YouTube, etc., these other ventures have all been marginal in terms of their contributions to the company’s profits.

“Mesothelioma” is a search term commonly used to demonstrate how AdWords tap a new form of wealth.\textsuperscript{58} Those searching for information about “mesothelioma” are often suffering, or know someone who is suffering, from asbestos-induced cancer. Class action lawyers want to find these people. As a result, Google can sell a single click on an advertisement for “mesothelioma” for $30 to $50. The high price is the result of a fierce bidding war by litigators.

There are millions of similar niche and not-so-niche “term markets” out there, where advertisers bid against each other for the right to connect individuals in the market for “school loans,” “oversize shoes,” “beanie babies,” and everything else under the sun. For many advertisers, AdWords purchases produce a greater return on investment than traditional media channels. A newspaper advertisement about mesothelioma will force the advertiser to subsidize a broadcast to many people who have no interest. With AdWords, the searcher comes to the advertiser, perhaps primed for a commercial transaction and just a mouse-click away from completing it.

\textbf{C. Two Sample Results Pages}

In order to ground further discussion with specific examples, this section briefly presents and discusses the results Google displayed in the summer of 2007 in response to queries for two terms: “cars,” and “Nike.” Google’s results for any terms are inherently

However, given that CPM pricing is the traditional model of Internet “banner” advertising that preceded Google, it has apparently not taken off. Sajjad Matin, \textit{Note: Clicks Ahoi! Navigating Online Advertising in a Sea of Fraudulent Clicks}, 22 BERKELEY TECH. L.J. 533, 536-37 (2007).

\textsuperscript{55} Google added one wrinkle: when many users clicked on an advertisement, Google would count this as a “vote” to move that advertisement to the top of the AdWords pile. As a result, more popular advertisements preceded less popular ones. \textit{GOOGLE STORY supra note 36}, at 89-90. This increased “relevancy” and also ensured that Google would display the advertisements that were most likely to garner clicks and increase its own revenues.

\textsuperscript{56} \textit{GOOGLE STORY supra note 36}, at 305.


\textsuperscript{58} \textit{See, e.g., Eric Goldman, Deregulating Relevancy in Internet Trademark Law}, 54 EMOY L.J. 507, 548 n.150 (2005); \textit{THE SEARCH supra note 36}, at 110; \textit{GOOGLE STORY supra note 36}, at 117.
unstable, it should be noted. Because Google regularly refreshes its Web index and modifies its relevancy algorithm, its organic results may change from day to day.

The two terms are selected with a future discussion of trademark law in mind. The term “cars” might be understood by laypersons as a generic term for a class of heavily advertised goods (automobiles). The term “nike” probably calls to mind, for many readers, the trademark of a particular sneaker company. “Nike” is also part of a proud traditional of law review commentary on search engines and trademarks, and has even been used as an example search term by Google to illustrate its technology.

![Google Search Results](image)

**Figure 3**

A 2007 search results page for “cars” shows: 1) the user-entered keyword at the top of the page, 2) the “organic” (unpaid) results on the left side of the page and 3) the paid “sponsored links” results on the right side of the page. Note that the key term “cars” is highlighted with bold type in both the organic and paid results.

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59 In fact, as I will explain below, this is a false dichotomy. Both terms have established trademark and non-trademark meanings.


The screenshot in Figure 3 shows a partial page of Google results for “cars” in North America during the summer of 2007. In the shaded bar at the top of the page, Google claims to have indexed over 300 million websites related to “cars.” However, only 10 of these 300 million “organic” results—those ten that Google’s ranking algorithm deemed most relevant—have been displayed on the first page of results. The average user will only rarely travel beyond this first page of results.62

The left column lists Google’s “organic” results, starting with multiple sub-domains of the website “cars.com”. The right column is filled with AdWords advertisements, displayed under the word “Sponsored Links.” About half of the left-column organic results for “cars” relate to a Disney movie of that name. The other half are links to websites selling and providing information about automobiles, like a Washington Post website that offers information about cars.

The following screenshot shows Google’s results page for “nike.”

Figure 4
A 2007 search for “nike” produces two sponsored links that appear above the organic listings (these are lightly shaded in a highlight color) and three sponsored links on the right side of the page. The organic results are dominated by the websites of the Nike™ athletic wear company.

“Nike” is apparently understood by both Google’s algorithm and its AdWords advertisers as the proper name of a sneaker company. All the top-page results and AdWords advertisements reflect this meaning of the word. The left column here is somewhat different that the last example because Google has “awarded” two advertisers (Nike and Finish Line63) with top left-column placements for their advertisement, which

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63 Finish Line has some significant advertising partnerships with Nike, which may be relevant to the placement. See Reuters, Finish Line and Nike Team Up, Aug. 3, 2007, http://www.topix.net/content/reuters/2007/08/finish-line-and-nike-team-up (last visited Sept. 1, 2007)
appear above the left-column results. The standard left-hand column follows these two advertisements and includes several links to the Nike company’s websites. In the right column, various AdWords advertisements for the search term “Nike” are listed. These include advertisers that sell Nike footwear as well as other brands of sneakers.

D. The Left and Right Columns

During its short history, Google has repeatedly proclaimed that its business model bears no resemblance to the model of GoTo.com, where advertisers paid for prominent placement in results. Google draws a bright line between left-column “results” and right-column “advertisements.”

The Google home page states:

[W]e always distinguish ads from the search results or other content on a page. We don’t sell placement in the search results themselves, or allow people to pay for a higher ranking there.

In a 2004 statement to prospective shareholders, under the heading “DON’T BE EVIL,” Google stated:

Our search results are the best we know how to produce. They are unbiased and objective, and we do not accept payment for them or for inclusion or more frequent updating. We also display advertising, which we work hard to make relevant, and we label it clearly. This is similar to a newspaper, where the advertisements are clear and the articles are not influenced by the advertisers’ payments.

So according to Google’s public relations, one way it avoids “being evil” is by refusing to allow its left hand column to be purchased while making its right hand column its profit center. There are clearly echoes here of the Google founders’ former aversion to

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64 Ads that appear above the organic listings cannot be purchased from Google (at least not currently), but are Google’s way of “rewarding” AdWords purchasers who make their advertisements highly relevant to users (in other words, ads that produce a very high click-through rate are put in this position). This is explained by a Google employee blogger. See Posting of Blake to Inside AdWords, http://http://AdWords.blogspot.com/2005/12/into-blue.html (Dec. 2, 2005) (last visited Sept. 1, 2007) (“At the bottom line, highly relevant keywords and ad text, a high CPC, and a strong CTR will result in a higher position for your ad and help you rise ’into the blue.’”).


advertising. On the other hand, placement in the right hand column must be purchased. And in the right column, a lack of relevance is no bar to placement if an advertiser is willing to pay.  

The left/right distinction is very important to Google, but studies have shown it is not important to the average user. In fact, the average Google user does not distinguish between the two types of links. According to a recent study, five out of six search engine users cannot tell the difference between sponsored links and organic results, and roughly half are unaware that a difference between the two exists.

Google may bear some blame for the confusion. As the screenshots show, AdWords advertisements appear in the same format as “organic” results and this may blur the distinction between the two for users. The small word “Sponsored Links” and the pastel shading of the AdWords is ambiguous in its meaning. To someone unfamiliar with the details of Google’s advertising practices, it might seem as if Google is suggesting that the advertisements are more relevant (i.e. Google “sponsors” the results). In 2002, the Federal Trade Commission warned search engines that they were obliged to clearly differentiate paid results from non-paid results. However, the FTC has yet to take any action.

There is another good reason that most users do not see a difference between Google’s right and left column. Google’s left-hand column is, in fact, subject to market forces in ways that can make it similar to the right-hand column. Businesses seeking consumer traffic realize that both columns are simply lists of links. Being first in the left hand column can provide as much or more traffic as paying for an AdWords

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68 However, advertisement producing fewer clicks (and fewer revenues for Google), are threatened with removal unless payments per click are increased. For example, in the summer of 2007, I bought an AdWord placement for the keyword “nike” that pointed to an unrelated weblog. After about 400 impressions that (unsurprisingly) led to no click-throughs, Google informed me that I might remain listed by increasing my bid from $1 per click to $5 per click. (I declined.) (Printouts on file with author.)


70 See Deborah Fallows, Search Engine Users, PEB INTERNET & AMERICAN LIFE PROJECT, Jan. 23, 2005, p. 17-18, available at: http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/146/report_display.asp. (“Among the 38% of internet users who are aware of the practice [of two different types of search results], some 47% of searchers say they can always tell which results are paid or sponsored and which are not. This represents about one in six of all internet searchers.”),

71 Letter from Heather Hippsley, Acting Associate Dir., F.T.C. Division of Advertising Practices, to Gary Ruskin, Executive Director, Commercial Alert, (June 27, 2002), available at: http://www.commercialalert.org/PDFs/ftcresponse.pdf (“the staff recommends that if your search engine uses paid placement, you make any changes to the presentation of your paid-ranking search results that would be necessary to clearly delineate them as such, whether they are segregated from, or inserted into, non-paid listings.”)

72 See generally Andrew Sinclair, Note: Regulation of Paid Listings in Internet Search Engines: A Proposal for FTC Action, 10 B.U. J. SCI. & TECH. L. 353 (2004) (arguing that the FTC should take action with respect to paid placement).
advertisement.\textsuperscript{73} Many small e-commerce fortunes have been found (and lost) by inadvertently pleasing (or displeasing) the Google algorithms that structure the left-hand column.\textsuperscript{74} As a result, a profitable business has grown up around the science of “reverse engineering” Google’s algorithm and adapting business websites to please it. This practice is known as “search engine optimization” or “SEO” for short.

Google has little to gain from helping the SEO business flourish.\textsuperscript{75} As Brin and Page realized in 1998, completely following the GoTo.com model would likely produce search results that are not ideal for users. Displeased users might look for a better search engine. If Google can’t capture profits from the left hand column for fear of displeasing users, then its optimal strategy should be combating SEO that undermines the indexical utility that column provides to users. Additionally, by combating SEO, Google can drive advertisers to its right hand column and gain greater profits.

Yet the SEO economy is here to stay and is currently valued at $4.1 billion.\textsuperscript{76} This makes questionable Google’s claim that the left hand column is not influenced by commercial influences. Many SEO techniques are not “evil,” but rather common sense (albeit technically obscure) methods designed to maximize traffic benefits. Yet these benefits are reaped only by those who are able to pay for them.

Google’s algorithm can also be gamed by more aggressive SEO practices that can sometimes lead to retaliatory actions by Google. While Google condones “honest” SEO optimization, it warns against hiring “aggressive” SEO companies who “unfairly manipulate search engine results” in ways that are “beyond the pale.”\textsuperscript{77} This is obviously a

\textsuperscript{73} Studies indicate that the first link in search results draw more much traffic as the second link – regardless of the text of the link. See Jakob Nielsen, The Power of Defaults, ALERTBOX, Sept. 26, 2005, http://www.useit.com/alertbox/defaults.html (last visited Sept. 1, 2007); Bing Pan et al., In Google we trust: Users’ decisions on rank, position, and relevance, J. COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMM. 12(3) (2007), available at: http://icmc.indiana.edu/vol12/issue3/pan.html (“In summary, the findings here show that college student subjects are heavily influenced by the order in which the results are presented and, to a lesser extent, the actual relevance of the abstracts”).

\textsuperscript{74} See, e.g., Paul Sloan, How to scale Mt. Google: Getting your site on the first page can turn a hobby into a thriving business, CNNMONEY.COM, May 14, 2007, http://money.cnn.com/magazines/business2/business2_archive/2007/05/01/8405661/index.htm (last visited Sept. 1, 2007) (explaining how a small business selling kitchen cabinets used search engine optimization techniques to go from negligible profits to “revenue of $10,000 a month and more inquiries than her one-woman business can handle.”); Who’s Afraid of Google?, THE ECONOMIST, Aug. 30 2007, at __ (“Many small firms hate Google because they relied on exploiting its search formulas to win prime positions in its rankings, but dropped to the internet’s equivalent of Hades after Google tweaked these algorithms.”).


\textsuperscript{76} Sloan, supra note 74.

\textsuperscript{77} See Google, What’s an SEO? Does Google recommend working with companies that offer to make my site Google-friendly?,
fuzzy line and Google’s conduct has not done much to clarify the distinction it draws between fair and unfair SEO. This might be best exemplified Google’s responses to the practice of “Google-bombing.”

Google-bombing is based on a well-known feature of Google’s link analysis algorithm. On its website, Google explains that the text present in a Web source is used to determine relevance:

Google gives added relevance to sites targeted by hyperlinks that contain text similar to the search query. So, e.g., if the majority of the hyperlinks with the text “Nike” point to the website of the Nike, Inc., Google might be more likely to list that website as an early result.78

“Google-bombers” exploit this fact by repeatedly linking a particular target phrase to a particular target website.79

In 2005, Google vice-president Marissa Meyer acknowledged Google-bombers had managed to link Google’s top result for “failure” and “miserable failure” to the website of the White House, but explained that Google was reluctant to intervene with this outcome: “We don’t condone the practice of googlebombing, or any other action that seeks to affect the integrity of our search results, but we’re also reluctant to alter our results by hand in order to prevent such items from showing up.”80

SEO tactics, both “fair” and “unfair” (and those in between) produce higher left column rankings. Therefore economically rational businesses should weigh dollars spent on AdWords against dollars spent on SEO.81 The New York Times recently admitted that it has been using SEO “to make money by driving traffic to its Web site.”82 An editor for the Times declared that its SEO tactics push “Times content to or near the top of search results, http://www.google.com/support/webmasters/bin/answer.py?hl=en&answer=35291 (last visited Sept. 1, 2007) (“A few unethical SEOs have given the industry a black eye through their overly aggressive marketing efforts and their attempts to unfairly manipulate search engine results…. While Google doesn’t comment on specific companies, we’ve encountered firms calling themselves SEOs who follow practices that are clearly beyond the pale of accepted business behavior. Be careful.”); Frank A. Pasquale, Rankings, Reductionism, and Responsibility, 54 CLEV. ST. L. REV. 115, 124 n.41 (2006).


80 Posting of Marissa Meyer to Official Google Blog, http://googleblog.blogspot.com/2005/09/googlebombing-failure.html (Sept. 16, 2005) (last visited Sept. 1, 2007) (“Pranks like this may be distracting to some, but they don’t affect the overall quality of our search service, whose objectivity, as always, remains the core of our mission.”).

81 See Frank A. Pasquale, Rankings, Reductionism, and Responsibility, 54 CLEV. ST. L. REV. 115, 129 (2006) (explaining how “the first unpaid result is likely to get ten times the traffic of the tenth”). Pasquale views the practice of SEO as an “arms race” generating negative economic externalities, drawing an interesting comparison to U.S. News Rankings. Id. at 130-34.

regardless of its importance or accuracy. Given the importance of SEO, it can be hard to see the much-vaulted distinction between the left hand and right hand columns on Google. Both are commercially influenced.

Google’s interest in the distinction between advertising results and organic results should be understood as an interest not so much based on avoiding “evil,” but primarily on securing profit. Clicks on “nike” AdWords advertisements produce revenues for Google. Clicks on “nike” results may take the user to the same business, but produce no revenues for Google. Google’s bottom line depends on the difference between its left and right columns. However, users searching for “nike” on Google are likely to be sent to a sneaker company in either case.

E. A Note on AdSense

In 2003, Google added further complexity to its advertising model by introducing AdSense. According to recent financial statements from Google, a majority of Google’s current revenues are generated by AdWords, while AdSense accounts for a significant minority percentage. Though an in-depth analysis of the structure of AdSense is beyond the scope of this article, it is worth describing briefly how the AdSense model differs from the AdWords model.

AdSense is a program whereby website owners are paid by Google to provide advertising space on their websites where AdWords advertisements are displayed. The precise advertisements displayed are determined by a process similar to the process that determines AdWords placements. However, given that the AdSense ads are incorporated in websites and are not triggered by searches, Google’s algorithm matches AdWords advertisements to the text of the website rather than search term. Hence, a website describing the Greek goddess Nike might display AdSense advertisements for Nike sneakers. According to Google, “AdSense technology analyzes the text on any given page

83 Id.
84 Cf. Eric Goldman, Deregulating Relevancy in Internet Trademark Law, 54 EMORY L.J. 507, 509 (2005) (hypothesizing a situation where a future student might search for “nike” on Google and be unable to find information on the mythological figure).
86 In the first quarter of 2007, Google generated approximately $2.3 billion (62% of revenues) from AdWords and approximately $1.3 billion (37% of revenues) from AdSense.
87 For more information about clickfraud and legal claims against it, see Sajjad Matin, Note: Clicks Aboye! Navigating Online Advertising in a Sea of Fraudulent Clicks, 22 BERKELEY TECH. L.J. 533 (2007).
88 Though Google’s current algorithm is smart enough to promote travel to Greece most of the time, the occasional sneaker ad actually does appear. (Printout on file with author.)
and delivers ads that are appropriate and relevant, increasing the usefulness of the page and the likelihood that those viewing it will actually click on the advertising presented there.\textsuperscript{89}

The AdSense program draws hosting sites into a closer relationship with Google. Because Google operates as an index, almost all small websites are partially dependent on Google for the traffic they receive.\textsuperscript{90} AdSense allows small and large websites that seek profits to partner with Google and share in AdWords revenues. When website viewers click on AdSense advertisements, the AdWords advertisers pay Google for the traffic generated, and Google forwards a percentage of the proceeds to the website that hosts the AdSense advertisements. AdSense has even crept into the “market” (such as it is) for law review articles. The academic paper-hosting website SSRN generates revenues by displaying AdSense advertisements.\textsuperscript{91}

One major criticism of the AdSense model is that it enables a “clickfraud” industry built around “false” click-throughs. \textsuperscript{92} Advertisers generally and reasonably trust that traffic flowing from Google’s results pages is genuine. However, AdSense is prone to a systemic failure. AdSense hosts have an incentive to maximize their income by maximizing the number of time users “click through” on hosted advertisements. While most AdSense hosts generate their viewer traffic and AdSense profits in “fair” ways (e.g. making their websites more likely to attract attention), there are more direct ways to simply generate clicks on AdWords advertisements.

If a click is worth a dollar to an AdSense host, it is hardly surprising that some websites have been willing to split their AdSense profit with paid teams of “click-farmers” who generate “fake” AdWords clicks (that are not based on any actual interest in the advertising). This practice is known as clickfraud. Analysts estimate that around 5%-20% of AdSense clicks are generated by clickfraud.\textsuperscript{93} This would make clickfraud a multi-billion dollar business.

While Google has recognized that clickfraud is a problem, it is also true that Google profits substantially from clickfraud in the short term.\textsuperscript{94} Though Google has a


\textsuperscript{90} To take a random example, the law blog Concuring Opinions receives the majority of its traffic from search engines, with Google accounting for the substantial majority of search engine traffic. See eXTReMe Tracking, http://extremetracking.com/openref2?login=solo1111 (last visited Sept. 1, 2007).

\textsuperscript{91} For instance, at present a draft of Professor Mark A. Lemley’s Property, Intellectual Property, and Free Riding, 83 TEX. L. REV. 1031 (2005), is associated by Google with ads for the law firms of Myers, Boebe\& MacLeod and Buus Kim Kuo & Tran LLP. Another popular paper by Professor Orin Kerr features advertisements for Harry Potter ringtones. (Page printouts on file with author.)

\textsuperscript{92} GOOGLE STORY supra note 36, at 240-49.

\textsuperscript{93} Sajjad Matin, Note: Clicks Ahoi! Navigating Online Advertising in a Sea of Fraudulent Clicks, 22 BERKELEY TECH. L.J. 533, 540 (2007)

\textsuperscript{94} GOOGLE STORY supra note 36, at 248 (“Google has the data, but not the incentive, to put sufficient resources into fighting clickfraud...”).
division that works to combat clickfraud, Google’s CEO, Eric Schmidt, has also stated that the clickfraud situation is “self-correcting” and that the market can provide a perfect “economic solution” to the problem. This has not deterred class action suits against Google based on the practice, one of which was recently settled for ninety million dollars. As a recent student note points out, the legal obligations of Google to police against clickfraud have not been conclusively settled by courts.

II. The Current Legal Status of Search Results

A. Non-Trademark Search Regulation

This second Part considers attempts to use law to regulate the structure of Google's results. As an initial matter, it is worth observing how the law clearly does regulate Google’s results in many ways. In its right hand column, Google, by its own policies, prohibits 28 types of AdWords advertising. Among the prohibited advertisements are those for prostitution, child pornography, computer hacking tools, weapons, and counterfeit goods. These bans are clearly motivated by Google’s concerns over legal liability. In its left column, Google regularly removes certain search results from its indices when copyright holders notify Google that the linked resources contain infringing material. The procedure that Google follows affords it a “safe harbor” from infringement liability under the Digital Millennium Copyright Act.

95 See Google Adwords, Ad Traffic Quality Resource Center: Overview, http://www.google.com/adwords/adtrafficquality/overview.html (last visited Sept. 1, 2007) (“[W]e protect advertisers against click fraud by not charging for suspicious clicks. The intent of a click is difficult to determine with a high degree of scientific accuracy. We therefore create a high false positive rate by marking a much larger number of clicks as invalid compared to the number of clicks we believe to be generated with bad intent.”).


98 Matin, supra note __, at 540 (2007) (noting there is there is no industry-accepted definition for an “invalid click”).


The key question about Google, therefore, is not whether its results pages should be regulated per se, but whether search results require a more specific form of regulation. Google’s business model is different from that found in other media. One does not consult a daily newspaper seeking to rapidly discover useful information about “mesothelioma lawyers,” “phil rizzuto,” or “phrogging.”

If our concerns are about the general nature of Google’s results pages, we might start by taking the earlier examples (“cars” and “nike”) and looking for flaws. It is not hard to find some basis for criticism. Traditional mass media has been criticized for both privileging “majority preferences” and for favoring the provision of information that is “commercially effective.” Both of these criticisms apply fully to the “cars” and “nike” results provided by Google.

Google clearly demonstrates a commercial bias in the searches for both “cars” and “nike.” Though most dictionaries suggest that “cars” is the plural of a term for automobiles, Google’s results correlate the term, in significant part, with a recent Disney movie. And whereas most all dictionaries define the word “nike” as the name of the Greek goddess of victory, Google’s right and left columns privilege information about (and largely created by) a sneaker company.

There is also a significant and systemic bias in favor of majority preferences. Google’s PageRank formula is designed to privilege websites that win the most “votes” in the form of hyperlinks. The commercial bias and the popular bias of Google are difficult to disaggregate. Commercial influence drives offline and online advertising and social prominence. So it may be that “cars” is highly correlated with a Disney movie because many Web authors exposed to Disney’s advertising have now associated the term with the move in hyperlinks. The same may be true of the shape of “nike” results. Google may simply be a mirror held up to a consumer culture. Of course, there might be other explanations: if Disney and Nike are engaging in sophisticated SEO, their investments may also be responsible for the “cars” and “nike” results.

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101 This term “phrogging” apparently means living in someone else’s home without their knowledge or permission. It can be found in Google’s “Hot Trends,” a list of search queries that became rapidly popular on given dates. For instance, on August 14, 2007, the Google top ten Hot Trends were as follows: “1. phil rizzuto, 2. phrogging, 3. sentinel management group, 4. sue scheff, 5. vomit island, 6. paycheck showdown, 7. sentinel funds, 8. craig cartoon, 9. albert insinna, 10. tiger woods design.” For more query demographics, see Google, Hot Trends, http://www.google.com/trends/hottrends (last visited Sept. 1, 2007).

102 For an early critique of search engines, see Lucas D. Introna & Helen Nissenbaum, Shaping The Web: Why the Politics of Search Engines Matter, 16 INFO SOC’Y 3 (2000), at www.nyu.edu/projects/nissenbaum/papers/searchengines.pdf (criticizing the manner in which search engines display results).


104 Google does eventually provide results that reflect the mythological meaning, just not on its first page.
The AdWords in the right hand column are transparently commercial because Google’s auction awards the highest place to the highest bidder, conditioned only by the popularity of the advertisements with users. This should naturally result in a bias toward both commercial influence and majority preferences. In short, Google’s results pages are prone to exactly the same types of bias found in traditional mass media.  

Yet while this may be disappointing to those hoping for a revolution from Google, can the law intervene to improve things? Arguably, Google’s results pages simply represent Google’s opinion (or the opinion produced by its algorithm) about sites relevant to the search terms. As such, even if Google were to follow the model of GoTo.com and only direct users to sites according to advertising payments, it might claim protection under the First Amendment (unless its results were somehow deceptive). A line of cases is beginning to reflect this view, according Google the freedom to provide results in any way it deems fit, including through the hand-editing of its indices. The two most prominent cases have been Search King v. Google, brought in the Western District of Oklahoma, and Kinderstart.com v. Google, brought in the Northern District of California.

In the Search King case, the plaintiff was a company based in Oklahoma that engaged in a form of SEO. Google believed Search King’s practices abused and manipulated its algorithm. Search King’s business model was oriented around locating Web pages that had a high Google PageRank and then acting as a middleman paying those sites to link to its clients. Essentially, Search King was monetizing the value of PageRank by paying those sites that had it for outbound links.

But Search King’s efforts to build a market in the left hand column were not in keeping with Google’s desire to avoid “evil” in that space. When Google learned of Search King’s practices, it reduced Search King’s PageRank as well as the PageRank ratings of associated websites. Though Google never explicitly admitted it, Search King had

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109 Search King disagrees and vigorously defends its SEO practices. See Search King, The Fallacy of SEO, http://www.searchking.com/seo-fallacy.html (last visited Sept. 1, 2007) (“Search Engine Optimization (SEO) has been defined as the art of manipulating the search engines. That is false. SEO does not manipulate search engines.”).

110 Id. at *3 (“[the advertising network’s] fee is based, in part, on the PageRank assigned to the web site on which its client’s advertisement and/or link is placed.”)

111 Id. (“In August or September of 2002, Search King’s PageRank dropped [from 8] to 4; PRAN’s
obviously been targeted for “hand-editing.” Employees at Google have confirmed that certain other websites have been penalized and specifically removed from Google’s index in response to what it believes are abusive SEO techniques.

Search King brought suit, alleging that Google’s penalization of its ranking constituted tortious interference with contractual relations. Essentially it claimed that Google had destroyed its advertising business by removing its site from search listings. Search King’s request for a preliminary injunction was denied and Google brought a motion to dismiss. The key question was whether, under applicable Oklahoma law, Google’s actions were “malicious and wrongful” and “not justified, privileged, or excusable.” Google argued that reductions in PageRank were “opinions” protected by the First Amendment. Search King responded by pointing out how PageRank was a patented formula that Google claimed to be “objectively verifiable.” The court sided with Google:

[T]he Court finds that PageRanks do not contain provably false connotations. PageRanks are opinions - opinions of the significance of particular web sites as they correspond to a search query. Other search engines express different opinions, as each search engine’s method of determining relative significance is unique. The Court simply finds there is no conceivable way to prove that the relative significance assigned to a given web site is false.

Bob Massa, the proprietor of Search King, claimed he was targeted as a “spammer.” See Stefanie Olsen, Google counters search-fix lawsuit, CNETNEWS.COM, Jan. 10, 2003 (“They arbitrarily singled us out. They make up rules, and they decide you’re a spammer, and boom! you’re gone. There’s no recourse. Search engines have to be held accountable.”).


I can confirm that Google has removed traffic-power.com and domains promoted by Traffic Power from our index because of search engine optimization techniques that violated our webmaster guidelines at http://www.google.com/webmasters/guidelines.html. If you are a client or former client of Traffic Power and your site is not in Google, please see my previous advice on requesting reinclusion into Google’s index to learn what steps to take if you would like to be reincluded in Google’s index.

Id. During the same week, Google confirmed that it had “blacklisted” the German website of auto manufacturer BMW for using improper SEO tactics. Tom Espiner, Google blacklists BMW.de, CNET NEWS, Feb. 6, 2006, http://news.com.com/Google+blacklists+BMW.de/2100-1024_3-6035412.html (last visited Sept. 1, 2007) (stating that the website had used “doorway pages” or false websites that enticed Google’s algorithm but redirected visitors to other pages).

2003 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 27193 at *4 (W.D. Ok. May 27, 2003) (stating that Search King claim Google had “adversely impacted the business opportunities available to Search King… to an indeterminate degree by limiting their exposure on Google’s search engine.”).

Id.

Id. at 12-13.
The court found Search King had failed to state a claim and dismissed the suit.

The *Kinderstart* case involved somewhat similar facts. *Kinderstart.com* is a website that provides a directory with information and resources related to young children. In 2003, Kinderstart.com became a Google AdSense affiliate. In 2005, Kinderstart.com claimed monthly traffic amounting to over 10 million page views. With this amount of traffic, Kinderstart.com was surely profiting substantially from AdSense. In March 19, 2005, however, Google de-listed Kinderstart from its index and dropped Kinderstart’s PageRank to zero. It is a testament to Google’s power that these actions reduced Kinderstart’s AdSense revenues by 80% and its overall website traffic by 70%.118

Google has never publicly explained why it reduced Kinderstart’s PageRank. Kinderstart claimed that it had never violated Google’s policies. However, it seems clear that the Kinderstart delisting and PageRank reduction were, like the actions taken against Search King, instanced of targeted hand editing by Google employees based on some concern Google had about the company.

Kinderstart filed suit on March 17, 2006, with a class action complaint bringing claims on behalf of itself and similarly situated online businesses. It alleged nine counts of violations of common and statutory law, claiming, *inter alia*, that Google had abridged its rights to free speech, that Google had monopolized the online advertising market, that Google was guilty of unfair business practices, and that its “zero” PageRank constituted common law defamation and libel. After an initial unfavorable ruling dismissing the Complaint with leave to amend, Kinderstart filed an amended complaint, adding a false advertising claim.

All Kinderstart’s claims were ultimately dismissed. Though the various claims failed for reasons grounded in the appropriate legal doctrines (*e.g.* Kinderstart’s federal and state free speech claims failed for a lack of state action120), the defamation and libel claim was resolved by court findings highly similar to those in the *Search King* litigation. The court stated that Google’s PageRanks were protected statements of opinion:

PageRank is a creature of Google’s invention and does not constitute an independently-discoverable value. In fact, Google might choose to assign PageRanks randomly, whether as whole numbers or with many decimal places, but this would not create ‘incorrect’ PageRanks.


118 2006 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 45700 at *8.


120 2006 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 82481 at *11-16 (dismissing claims in First Amended Complaint); 2007 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 22637 at *39-52 (dismissing new amended claims).
Though there will undoubtedly be future cases in the same vein as *Search King* and *Kindergarten*, it seems general challenges to the nature of Google’s results pages have little chance of succeeding under current law. If Google’s results are simply subjective opinions, then Google apparently has the right to structure its left hand column in whatever way it pleases.\(^\text{121}\) With regard to the right hand column, Google has stipulated in one lawsuit that it possesses the right to refuse to sell AdWords to anyone for any reason.\(^\text{122}\)

Many commentators, most notably Professor Eric Goldman, have argued that, from a policy perspective, this is the correct result. Goldman states that there is no compelling reason for the law to dictate how Google or other search engines structure their results pages.\(^\text{123}\) Though Goldman provides several justifications for the status quo, his primary argument is that market discipline is superior to regulatory intervention. To the extent that Google’s results fail to serve the interests of the public, another search engine company will arise to entice users, thus allowing the market to fix the problem.\(^\text{124}\) Goldman fears that efforts to regulate search engines will lead to “regulatory distortion” that will undercut the efforts of search engine to improve relevancy.\(^\text{125}\)

Professors Oren Bracha and Frank Pasquale have disagreed with Goldman about the utility of market discipline.\(^\text{126}\) In a forthcoming article, Bracha and Pasquale argue that search engine results are prone to various types of market failure that should be remedied through federal regulation.\(^\text{127}\) One of their primary concerns, borne out by the cases above, is that Google’s rankings lack meaningful transparency and might be subject to abuse. In a weblog posting, Bracha compared the ranking power of search engines to “concentrated power that operates in the dark.”\(^\text{128}\) Bracha and Pasquale argue that the state should act to


\(^{124}\) Goldman, *Utopianism, supra* note __, at 197 (“[S]earchers will shop around if they do not get the results they want, and this competitive pressure constrains search engine bias.”).

\(^{125}\) Goldman, *Utopianism, supra* note __, at 199-200.


cure the failures of search engine results by requiring search engines to reveal their algorithms. They further argue that the First Amendment, properly understood, should not serve as a shield protecting Google from relevancy regulation.

However, Bracha and Pasquale are (understandably) vague about exactly how they would like results to be regulated. They simply state that any solution will require “institutional arrangements” that “will have to be nuanced and somewhat complex.”

One wonders how government regulators might be inclined to oversee the structure of search engine results pages for “cars,” “nike,” “mesothelioma lawyers,” “violent crime map of Philadelphia,” or “phrogging.”

Whatever one thinks of the call for greater state involvement with search results, the notion of an FCC-equivalent organization that oversees results generally seems like a distant prospect. At this point there seems little legal footing or focused political will that might support regulating Google’s results generally. I emphasize generally, because within one particular category of search terms, search engine results have been and continue to be regulated. When users search for terms that correspond with recognizable trademarks, some courts have found that trademark law places limits on the shape of the results that search engines return.

Limiting the discussion of the legal regulation of search results to trademark law, as the rest of this article will do, constitutes a concession to the power of “Google’s Law” in e-commerce today. While one might hope for a law that acts as a more general regulator of information practices like search results, trademark law is really not up to that task. The best that trademark law can offer is one means, within a very limited context, of curbing potential market abuses and unfair competition.


129 In a prior article, Professor Pasquale limited his regulatory proposal to results for trademarked goods and personal names. Frank A. Pasquale, Rankings, Reductionism, and Responsibility, 54 CLEV. ST. L. REV. 115, 117 & n.7 (2006). This remainder of this article discusses the trademark proposal. I discuss the relation of trademarks to personal names and information in another recent article. See Greg Lastowka, Digital Attribution: Copyright and the Right to Credit, 87 B.U. L. REV. 41 (2007).


131 Cf. Goldman, Utopianism, supra note __, at 197 (2006), available at: http://www.yjolt.org/files/goldman-8-YJOLT-188.pdf (“[R]egulatory solutions become a vehicle for normative views about what searchers should see—or should want to see. How should we select among these normative views? What makes one bias better than the other?”).

B. Trademark Laws Old and New

Google currently lists left-column results and sells right-column advertisements for terms such as “nike,” “jr cigars,” “playboy,” “american airlines,” and “rescuecom.com.” All of these terms have trademark meanings. It is clear that some users search for these terms in left column results and that Google profits from the sale of AdWords advertisements for these terms in its right column. Searchers go to Google looking for “nike” and Google sometimes directs (and is sometimes paid to direct) those searchers to parties other than Nike, Inc. Is this fair to the Nike company? That is the fundamental question raised by the current litigation against Google. The answer to the question is not clear.

Google’s policy concerning the right-column exploitation of trademark-significant terms like “nike” has changed over time. Prior to 2004, Google had honored requests it received from certain trademark owners to prohibit competitors from bidding for advertising keyed to terms corresponding to trademarks. For instance, Google reportedly once refused to sell advertisements to eBay’s competitors on results pages for the term “eBay.” Google’s policy concerning the right-column exploitation of trademark-significant terms like “nike” has changed over time. Prior to 2004, Google had honored requests it received from certain trademark owners to prohibit competitors from bidding for advertising keyed to terms corresponding to trademarks. For instance, Google reportedly once refused to sell advertisements to eBay’s competitors on results pages for the term “eBay.” Advertisements for such terms were sold only to the companies that held the corresponding trademarks.

However, in 2004, shortly before making its initial public offering, Google decided to change its internal policy in the United States and Canada. It decided to allow bids for terms that corresponded with the names of brands. News reports at the time described this new policy as a legal “gambit.” Currently, Google informs trademark owners who complain about the practice that it will “not disable keywords in response to a trademark complaint.” It did not take long after this change in policy for trademark holders to bring suit. Within a few weeks, GEICO Insurance sued Google for selling “geico” as a keyword. Since that time, there has been a steady stream of new litigation brought by trademark holders against Google as well as against competitors who have bought AdWords placements from Google related to “trademarked” terms.

It is not at all clear how courts will ultimately decide these suits as a matter of trademark law. In order to understand why the issue is complicated, it is necessary to lay


134 Id.

135 Id.


138 See infra Part II.C.
out the history of trademark law, its limits and recent expansions, and its application to search engines over the last 10 or so years.

1. Traditional Trademark Law

Though trademarks have existed since ancient times, modern trademark law has its roots in the protection of the marks of English guilds. 139 Trade guilds stamped their marks of origin on goods and containers. The counterfeiting of these marks was prohibited by common law courts pursuant to the law of deceit. 140 False designations of origin deceived consumers about the quality of the products they purchased. This deception also harmed business reputations.

As commercial trade expanded and the social distance between consumers and producers of goods increased, designations of source and origin became even more important. Consumers could not rely on personal relationships in the marketplace and increasingly needed to rely on trusted source identifications. Accordingly, trademark law grew increasingly detailed. 141

Today, in the United States, the federal Lanham Act is the primary source of trademark protection, though state common law and statutory protections are also available. 142 Most (if not all) commentators today consider United States trademark law as justified under an economic theory. 143 The “economic” theory of trademark protection is largely a paraphrase of historic statements from common law courts about the purposes served by trademarks. 144 Trademark has historically pursued two goals: the protection of

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141 Mark A. Lemley, The Modern Lanham Act and the Death of Common Sense, 108 Yale L.J. 1687, 1690 (1999) (“[E]conomists have pointed to the role of trademarks in allowing the growth of complex, long-term organizations spread over a wide geographic area.”)


144 While the bulk of the historic rationale of trademark protection is retained in the translation to economic jargon, the match is not perfect. Something valuable is surely lost when the lens of economics is used exclusively as a means of understanding the social role of trademark law. Cf. Graeme B. Dinwoodie & Mark D. Janis, Confusion Over Use: Contextualism in Trademark Law, 92 Iowa L. Rev. 1597, 1607 (2007) (noting how a focus on economics can obscure “humanist concerns about a materialist, consumptive society.”); Mayer v. City of Chicago, 404 U.S. 189, 201 (1971) (Burger, C.J., concurring) (“An affluent society ought not be miserly in support of justice, for economy is not an objective of the system”).
business goodwill against unfair misappropriation by competitors and the protection of consumers against marketplace deception.\textsuperscript{145}

If we translate this to popular “law and economics” terms, trademark law remedies a potential market failure by generating limited property-like incentives for investments in the production of higher quality products. For example, protecting the Coca-Cola Company’s exclusive right to produce beverages bearing the Coca-Cola mark encourages the company that “owns” that mark to invest in ensuring that its products have a uniform high quality. If purchasers are pleased with the quality of Coca-Cola branded products, the company can raise prices for products bearing the mark and reap the benefits of investments in superior quality. This is understood as preferable to a system where businesses lack such incentives and companies can copy each other’s designations of origin at will.

Second, and congruently, trademarks protect consumers. The economic translation of this is that consumers benefit from both reliance on indicators of quality (as described above) and a reduction in “search costs” enabled by the legally-insured stability of trademark indicators. With regard to search costs, the general idea is that once a consumer finds a preferred brand (such as Coca-Cola) with qualities that the consumer finds acceptable, the consumer can rely on the source indicator in future purchases. The consumer need not fear that other products marked with that label are produced by a different company and need not spend additional time investigating that possibility. Because trademark law grants the trademark owner exclusive rights to the signifier, consumers be confident it is the source of the product. This results in consumer savings of time expended in the marketplace (“search costs”).

The traditional and economic theories of trademark are limited by these animating justifications. There is no reason the Coca-Cola Company should own any interest in the word “Coca-Cola” in the abstract. The social objectives of trademark law can be accomplished by allowing Coca-Cola to do no more than prevent unfair competition by competitors. Although trademarks are often described as “intellectual property” interests, they do not grant broad exclusionary rights, such as are enjoyed by owners of land or bank accounts. As the Senate Report accompanying the passage of the Lanham Act put it, “Trade-marks are not monopolistic grants like patents and copyrights.”\textsuperscript{146}

Before a trademark owner can enjoin a given use, the owner has traditionally been required to demonstrate that the competitor use created a “likelihood of confusion” among consumers about the source or sponsorship of the defendant’s goods and services.\textsuperscript{147}

\textsuperscript{145} S. Rep. No. 1333, 79th Cong., 2d Sess. (1946) (“The purpose underlying any trade-mark statute is twofold. One is to protect the public so it may be confident that, in purchasing a product bearing a particular trade-mark which it favorably knows, it will get the product which it asks for and wants to get. Secondly, where the owner of a trade-mark has spent energy, time, and money in presenting to the public the product, he is protected in his investment from its misappropriation by pirates and cheats.”); Qualitex Co. v. Jacobson Products Co., 514 U.S. 159, 163-164 (1995) (recognizing the same).


Trademark infringement is established only if the defendant’s goods and services “would reasonably be thought by the buying public to come from the same source, or thought to be affiliated with, connected with, or sponsored by, the trademark owner.” Thus, each trademark infringement suit entails an inquiry into what is occurring in the minds of consumers with regard to a particular usage of a trademark signifier in a particular market.

The protection of trademarks is therefore strongly wedded to marketplace context. Indeed, in order for a trademark to be protected at all, it must be compared to a particular market. “Distinctiveness” means that the word or symbol claimed to be a trademark serves a trademark function. Only words and symbols that identify a specific commercial source are protected as trademarks. For instance, “nike” would not be protectible as a trademark if used in relation to the sale of statues of a Greek goddess. The word would be understood to identify the product, not its marketplace source.

Many well-known trademarks are only meaningful in particular market contexts. The words “apple,” “caterpillar,” and “aspen” have a natural meaning and a trademark meaning within a particular market context. In some commercial contexts, consumers might associate the terms with computers, construction equipment, and legal casebooks. Yet in the sale and marketing of apples, larval Lepidoptera, and certain trees of the willow family, the terms would have no trademark significance or protection.

The term “cars” has a highly significant non-trademark meaning, yet as Google’s results show, roughly half of Google’s left column results relate to a recent movie by Disney. Disney has registered “Cars” as a trademark in a variety of markets. However, various other companies use “cars” as a trademark denoting the sources of, among other things, investment securities (Reg. No. 2970658), database management services (Reg. No. 2802355), coupon distributions (Reg. No. 2462471), automobile restorations (Reg. No. 3065082), and instructional reading evaluation materials (Reg. No. 2320672). And many other companies may also be using “cars” as an unregistered trademark in various other contexts.

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149 Different courts use different multiple factor tests to determine whether confusion is likely, but most all include factors such as the distinctiveness of the mark (how strongly it indicates a particular source), the similarity of the plaintiff’s mark and the allegedly infringing mark, the proximity of the markets in which the marks operate, the defendant’s intent in selecting the mark, and the evidence of actual confusion among consumers. See generally Barton Beebe, An Empirical Study of the Multifactor Tests for Trademark Infringement, 95 Cal. L. Rev. 1581 (2006) (explaining the way courts apply the factors).

150 15 U.S.C.A. § 1052 (“No trademark by which the goods of the applicant may be distinguished from the goods of others shall be refused registration...”).

151 See U.S. Trademark Reg. No. 78978328 (for school supplies, clothing, and furniture). Technically, this Disney registration is limited to the movie logo, not the word “cars.” Id.

152 Though it is not certain that all these registrations would be upheld if they were asserted in litigation, courts would award them a presumption of validity.
markets. These companies may also be able to obtain trademark protections under the Lanham Act.\textsuperscript{153}

The centrality of spatial and marketplace context to trademark law permits these types of multiple trademark “ownership” within severable markets.\textsuperscript{154} In addition to being used in multiple markets, trademarks may be used by multiple parties who operate independent businesses within non-overlapping geographic areas. Under common law rules, a “junior” (latter in time) user of a trademark may still claim exclusive rights to use a mark within the geographical area where the prior “senior” user of the mark did not expand.\textsuperscript{155} So an identical mark might be used in an identical market, for example, by two different companies operating in Maine and California. Where the markets are geographically separate, these concurrent uses may be permitted because its cannot be demonstrated that consumers in either market will be confused about the origins of goods or services.

Offline, given the abundant contextual clues that consumers are able to access, there are relatively few difficulties encountered in reconciling legitimate infringement claims, common non-trademark usages, separate geographic uses, and usages by multiple trademark “owners” in various markets. “Playboy” yams and sweet potatoes are unlikely to confuse consumers into believing that the yam farmers have a side business in adult entertainment.\textsuperscript{156} And even in instances where consumers might be confused, traditional trademark doctrines have allowed defendants to make “fair use” of trademarks where, for instance, business competitors use a trademark for comparative purposes.\textsuperscript{157}

Search terms are obviously different. While the term “coke” means one thing in a supermarket, another in a steel manufacturing plant, another for a student of the history of common law,\textsuperscript{158} and still another thing in the drug trade, it is a single search term. Google's current technology lacks significant contextual cues and therefore compresses all results for any given term into a single page.\textsuperscript{159} Individuals who may be searching for “playboy” yams


\textsuperscript{154} Graeme B. Dinwoodie & Mark D. Janis, Confusion Over Use: Contextualism in Trademark Law, 92 IOWA L. REV. 1597, 1658-59 (2007) (explaining the importance of context to trademark law); Eric Goldman, Deregulating Relevancy in Internet Trademark Law, 54 EMORY L.J. 507, 592 (2005) (“many trademarked words can have multiple trademark owners”).

\textsuperscript{155} United Drug Co. v. Theodore Rectanus Co., 248 U.S. 90 (1918); Grupo Gigante SA De CV v. Dallo & Co., Inc., 391 F.3d 1088, 1097 (9th Cir. 2004).

\textsuperscript{156} U.S. Trademark Reg. No. 73799881 (for fresh yams and fresh sweet potatoes).

According to the company’s website, the brand name was chosen back when “a playboy was a classy, outgoing kind of guy, not what you think of today.” See History of the Wayne E. Bailey Produce Company, http://www.sweetpotatoes.com/Default.aspx?tabid=65 (last visited Sept. 1, 2007).


\textsuperscript{158} See EDWARD COKE, THE SELECTED WRITINGS OF SIR EDWARD COKE (Steve Sheppard ed., 2004).

\textsuperscript{159} See Eric Goldman, Deregulating Relevancy in Internet Trademark Law, 54 EMORY L.J. 507, 521-24 (2005) (discussing the “objective opaqueness” of search engine queries). There is some context in a Google
or “cars” investment securities will likely be disappointed by this lack of context. Without context, popularity and commercial sway prevail in Google’s results again. Yet traditional trademark law, guided strongly by context, would never dictate that a single trademark meaning should generally precede other trademark and non-trademark social meanings.  

Indeed, under a traditional trademark analysis, it should be hard to see exactly how or why trademark owners should have an ability to influence Google’s search results. Given the lack of context accompanying a search term, it cannot be clear what a user is seeking. While the results of a search inquiry may be frustrating when they fail to produce the desired results, Google’s users are not likely be confused, when reviewing search listings for “coke” or “apples,” about the sources of goods or services. However, the traditional theories described so far do not tell the whole story of trademark law today.

2. Recent Expansions in Trademark Rights

Traditional theories of trademark law have been partly usurped today by recent judicial and legislative expansions of trademark rights.  

Dilution

The idea of dilution protection originated in a 1927 law review article written by Frank I. Schecter. Dilution’s controversial innovation is that it protects marks without the need for plaintiffs to demonstrate consumer confusion. Dilution, according to Schecter, should protect against the weakening of a trademark’s power to identify a source. Schecter warned against a “gradual whittling away or dispersion of the identity and hold upon the public mind of the mark or name by its use on non-competing goods.” He argued that certain famous trademarks had inherent value that required search. With regards to AdWords, Google does offer “localized” AdWords targeting that offers results in particular geographic locations. Additionally, a user can create needed context by lengthening a query string, e.g., entering “nike mythology” or “aspen trees.” However, as Professor Goldman notes, “most searchers use no more than two keywords.” Id. at 516. It is also possible that “personalized search” will eventually increase the contextual cues Google can bring to search queries. See Goldman, Utopianism, supra note __, at 198-99 (discussing personalized search).

See Eric Goldman, Deregulating Relevancy in Internet Trademark Law, 54 EMORY L.J. 507, 509 (2005) (stating that “trademark law could jeopardize the Internet’s potential as an information resource”).


Schecter, supra note __ at 342.
protection without regard to consumer confusion.\textsuperscript{166} Though Schecter’s article was certainly the origin of the trademark dilution concept, it wasn’t until 1947 (the year the Lanham Act went into effect) that the first state legislatively adopted Schecter’s dilution theory.\textsuperscript{167} It was not until 1996 that a federal dilution bill was passed.

Historically, state and federal courts have struggled to grasp the concept of dilution.\textsuperscript{168} Some courts have explicitly criticized dilution as potentially extending unjustifiable “rights in gross” to trademark holders.\textsuperscript{169} When the United States Supreme Court took its first decision addressing the dilution statute, \textit{Moseley v. Victoria’s Secret},\textsuperscript{170} it effectively eviscerated the federal dilution law by imposing an almost impossible evidentiary burden on potential plaintiffs.\textsuperscript{171} However, in 2006, Congress legislatively reversed the \textit{Moseley} decision and reanimated the near-dead doctrine.\textsuperscript{172} It did so with the Trademark Dilution Revision Act (“TDRA”), amended the statutory weakness the Supreme Court had seized upon in \textit{Moseley}.\textsuperscript{173} Yet the revision has essentially just forced dilution back onto the plate of courts, doing little to clarify its nature or the basis for its inclusion in trademark law.

Under the ‘TDRA, there are now two federal types of dilution harms. Both of these formulations are based on prior state doctrines of dilutions. “Dilution by blurring” is established where the plaintiff can demonstrate an “association arising from the similarity between a mark or trade name and a famous mark that impairs the distinctiveness of the famous mark.”\textsuperscript{174} An example of blurring would be a “Rolls Royce” toothbrush. Even if consumers are unlikely to believe that the owner of the Rolls Royce trademark for autos actually manufactures or sponsors a line of toothbrushes, dilution law allows the trademark

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Id.
\item Arguably, the dilution statutes adopted were not very faithful to Schecter’s original concept, but an explanation of that point is beyond the scope of this article.
\item Clarisa Long, \textit{Dilution}, 106 COLUM. L. REV. 1029, 1062 (2005) (“Courts have struggled, and continue to struggle, to identify the harm dilution law is trying to prevent.”); Sally Gee, Inc. v. Myra Hogan, Inc., 699 F.2d 621, 625 (2d Cir. 1983) (applying state dilution law and noting that “dilution remains a somewhat nebulous concept.”).
\item Ringling Bros.-Barnum & Bailey Combined Shows, Inc. v. Utah Div. of Travel Dev., 170 F.3d 449, 458 (4th Cir. 1999)
\item Id. at 433 (“actual dilution must be established.’”). The impossibility of establishing “actual dilution” was largely due to the fact that nobody knows exactly what dilution is or how it might create a quantifiable economic harm.
\item See generally, Clarisa Long, \textit{Dilution}, 106 COLUM. L. REV. 1029, 1075 (2005) (explaining how the Moseley limitation on dilution was the culmination of a “bottom-up phenomenon”).
\item Starbucks Corp. v. Wolfe’s Borough Coffee, Inc., 477 F.3d 765, 766 (2d. Cir. 2007) (stating that the \textit{Moseley} standard no longer applies); Eldorado Stone, LLC v. Renaissance Stone, Inc., No. 04-2562, 2007 WL 2403572 at *5 (S.D. Cal.) (applying the post-\textit{Moseley} relaxed standard and finding plaintiff’s famous “CLIFFSTONE” and “RUSTIC LEDGE” marks were diluted by defendant’s actions).
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
owner to enjoin the toothbrush maker from using the mark. The Schecterian justification is that associating tooth brushes with “Rolls Royce” leads to the “whistling away” of the distinctive Rolls Royce signifier. Yet courts have also seemed to see dilution’s goal as prohibiting commercial actors from “free riding” on the value created by trademarks.\footnote{Clarisa Long, \textit{Dilution}, 106 \textit{Colum. L. Rev.} 1029, 1059 (2005) (identifying “free riding” as a harm independent of blurring).}

“Dilution by tarnishment,” the other TDRA form of dilution, takes place where there is an “association arising from the similarity between a mark or trade name and a famous mark that harms the reputation of the famous mark.”\footnote{15 U.S.C. § 1125(c)(2)(C).} Perhaps the classic textbook example of tarnishment is the (pre-FITDA) case of \textit{Coca-Cola Co. v Gemini Rising, Inc.},\footnote{346 F. Supp. 1183, 1188 (E.D.N.Y. 1972).} where a court enjoined the sale of posters in the style of the Coca-Cola trademark bearing the words “Enjoy Cocaine.”\footnote{\textit{Id.}}

Though the district court in \textit{Gemini Rising} nodded to traditional trademark theories by asserting that consumers could be confused about the sponsorship of the posters, the opinion seemed to hinge on the sense that the Coca-Cola mark itself was being harmed by the poster. (Interestingly, however, Justice Holmes once opined for the Supreme Court that Coca-Cola’s “goodwill” had been helped by the inclusion of cocaine in its formula.\footnote{\textit{Coca-Cola Co. v. Koke Co. of America}, 254 U.S. 143, 145-46 (1920) (Holmes, J.) (“Before 1900 the beginning of [Coca-Cola’s] good will was more or less helped by the presence of cocaine… The amount seems to have been very small, but it may have been enough to begin a bad habit…”).}) The \textit{Gemini Rising} case also highlights common concerns that, by extending trademark protections beyond the need to prevent consumers from commercial deception, dilution law may improperly impinge upon free expression.

Dilution law, currently re-invigorated by the TDRA’s blurring and tarnishment provisions, makes it hard to say that trademarks are limited rights used exclusively to prevent consumer confusion. By removing the solicitude for consumer interests from trademark law, dilution unmixes traditional theories and threatens to transform trademark law into a regime of “word ownership.” If dilution law becomes more powerful under the TDRA, “search term ownership” may not be inconceivable.

\textbf{Initial Interest Confusion}

With respect to search engines, however, a more significant recent expansion of trademark law is the doctrine of initial interest confusion.\footnote{See generally Jennifer Rothman, \textit{Initial Interest Confusion: Standing at the Crossroads of Trademark Law}, 27 \textit{Cardozo L. Rev.} 105 (2005) (explaining the historical roots and contemporary expansion of the doctrine).} Traditionally, and not surprisingly, most courts have focused analysis of consumer confusion on the time period proximate to consumer purchases. The doctrine of initial interest confusion shifts the
focus of confusion analysis to at a time prior to the time of purchase. Initial interest confusion can be found to exist even if that confusion was not present at the time of purchase.

*Dr. Seuss Enters. v. Penguin Books USA*\(^{181}\) is a well-known Ninth Circuit referencing the doctrine. The plaintiff in the case owned the copyright and trademark rights in the well-known children’s book, *The Cat in the Hat*. The defendant, Penguin Books, had published *The Cat NOT in the Hat! A Parody by Dr. Juice*, a book which consisted of a “rhyming summary of highlights from the O.J. Simpson double murder trial.”\(^{182}\) From a distance, the plaintiff claimed, consumers might become initially interested in the parody book due to the cover’s resemblance to the other books bearing the trademarks of the plaintiff.

Affirming the preliminary injunction entered against the defendant, the Ninth Circuit stated that: “[T]he use of the Cat’s stove-pipe hat or the confusingly similar title to capture initial consumer attention, even though no actual sale is finally completed as a result of the confusion, may be still an infringement.”\(^{183}\) The court also seemed censorious of what it saw as a opportunistic use of the plaintiff’s trademarks to generate consumer interest, stating: “[Defendants’] likely intent in selecting the Seuss marks was to draw consumer attention to what would otherwise be just one more book on the O.J. Simpson murder trial.”\(^{184}\) Like the Gemini Rising case, the *Dr. Seuss* case highlights the way that expansions beyond traditional trademark protections threaten limitations on the permissible scope of public speech.

As Professor Jennifer Rothman has noted in a recent article, there is only a tenuous connection here to the traditional rationale of trademark law.\(^{185}\) Indeed, there are potential anti-competitive and anti-consumer effects that flow from rights to police “confusion” outside the context of an actual sale.\(^{186}\) Though not all federal circuits have endorsed the doctrine of initial interest confusion and the Supreme Court has yet to consider a case applying it, many courts have accepted and applied the doctrine.\(^{187}\)

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181 109 F.3d 1394 (9th Cir. 1997).
182 Id. at 1396.
183 Id. at 1405.
184 Id.
185 See Rothman, supra note __, at 190 (“Initial interest confusion is… an excess, and one which, despite violating the express terms of the Lanham Act, thus far has been extremely successful.”)
186 Id.
In summary, the rights of trademark owners have expanded considerably in recent decades to extend to situations where consumers are not confused and/or where confusion exists outside the context of a direct sale. These expansions have led trademark law to drift from its common law moorings. It is in this unstable legal context that Google’s AdWords sales practices are being challenged.

C. Trademarks & Search Results

As explained above, there are significant mismatches between traditional trademarks and search terms. However, given dilution’s under-theorized solicitude for trademark owners and initial interest confusion’s expanded scope of relevant consumer confusion, Google’s practice of profiting from the sale of trademark-significant terms might conceivably be found to be an infringing act. Ironically, the decisions that now may provide a basis for policing Google’s commercial conduct in its right hand column were issued in instances where courts were attempting, in part, to protect the integrity of the left hand column against what might be described as abusive SEO.

1. Meta tags

The earliest case law on search engines involved litigation over HTML “meta tags.” Though more sophisticated methods of Web design are commonly used today, Web pages were originally created in a computer language called HTML (hyper-text markup language). The “meta” tag is a feature of HTML that originated around 1995 as way to provide information about pages that would not be presented in the page as displayed. Though meta tags come in a variety of flavors, it was the “keyword” tag that prompted litigation. The keyword meta tag communicates with search engines. It is used by Web page authors to identify terms they believe are relevant to their web pages.

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188 Lemley, supra note __, at 1690 (1999) (“[Contemporary] changes have loosed trademark law from its traditional economic moorings and have offered little of substance to replace them.”)


190 HTML is not a programming language, but a “markup language” that instructs Web browsers on how to display Web pages. As an example, a “<p>” tag instructs a browser to start a new paragraph and an “<a href>” tag indicates that the Web browser should generate a hyperlink.

191 E-mail from Dave Ragget, World Wide Web Consortium Fellow, to Greg Lastowka (Sept. 6, 1999)(on file with author). Dave Ragget was one of the original drafters of HTML. His home page can be found at http://www.w3.org/People/Raggett/.

Many Web pages still feature keyword meta tags today. The website of the New York Times, for instance, declares that it is properly associated with roughly a hundred search terms, including “daily newspaper,” “national,” “politics,” “NY Yankees,” “Mets,” and “obituaries.” YouTube, on the other hand, claims in its meta tags that it is relevant to just four keyword terms: “video,” “sharing,” “camera phone,” and “video phone.”

At one point, search engines paid attention to keyword meta tags. Pages that claimed to be about “nike,” for instance, would be ranked higher in searches for that term. But today, the majority of search engines ignore meta tags. This is undoubtedly due to the fact that meta tags were a prime means for engaging in unconstrained SEO. For instance, unscrupulous website owners noticing the high traffic for certain search terms such as “mp3” or “Princess Diana” could once benefit from placing those terms in their keyword tags despite the fact that their sites contained no information relevant to either term. This tactic, known as “spamdexing,” could drive traffic to the meta tag manipulator, but confounded search engine users looking for information about Princess Diana.

Even though search engines were the primary victims of meta tag abuse, they did not participate in meta tag litigation. Spamdexing was understood by search engines as a systemic and technological problem to be addressed by technological fixes, like PageRank, rather than by myriad lawsuits against Web authors. Meta tag litigation was a path instead pursued by trademark owners who brought complaints against their rival competitors.

For example, in the 1998 case of Playboy Enterprises v. AsiaFocus International, Playboy sued a competitor that had used “playboy” and “playmate” as keyword meta tags. Though there were various other bases for trademark claims, the court highlighted the use of keyword meta tags as a “deceptive tactic.” Other cases decided in the late 1990’s shared this view, finding that defendants who used the trademarks of their competitors in

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195 Though the vast majority of web crawlers grant keyword meta tags no special relevance, they may continue to influence search engine relevance ranking simply due to the fact that they appear near the top of the HTML text of a page.
196 Lastowka, supra note __, at 865-68 (discussing spamdexing).
197 Lastowka, supra note __, at 874-77 (discussing competitor lawsuits).
199 Id. at *8 (“The defendants have purposefully employed deceptive tactics to attract consumers to their Web site under the guise that their sites are sponsored by or somehow affiliated with PEI… [A] consumer conducting a search for PEI’s Web site by typing in the trademark ‘Playboy’ or ‘Playmate’ would receive a search engine-generated list which included the asian-playmates Web site.”) (internal citations omitted).
keyword meta tags were competing unfairly. In many of these early cases, it seemed that both lawyers and judges were struggling with the basic technology of Web search.

In 1999, the Ninth Circuit made a substantial innovation in the first meta tag case to be decided by a circuit court of appeals: Brookfield Communications, Inc. v. West Coast Entertainment Corp. Brookfield and West Coast Video were competing claimants to the trademark “moviebuff.” Both intended to use the mark in marketing and sales efforts on the Web. After first finding that Brookfield was the rightful owner of “moviebuff” in this market, the court considered whether West Coast’s use of “moviebuff” in its keyword meta tags amounted to trademark infringement.

Under a traditional trademark infringement analysis, this seemed unlikely. Though some courts prior to 1999 had found meta tags contributed to a “likelihood of confusion,” there were often other factual circumstances supporting liability. The Ninth Circuit, by comparison, considered the meta tag question exclusive of other issues. Applying the traditional analysis, the Brookfield court found that confusion was unlikely. It would not be reasonable for a search engine user to believe that West Coast’s website was sponsored by Brookfield simply because it appeared in the results listing for “moviebuff.”

Yet by applying the doctrine of “initial interest confusion,” the Ninth Circuit found that West Coast’s use of the meta tag unfairly diverted consumers searching for Brookfield’s products toward West Coast’s products. The court famously analogized West Coast’s use of the “moviebuff” keyword meta tag to a deceptive billboard directing travelers to exit a highway at the wrong place. This billboard analogy has been extensively criticized—and for good reason.

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201 174 F.3d 1036 (9th Cir. 1999).

202 Id. at 1062.

203 Id. at 1064. The court stated:

Using another’s trademark in one’s metatags is much like posting a sign with another’s trademark in front of one’s store. Suppose West Coast’s competitor (let’s call it ‘Blockbuster’) puts up a billboard on a highway reading - “West Coast Video: 2 miles ahead at Exit 7” - where West Coast is really located at Exit 8 but Blockbuster is located at Exit 7. Customers looking for West Coast’s store will pull off at Exit 7 and drive around looking for it. Unable to locate West Coast, but seeing the Blockbuster store right by the highway entrance, they may simply rent there.
Search engine users were not, in fact, being “misdirected” into “traveling” to West Coast Video's website. There was nothing in the facts that suggested West Coast’s listings in the search results were not truthfully labeled. Hence, the deceptive billboard was not deceptive at all. Second, even if some confusion existed, users finding West Coast Video when searching for Brookfield might easily click back to the original results listings in a second. Comparing that type of “diversion” to exiting a highway and searching in vain for the wrong business was overstatement of the severity of the problem. Yet, despite the weakness of the analogy, Brookfield was perceived as a sound rule with regard to meta tags by many courts.

Defendants in meta tags cases prevailed at times, however. While no Ninth Circuit case overruled Brookfield, prior and subsequent decisions allowed some defendants to make fair use of meta tags corresponding to the trademarks owned by plaintiffs. For instance, the district court case of Bally Total Fitness Holding Corporation v. Faber, decided a year before the Ninth Circuit’s Brookfield decision, upheld a defendant’s use of the plaintiff’s trademark in keyword meta tags. Faber had created a website featuring his many complaints about the plaintiff’s health club and used the word “Bally” in his meta tags.

The court rejected Bally’s attempt to enjoin Faber’s use of the term in his meta tags, explaining that Faber had a protected interest in reaching the public:

[T]he average Internet user may want to receive all the information available on Bally.... This individual will be unable to locate sites containing outside commentary unless those sites include Bally’s marks in the machine readable code upon which search engines rely.

Even consumers who prefer West Coast may find it not worth the trouble to continue searching for West Coast since there is a Blockbuster right there. Customers are not confused in the narrow sense: they are fully aware that they are purchasing from Blockbuster and they have no reason to believe that Blockbuster is related to, or in any way sponsored by, West Coast. Nevertheless, the fact that there is only initial consumer confusion does not alter the fact that Blockbuster would be misappropriating West Coast’s acquired goodwill.

See, e.g., Eric Goldman, Deregulating Relevancy in Internet Trademark Law, 54 EMORY L.J. 507, 565-572 (2005) (“[T]he Brookfield case took an already unclear IIC doctrine and threw it into chaos.”).

Bihari v. Gross, 119 F. Supp. 2d 309, 320 n.15 (D.N.Y. 2000) (“The harm caused by a misleading billboard on the highway is difficult to correct. In contrast, on the information superhighway, resuming one’s search for the correct website is relatively simple. With one click of the mouse and a few seconds delay, a viewer can return to the search engine’s results and resume searching for the original website.”).


Id.

Id. at 1165.
Bally had also claimed trademark dilution under the FTDA (the predecessor of the current TDRA). However, these claims were dismissed on the premise that “courts have held that trademark owners may not quash unauthorized use of the mark by a person expressing a point of view.”\textsuperscript{210} The \textit{Bally} court cited a pre-FTDA decision from the First Circuit that stated that “The Constitution does not . . . permit the range of the anti-dilution statute to encompass the unauthorized use of a trademark in a non-commercial setting such as an editorial or artistic context.”\textsuperscript{211}

The reasoning of the \textit{Bally} decision was echoed in a post-\textit{Brookfield} case decided by the Ninth Circuit, \textit{Playboy Enterprises, Inc. v. Welles.}\textsuperscript{212} The defendant was a former Playboy model who had used the word “playboy” in her metatags. Though the \textit{Welles} court did not reference the \textit{Bally} case, it found that the defendant had used her meta tag keywords to accurately describe the contents of her website. The Ninth Circuit reasoned that forcing Welles to avoid the term “playboy” “would be particularly damaging in the Internet search context.” Again, the logic seemed to be that Welles had a right to have her website appear under the term “playboy” because her site was relevant to users searching for that term. Doctrinally, \textit{Welles} avoided the \textit{Brookfield} outcome by relying on Ninth Circuit doctrines of trademark “fair use” to bar Playboy’s claims of trademark infringement.\textsuperscript{213}

Keyword meta tag litigation continues to this day.\textsuperscript{214} However, with the arrival of the Google AdWords business model at the turn of the century, competitors no longer needed to exclusively employ SEO tactics to appear high in the left column. They could buy their way into the right column instead. Rather than using meta tags, competitors began to pay Google and other search companies to appear in advertisements keyed to results. So if trademark infringement liability attached to West Coast Video for using a “moviebuff” meta tag to divert search engine users toward its website, could West Coast Video avoid liability if it obtained the same results by purchasing “moviebuff” AdWords advertisements?

2. \textit{Playboy v. Netscape}

The most significant early case against search engines for search term sales was \textit{Playboy Enterprises, Inc. v. Netscape Communications Corp}, which ultimately led to a decision by

\textsuperscript{210} \textit{Id.}

\textsuperscript{211} \textit{Id.} (quoting L.L. Bean, Inc. v. Drake Publishers, Inc., 811 F.2d 26, 29 (1st Cir. 1987).

\textsuperscript{212} 279 F.3d 796 (9th Cir. 2002).

\textsuperscript{213} \textit{Id.} at 804.

the Federal Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit.\textsuperscript{215} The defendant in the case, Netscape, had sold space for banner advertisements that were categorically “keyed” to certain groups of search terms. This was slightly different than Google’s current AdWords model, in that Netscape’s search engine required advertisers to purchase placement in large pools of search terms rather than allowing the purchase of specific terms.

A familiar search engine lawsuit plaintiff, Playboy, objected to Netscape’s sale of banner advertisement placements in the category of “adult entertainment.” There were over 450 sex-related terms in the category, but included among them were “playboy” and “playmate.”\textsuperscript{216} When “playboy” or “playmate” was entered into the search engine, an “adult entertainment” category banner would be displayed above the search results. Playboy brought suit against Netscape, alleging trademark infringement and dilution. Netscape prevailed at the district court level, but that decision was reversed by the Ninth Circuit. Both opinions are helpful in seeing the key arguments that continue to characterize the current litigation over search engines results.

In two opinions, the district court first denied Playboy’s request for a preliminary injunction\textsuperscript{217} and then later granted summary judgment to the defendants.\textsuperscript{218} Its analysis began with the conclusion that the defendants had not used the “playboy” trademark in commerce. The court stated:

[I]t is undisputed that an Internet user cannot conduct a search using the trademark form of the words, i.e., Playboy\textsuperscript{TM} and Playmate\textsuperscript{TM}. Rather, the user enters the generic word “playboy” or “playmate.” It is also undisputed that the words “playboy” and “playmate” are English

\textsuperscript{215} 354 F.3d 1020 (9th Cir. 2004).

There was actually one earlier decision to consider the issue: Nissan Motor Co., Ltd. v. Nissan Computer Corp. 204 F.R.D. 460 (C.D. Cal. 2001). The case is a well-known domain name dispute: Nissan Motor Company sought to recover the “nissan.com” domain name from the Nissan Computer Corporation. However, the claim was ultimately unsuccessful. The defendant’s given name was Uzi Nissan and he has been using his surname in relation to his businesses since 1980. \textit{Id.}

During the course of the litigation, the defendant sought to amend its counterclaims to allege trademark infringement on the basis that Nissan Motor Company had purchased placement under the terms “Nissan” and “Nissan.com” from certain search engines. The district court saw no reason why existing meta tag cases should not be extended to situations where companies purchased search engine placement. However, the court found that the claims were unsupportable in the case: Nissan Motor Company could purchase keywords congruent with trademark law because it owned trademark rights in the “Nissan” mark. 55 F. Supp. 2d 1070, 1072 (C.D. Cal. 1999).


\textsuperscript{216} 354 F.3d 1020, 1023 (9th Cir. 2004).


words in their own right, and that there exist other trademarks on the words wholly unrelated to PEI. Thus, whether the user is looking for goods and services covered by PEI’s trademarks or something altogether unrelated to PEI is anybody’s guess.\footnote{55 F. Supp. 2d at 1073.} The court distinguished the situation in \textit{Brookfield} on the basis that “moviebuff,” unlike “playboy,” was not “an English word in its own right,” and therefore had no significant non-trademark meaning.\footnote{Id. at 1074.} The court feared if it equated the “playboy” search term with the plaintiff’s trademark rights, this would be tantamount to granting the plaintiff the ability to “remove a word from the English language.”\footnote{Id. at 1074.} Because it believed that “playboy” as a search term could not be equated with “playboy” as a trademark, the district court found that Playboy had not “shown that defendants use the terms in their trademark form” and therefore there was no commercial use of the Playboy trademarks.\footnote{Id. at 1073.} It dismissed the claims for both infringement and dilution.\footnote{Id. at 1090.}

In its numbered findings of fact, the district court went further in defense of Netscape’s practices. It explained that a multiple trademark owners claim rights to “playboy” and “playmate” marks, including a producer of yams and sweet potatoes.\footnote{Id. at 1079.} Citing to \textit{Bally} and \textit{Welles}, it noted that numerous cases had allowed trademarks to be “used” without the consent of trademark holders.\footnote{Id. at 1081.} Citing \textit{Faber}, the court found that permitting Playboy to “monopolize” the use of the terms “playboy” and “playmate” terms would violate the First Amendment rights of 1) the defendants, 2) the other holders of “playboy” and “playmate” trademarks, and 3) “members of the public who conduct internet searches.”\footnote{55 F. Supp. 2d at 1083.}

The district court opinion in \textit{Netscape}, had it been upheld on appeal and followed by other circuits, would have likely resolved the intersection of trademark law and search engines once and for all—in favor of search engines. However, four years later, the district court decision was reversed by the Ninth Circuit.\footnote{354 F.3d 1020, 1034 (9th Cir. 2004) (finding that genuine issues of material fact precluded summary judgment for the defendants). The case was settled in 2004 and did not proceed to trial.}
The Ninth Circuit considered itself bound by the logic of the *Brookfield* case. Applying the theory of initial interest confusion from *Brookfield*, the court found that search engine users were being diverted toward the websites of advertisers through the use of the term “playboy” in its trademark sense: “In this case, PEI claims that defendants, in conjunction with advertisers, have misappropriated the goodwill of [Playboy’s] marks by leading Internet users to competitors’ websites just as West Coast video misappropriated the goodwill of Brookfield’s mark.”

The Ninth Circuit also rejected the reliance of the district court on the various meanings, multiple trademark ownerships, and potential fair uses of the term “playboy.” The Ninth Circuit found that “to argue that they use the marks for their primary meaning, as defendants did below, is absurd.” Apparently due to the concession of the defendants that “they use the marks for their secondary [i.e. trademark] meanings,” there was “no dispute” that the defendants had “used the marks in commerce.” The court found “farfetched” the notion that the defendant’s use of the term “playboy” was not a trademark use.

Applying *Brookfield* and the dilution analysis under the federal statute, the court found that Playboy had introduced enough evidence to raise substantial issues of facts as to whether the defendants’ use of the “playboy” and “playmate” search terms had created a likelihood of initial interest confusion and dilution. One potentially important fact was that some banners displayed contained no text. The court determined that “some consumers, initially seeking PEI’s sites, may initially believe that unlabeled banner advertisements are links to PEI’s sites or to sites affiliated with PEI.” Playboy had introduced evidence that consumers were more likely to believe that “relevant” banner advertisements (i.e. unlabeled sexual images) were sponsored by Playboy than they were to believe that “random, untargeted” advertisements (e.g. car insurance advertisements) were affiliated with Playboy.

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228 Id. at 1025.
229 Id.
230 Id. at 1027 n.32.
231 Id. at 1027.
232 Id. at 1024.
233 Id. at 1028.
234 Id. at 1025.
235 Id. at 1025.
236 Id. at 1026.
Ninth Circuit in Netscape determined that Netscape’s diversion of internet traffic could be actionable as trademark infringement.

The Ninth Circuit then considered the defendants’ “fair use” arguments on the issue of infringement. Unlike the district court, the Ninth Circuit did not seem concerned about a risk that Playboy would monopolize search terms or impinge on the First Amendment rights of search engine companies or users. The Ninth Circuit explained that the case was not analogous to Welles because the defendant had reasonable alternatives to using the trademark term—the defendants was already using over 400 other terms to advertise adult-oriented businesses.237

The stability of the Ninth Circuit’s Netscape opinion, however, was undermined by a skeptical concurrence. Judge Berzon supported the court’s opinion as “fully consistent with the applicable precedents” and was also struck by the analytical similarity of Netscape and Brookfield. However, Judge Berzon warned that the Brookfield holding reached to “situations in which a party is never confused.”238 Judge Berzon saw a “big difference between hijacking a customer to another website by making the customer think he or she is visiting the trademark holder’s website (even if only briefly)… and just distracting a potential customer with another choice…”239

Judge Berzon analogized the search engine’s results listings to market shelves. A customer coming to a market searching for one trademark owner’s product (e.g. Calvin Klein) might be distracted en route to that purchase by another product (e.g. Charter Club).240 Judge Berzon noted, however, that this was essentially analogous to the Brookfield case, given that those searching for “moviebuff” would not have been confused about the sponsorship of the West Coast Video website. While Judge Berzon was comfortable applying the Brookfield rule to unlabeled (and therefore potentially confusing) advertisements, she believed that the general rule of Brookfield was “insupportable.”241

3. Pop-Ups and “Trademark Use”

The Ninth Circuit opinion in Playboy v. Netscape thus left the law of search engine results in substantial flux. Brookfield and initial interest confusion remained the leading precedent on meta tags and SEO practices manipulating left column results. Search engine practices in the right column were arguably were governed congruently by the ruling in Netscape, but Judge Berzon had also stated that Brookfield was “insupportable.” Since Netscape, there has been much litigation and little progress in the law. The most important

237 Id. at 1030 (“There is nothing indispensible, in this context, about [plaintiff’s] marks.”).
238 Id. at 1035.
239 Id. (emphasis in original).
240 Id. (using these two product lines as an example).
241 Id. at 1036.
legal development has been the adoption, prefigured by the *Netscape* district court decision, of claims that the commercial sale of search terms does not amount to “trademark use.” That view proceeds largely from a Second Circuit ruling concerning “pop-up” advertisements.242

The most important pop-up cases have concerned a single company, WhenU, the creator and distributor of a program called “SaveNow.”243 The SaveNow software generally comes bundled with programs made available for free download. In the process of installing the “free” software, users may install, intentionally or inadvertently, an adware program like SaveNow. Because those installing free software often do not scroll through their installation agreements, they are often unaware that they have agreed to install such programs.244

When installed, SaveNow displays advertisements that “pop-up” over normal browser windows. To maximize the relevancy of the advertisements (and thereby its own revenues), the SaveNow advertisements, like the banner advertisements in *Playboy v. Netscape*, are keyed to specific terms.245 Unlike the Netscape banner ads, however, and more like Google’s AdSense, SaveNow’s advertisements are triggered when the terms are presented in other places, such as the domain name of a website or the text of website contents.246 SaveNow’s pop-up advertisements also appear in new browser windows, arguably reducing the likelihood that users may believe them to be sponsored by or affiliated with content presented in another window.

In 2003, SaveNow became a magnet for trademark litigation. Three federal district court opinions were issued concerning the company’s practices. *U-Haul International v. WhenU.com*,247 from a Virginia district court, concerned SaveNow’s use of the key term “u-haul.” The Virginia district court found in favor of the defendant.248 It stated that SaveNow’s pop-up windows did not display the plaintiff’s “U-Haul” trademark and that

242 1-800 Contacts, Inc. v. WhenU.com, Inc. 414 F.3d 400 (2d Cir. 2005).
244 Wells Fargo & Co. v. WhenU.com, Inc., 293 F. Supp. 2d 734, 739 (E. D. Mich. 2003) (“Although many users claim not to be aware that SaveNow has been loaded on to their computer, the Court finds that some user assent is required before SaveNow is downloaded. The fact that assent may be in the form of a reflexive agreement required for some other bundled program does not negate the fact that the computer user must affirmatively ask for or agree to the download.”).
248 Id.
the SaveNow program itself did not otherwise make the trademark visible to users. According to the court: “U-Haul fails to adduce any evidence that WhenU uses U-Haul’s trademarks to identify the source of its goods or services.” Given the absence of “trademark use,” the court concluded that WhenU was not liable.

In a similar case in Michigan, the Wells Fargo Company sued over SaveNow’s use of the terms “wells fargo” and “quicken loans” to trigger advertisements. The district court, citing approvingly to the district court decision in Playboy v. Netscape, found that that the plaintiff had not demonstrated “use” of the plaintiff’s trademarks. Additionally, and also echoing the district court in Playboy v. Netscape, the court explained that as a matter of trademark policy, it was important to understand that “trademark laws are concerned with source identification” and do not extend to rights beyond the purpose. According to the Michigan district court, SaveNow’s pop-up advertisements were not a “use” of the marks and instead constituted a legitimate form of “comparative advertising.”

However, a federal district court in New York reached the opposite conclusion in a case brought by the 1-800 Contacts company. The plaintiff sued over SaveNow’s use of the term and the court, essentially applying the Brookfield initial interest confusion doctrine, found that SaveNow had “used” and infringed upon the plaintiff’s trademark. The Second Circuit’s reversed, however, and brought the outcome of the 1-800 case into line with Wells Fargo and U-Haul. The Second Circuit found that SaveNow had not made “trademark use” of the plaintiff’s 1-800 Contacts marks on goods or services. The use of “1-800 Contacts” was only in the non-visible software code, and the Second Circuit stated that: “[r]eal-time utilization of a trademark in a way that does not communicate it to the public is analogous to an individual’s private thoughts and is not an infringement of the Lanham Act.”

4. Applying “Use” to Search Engines

The law of search engine results today is often pulled by the gravitation of two very powerful doctrines: the Scylla of initial interest confusion and the Charybdis of use. The district courts of the Second Circuit, following the reasoning of the 1-800 Contacts opinion and the district court in Netscape, have found that search term sales are not infringing

249 Id. at 728.
251 Id. at 761.
252 Id. at 761-62.
254 1-800 Contacts, Inc. v. WhenU.com, Inc. 414 F.3d 400 (2d Cir. 2005).
255 Id. at 410.
because they are not “trademark use.” Outside the Second Circuit, many courts seem inclined toward the reasoning of Brookfield and Netscape.

The next Part will explain why neither approach is desirable. However, in order to describe the current landscape, it is worth briefly setting forth a representative (non-exhaustive) list of district court opinions that consider the issue of trademark use. These are broken down into two categories: 1) Opinions from the district courts of the Second Circuit applying “trademark use” doctrine, 2) Opinions from outside the Second Circuit that have rejected the doctrine.

**Opinions Applying “Trademark Use”**

1. In the Southern District of New York case of Merck & Co. v. MediPlan Health Consulting, the plaintiff sued the defendant for purchasing search engine placement under the term “zocor,” which corresponded with a register trademark for a pharmaceutical product. The court granted the defendants’ motion to dismiss these claims, finding that purchasing advertising placement under keywords did not amount to “use in commerce,” and that the Second Circuit’s decision in 1-800 Contacts controlled. It stated that keyword purchases, like the terms used by SaveNow, are “internal utilization of a trademark in a way that does not communicate it to the public.” The same court later denied a motion for reconsideration in light of developments in the case law from other circuits.

2. Google’s greatest district court victory to date under a “use” theory was the Northern District of New York case of Rescuecom Corp. v. Google. In that case, the computer repair company Rescuecom sued Google for allowing its competitors to purchase AdWords placement under the “rescuecom” search term. Relying on 1-800 Contacts, Google filed a motion to dismiss the. The New York district court granted the motion, finding that Google’s sale of the term “rescuecom” was not visible to the public. Applying 1-800 Contacts, the court concluded there was no trademark use and therefore no liability for trademark infringement or dilution. The plaintiff appealed and Rescuecom case is currently before the Second Circuit. Google is clearly hoping to secure a post-Netscape circuit court opinion that will validate its AdWords business model.

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257 Id. at 406. The plaintiff also objected to the defendant’s use of the term “generic zocor” in the text of its own website. These claims were not dismissed by the district court. Id. at 413.

258 Id. at 415.

259 Id.


262 414 F.3d 400, 406-407 (2d Cir.2005)
3. In *FragranceNet.com v. FragranceX.com*, a case decided recently in the Eastern District of New York, the plaintiff sought leave to amend its Complaint to allege that the defendant had infringed its trademarks via AdWords purchases. The defendant argued that the keywords were not “trademark use.” The district court agreed with the defendant and denied the motion for leave to amend. The opinion was also notable in that it denied the application of “use” to a meta tag claim as well, finding the Second Circuit’s *1-800 Contacts* opinion in “stark contrast” to the Ninth Circuit decisions in *Brookfield* and *Netscape*.

**Opinions Rejecting “Trademark Use”**

1. The first major trademark case against Google was brought in the Eastern District of Virginia by the insurance company GEICO and entailed the rejection of a “trademark use” argument by Google. GEICO alleged Google infringed its trademarks by the sale of the “geico” term (and other terms). GEICO relied heavily on the (subsequently reversed) district court decision in *1-800 Contacts* as well as on meta tag case law. Google relied on a “trademark use” defense. In a 2004 opinion, the district court denied the motion to dismiss, finding the sale of keywords was a sufficient trademark use. The court found Google’s sales of specific terms to be distinguishable from SaveNow’s sales of “broad categories” of terms. The defendants had “marketed the protected marks themselves as keywords to which advertisers could directly purchase rights.” However, after a bench trial, the court granted judgment to the defendants on the issue of infringement, finding GEICO failed to demonstrate a likelihood of consumer confusion.

2. In the 2006 Georgia district court case of *Rescuecom Corp. v. Computer Troubleshooters USA*, the defendant (not Google in this Rescuecom case) had purchased an AdWords placement under the term “rescuecom.” The defendant claimed this did not amount to “use” under the Lanham Act. Following the reasoning of *GEICO v. Google*, the court denied defendant’s motion to dismiss, finding that the issues of trademark use and confusion were factual questions that could not be resolved on a preliminary motion.

3. In the 2006 New Jersey district court case of *800-JR Cigar v. Goto.com*, the plaintiff sold cigars through its website and owned federal trademark rights in the term “JR Cigar” (and other terms). It brought suit against Goto.com for the sale of advertisements

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264 *Id.*
266 *Id.* at 704.
267 *Id.*
270 *Id.* at 1267.
keyed to terms such as “jr cigar.” Goto.com, like Google, defended on the basis that selling placement for search terms was not “trademark use.” Following the reasoning of *GEICO v. Google,* the court found that there was sufficient trademark use. Applying theories of initial interest confusion pursuant to *Brookfield* and trademark dilution, the court denied summary judgment.272

4. *Buying for the Home v. Humble Abode*273 was decided by another New Jersey district court in 2006. The plaintiff and defendant were competitors in the online sale of furniture. The defendant had purchased Google AdWords for the term “total bedroom,” which corresponded with the plaintiff’s trademark.274 The defendant moved for summary judgment based on an absence of “trademark use.” Surveying the varied case law on the issue, the New Jersey district court found the allegations “clearly satisfy[ed] the Lanham Act’s ‘use’ requirement.”275 The court noted that the keyword purchases were “a commercial transaction… trading on the value of Plaintiff’s mark.”276 The court stated that “the mark was used to provide a computer user with direct access (i.e., a link) to Defendants’ website through which the user could make furniture purchases.”277

5. In the 2006 District of Minnesota case of *Edina Realty v. TheMLSOnline,*278 the plaintiff, a realtor, alleged that the defendant had infringed on it trademarks by purchasing them as advertising keywords from Google and Yahoo.279 The defendant moved for summary judgment, arguing that the keyword purchases did not amount to “trademark use.” Citing *Brookfield,* the district court stated that: “Based on the plain meaning of the Lanham Act, the purchase of search terms is a use in commerce.”280 The court allowed the plaintiff’s infringement claims to proceed to trial.281

6. In the 2007 Pennsylvania district court case of *J.G. Wentworth v. Settlement Funding,*282 the plaintiff claimed that the defendant had infringed on its trademarks by

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272 Id. at 290-293.
274 Id. at 317.
275 Id. at 323.
276 Id.
277 Id.
281 The plaintiff’s trademark dilution claims were dismissed due to a failure to meet the Supreme Court’s stringent “actual dilution” standard announced in *Moseley.* Id. at *23.
purchasing corresponding terms in Google’s AdWord’s program. In response to the “trademark use” defense, the court concluded rejected the 1-800 Contacts position, stating that the use was “not analogous to ‘an individual’s private thoughts’ as defendant suggests. By establishing an opportunity to reach consumers via alleged purchase and/or use of a protected trademark, defendant has crossed the line from internal use to use in commerce under the Lanham Act.” At the same time, however, the court granted the defendant’s motion to dismiss, also rejecting the reasoning of Brookfield and finding that the plaintiff had not introduced evidence that could support a finding of a likelihood of confusion.

7. Just recently, Google settled its claims in Google v. American Blind & Wallpaper Factory, a long-running case brought by Google in the Ninth Circuit. Google had brought suit seeking a declaratory judgment that it did not infringe the defendant’s marks through the sale of AdWords advertisements for terms corresponding with the plaintiff’s trademarks (e.g. “american blinds”). In a 2007 ruling, the California district court found that Playboy v. Netscape made “an implicit finding of trademark use in commerce” that would apply to the Google AdWords program. The district court also stated that “Brookfield, like Playboy, suggests that the Ninth Circuit would assume use in commerce here.” The court was therefore prepared to allow the case to proceed to trial.

III. The Public Indexical Interest

At this point, the reader is familiar with the legal precedent regarding the regulation of search results. As Part II showed, there seems little possibility that the law will soon be capable of supervising generally the unique manner in which Google acts as an index and advertiser. However, within the limited confines of trademark law, some courts have

283 Id. at *17.
284 Id. at *24 (“Due to the separate and distinct nature of the links created on any of the search results pages in question, potential consumers have no opportunity to confuse defendant’s services, goods, advertisements, links or websites for those of plaintiff.”).
288 Id at *20-21.
289 Id. The ruling was not an unqualified win for the defendant, however. The court dismissed its dilution claims and granted summary judgment to Google on claims based on the “American Blind” or “American Blinds,” which the court found were not protectible as trademarks. Id. at *26 & n.16, 39, 40. However, the defendant had also alleged infringement of three other marks: “American Blind Factory,” “Decoratetoday,” and “American Blind & Wallpaper Factory.” Id. at *26 & n.16.
seemed willing to curtail abusive SEO practices that influence Google’s left column (under the rubric of competitor meta tag suits) and some have been willing to consider supervising Google’s practices in its right hand column. District courts in the Second Circuit, however, have rejected altogether the interference of trademark law with search results under a theory of “trademark use.”

This Part will argue that trademark law should stay engaged with the commercialization of search engine results in both columns. However, both “initial interest confusion” and “trademark use” are flawed theories. The goal trademark law should pursue is the protection of search engines as socially useful indices. Protecting search engines as indices is a complex goal. The social value of online indices can be threatened by SEO practices, by the commercial practices of search engines, and by trademark law itself, if overbroad theories of protection are employed.

A. Avoiding the Scylla & Charybdis

District courts confronting claims of keyword purchases today must navigate a dangerous path between two alluring, but very dangerous, recent doctrines. One doctrine claims that the sale of search terms amounts to the appropriation of trademark goodwill under a theory of “initial interest confusion.” The other doctrine claims that search engine sales of terms for their trademark value are not “use” and therefore are outside the power of trademark law to police. Neither of these recent doctrines is consistent with trademark law’s historic logic. Nor is either very helpful in ensuring the public utility of online indices.

Initial Interest Confusion

The problems with the doctrine of initial interest confusion as applied to the Internet have been explored extensively by both courts and commentators. The principal concern among courts and commentators is that the application of the doctrine to search results offers no clear consumer benefits and risks substantial consumer harms. As the district court in Netscape noted, it is not clear that a user searching for a given word on a search engine is actually searching for the trademark meaning of that word. Thus, initial interest confusion may make search engines less useful by increasing

290 Supra Part II.C.
291 My earlier arguments against the application of the doctrine to search engines can be found at F. Gregory Lastowka, Note: Search Engines, HTML, and Trademarks: What’s the Meta For?, 86 VA. L. REV. 835, 857-58, 877 (2000). But the writing on this topic, including many old and new student notes, is quite prolific. A recent article by Professor Jennifer Rothman offers a comprehensive general attack on the doctrine. See Rothman, supra note ___.
292 Rothman, supra note ___, at 190.
293 55 F. Supp. 2d at 1073.
consumer “search costs” in economic terms.\footnote{See Stacey L. Dogan & Mark A. Lemley, Trademarks and Consumer Search Costs on the Internet, 41 Hous. L. Rev. 777, 810 (2004).} Initial interest confusion threatens to allow trademark owners to “monopolize” language, as the Netscape district court put it.\footnote{55 F. Supp. 2d at 1083.} Search engine users searching for non-trademark usages of a word may have their interests in search eclipsed by an improper extension of the scope of trademark law.

Even in cases where a search engine user is searching for a trademark holder’s product by using the search term as a proxy, as the Netscape district court also noted, it may not be clear which market context corresponds with the user’s intent.\footnote{Id.} And even if the user is searching for the exact good or service provided by a single trademark holder, it is not clear, as Judge Berzon’s concurrence in the Ninth Circuit opinion points out, that a consumer actually searching for a specific product or service would always be displeased to be presented with additional choices.\footnote{Netscape, 354 F.3d at 1035.}

There may be some arguable consumer-protection logic behind initial interest confusion. Ideally, in offline contexts, “initial interest confusion” doctrine might be defended on the basis that business competitors should not be able to use trademarks in a way that amounts to a “bait-and-switch” tactic.\footnote{See Hannibal Travis, The Battle for Mindshare: The Emerging Consensus That the First Amendment Protects Corporate Criticism and Parody on the Internet, 10 Va. J.L. & Tech. 3 at *85 (2005); Dorr-Oliver, Inc. v. Fluid-Quip, Inc., 94 F.3d 376, 382 (7th Cir. 1996).} For instance, a store should not be able to advertise that it offers Brand A, generating initial interest by consumers and resultant traffic to its store, and then offer those who arrive to the store only Brand B. This is essentially the story of the billboard in Brookfield. If an actual billboard were to divert consumers in this way by using the drawing power of a trademark, there would be good reason for trademark law to prevent that type of conduct. The plaintiff’s trademark would be used as a false “lure” to bring consumers into unfruitful expenditures of time and energy.\footnote{See Rothman, supra note __, at 161 & n.241 (providing citations to initial interest confusion cases depending on the logic of “luring.”).}

But while consumers may see some benefits from limited applications of the “bait and switch” theory of initial interest confusion, as the Dr. Seuss case demonstrates, there are reasons to be concerned that this expansion of trademark law may have the negative consequence of restricting the permissible scope of free expression.\footnote{109 F.3d 1394 (9th Cir. 1997); see generally Graeme W. Austin, Trademarks and the Burdened Imagination, 69 Brooklyn L. Rev. 827, 884 (2004) (explaining how initial interest confusion doctrine, by broadening trademark rights, increases the level of conflict between trademark and the First Amendment).} Any broadening of
trademark law rights past traditional boundaries should be scrutinized carefully for a potential impact on free speech rights and other public interests.\textsuperscript{301}

The more important point with regard to “bait and switch” theory, however, is that it has not been guiding the application of initial interest confusion to search results. At present, initial interest confusion as applied to search results is much closer to a dilution-type right of word ownership. As Judge Berzon noted in \textit{Netscape}, despite the fact that \textit{Brookfield} was premised on “initial interest confusion,” there was no evidence that consumers were ever confused in that case.\textsuperscript{302} Applied to search results, it seems initial interest confusion serves the ends that the district court in \textit{Netscape} feared: the ability to control the general use of words, regardless of the public interest.

In the abstract, it may seem that when a trademark owner’s business efforts makes a novel term, such as “ipod” or “hÄagen-dazs,” popular with consumers, the trademark owner should possess a legal right to receive the profit associated with the popularity of that term. Why should competitors or Google have the power to profit from the value associated with these terms, given that neither competitors nor Google generated the consumer interest in the term? This instinct certainly plays a powerful role in rhetorical justifications of dilution law, which appeal strongly to the lack of justification for “free riding.” But as Mark Lemley has recently explained, there is no general anti-free-riding principle in intellectual property law.\textsuperscript{303} To the contrary, intellectual property often creates spillovers that are not internalized by those granted ownership of the associated right and that benefit society generally.\textsuperscript{304} Efforts to allow intellectual property owners to capture all economic value attributable to their activities can lead to significant social harms.

This is nowhere clearer than in the case of initial interest confusion as applied to search results listing. An overly expansive reading of trademark rights, such as the rule in \textit{Brookfield}, threatens to allow trademark owners to “own” all search engine traffic that might flow from terms associated with trademarks. Given that almost any word can be a trademark, a law to this effect would substantial destroy the benefits provided by search engines. The consumer wealth generated by useful online indices would be transformed in the poverty of a pedestrian trademark directory.\textsuperscript{305}

\textbf{Trademark Use}

Given the dangers to the public interest posed by initial interest confusion doctrine, it may prudent to keep trademark law entirely out of the process of regulating search

\textsuperscript{301} Austin, \textit{supra} note __; Lemley, \textit{supra} note __.

\textsuperscript{302} \textit{Netscape}, 354 F.3d at 1035.


\textsuperscript{305} Dogan & Lemley, \textit{supra} note __, at 816 (“\textit{Brookfield} takes the initial interest confusion rationale in a novel and dangerous direction that disregards its confusion-based origins, defies core trademark doctrine, and thwarts the normative goals of trademark law.”).
engines. Professor Eric Goldman is a leading advocate of this view. He has claimed that “trademark law must step aside” from the regulation of search results.306 He explains that “the solution is simple: Deregulate the keyword in Internet searching.”

Unsurprisingly, Professor Goldman has also favored the doctrine of “trademark” as a means of achieving this objective. “Trademark use” would insulate search engine companies entirely from the potentially interference of trademark law. According to decisions such as Rescuecom and FragranceNet, the Google AdWords program does not fall within the ambit of trademark law because the AdWords program does not engage in “trademark use.”308 Several scholarly commentators have argued that this is a beneficial development and that the doctrine of trademark use is essential to restoring the traditional balance of trademark law and “grounding” its errant theories.309

Professor Margreth Barrett, for instance, had lamented the “demise” of trademark use.310 She locates in the history of trademark law a limitation that she views as threatened by “remarkable expansion of the control trademark owners are able to extend... over unauthorized references to their marks on the Internet.”311 Uli Widmaier, in a lengthy article defending the importance of “use” to trademark doctrine, argues that “[t]rademark use must become once again a mandatory element of all trademark claims. The courts must stop disregarding this foundational premise of trademark law.”312

Professors Stacey Dogan and Mark Lemley are the leading advocates of an expanded role for “use” as a limitation on trademark law, and particularly on internet trademark law.313 According to Dogan and Lemley: “The trademark use requirement serves a gatekeeper function, limiting the reach of trademark law without regard to a factual inquiry into consumer confusion.”314 They state that: “Selling advertising space based on an Internet keyword that is also a trademark does not use that trademark as a brand. The

307 Id. at 596.
311 Id.
312 Id.
314 Dogan & Lemley, supra note __; Dogan & Lemley, Grounding, supra note __. Professor Lemley is involved in courtroom advocacy as well. As he acknowledges in his scholarly writing, he has represented Google and several other companies in major lawsuits that have expanded the defensive scope of trademark use doctrine.
315 Dogan & Lemley, supra note __, at 805.
Internet intermediary is not selling any product or service using those terms as an identifier.”

Yet this is exactly the argument that many district courts outside the Second Circuit have found unpersuasive, and that the Ninth Circuit in the Netscape decision decried as “absurd.” If Google knowingly sells advertising placement under the term “nike” to Adidas in order to direct consumer traffic to the website of Adidas, it is hard to understand why Google “does not use that trademark as a brand.” Indeed, many district courts, and the Ninth Circuit in Netscape, have found that such use is clearly within the reach of the Lanham Act.

By contrast, the line of reasoning being followed by district courts in the Second Circuit, that this type of use is “not visible to the public” and that it consists only of the “private thought” of Google (presumably a “private thought” shared by AdWords advertisers!), seems like a concentrated effort to ignore the reality of the situation. The search term is clearly communicated to the user who is, after all, querying Google with regard to that term. It is the value of the term “nike” as a trademark that makes it valuable to AdWords advertisers.

Yet the conclusion that this is a trademark use does not lead to a conclusion that trademark infringement has occurred. Two of the courts rejecting “trademark use” have also rejected plaintiff’s claims that search engine results create actionable consumer confusion. The court in GEICO v. Google reached this result after a bench trial. The court in J.G. Wentworth v. Settlement Funding reached this result on a motion to dismiss, while at the same time managing to reject the doctrine of initial interest confusion. This is the correct analysis. In fact, it is not clear that any court has held otherwise with regard to search engine practices. Other than the decision in Netscape, which involved the unusual fact of unlabeled keyed advertisements, no court so far has held a search engine liable for the sale of keyed advertisements.

So while “trademark use” would certainly make it easier for courts to exercise a “gatekeeper” function over claims directed at Google, it is not at all clear that trademark law needs “trademark use” to reach this end. In fact, declaring Google’s search results to be somehow beyond the ambit of trademark’s influence may lead it to one day adopt sharper business practices. The public interest may not be served by allowing trademark

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315 Dogan & Lemley, supra note __, at 807.
316 354 F.3d 1020, 1027 n.32. See also Misha Gregory Macaw, Advertising Placements In Internet Search Engine Results, 32 RUTGERS COMPUTER & TECH. L.J. 1, 48 (2005) (concluding that Google’s AdWords is a “use in commerce” and that this “is entirely consistent with the policy underpinnings” of trademark law).
317 Supra Part II.C.
318 Supra Part II.C.
owners to dictate the shape of result listings to Google. But it is hardly clear that it will be served by allowing Google free reign over all commercial uses it makes of trademarks.

The leading critics of the “trademark use” defense are Professors Graeme Dinwoodie and Mark Janis, who have co-authored two articles criticizing arguments by Dogan and Lemley for the expansion of trademark use doctrine.\textsuperscript{321} Dinwoodie and Janis have cogently argued that little basis can be found in the statutory text for the expanded doctrine.\textsuperscript{322} Dogan and Lemley responded to this by conceding that they advocated for a less strict and “more fluid approach” to the statutory language in the case of infringement.\textsuperscript{323} Trademark use, Dogan and Lemley claimed, is a bid for a “common-law evolution of trademark doctrine.”\textsuperscript{324}

If this is so then trademark use must be defended as a matter of policy. Dinwoodie and Janis claim it cannot be defended on this basis. “Trademark use,” they explain, is a currently undefined way of categorically removing the influence of trademark law from certain commercial activities that might otherwise be found to create confusion. By taking keyword advertising entirely off the table, trademark use doctrine constitutes a general abdication of the power of trademark law to police commercial actions that could be potentially harmful to consumers and unfair to trademark owners.\textsuperscript{325} They explain: “Experience militates against the pure laissez-faire approach… Were it otherwise, of course, one might question whether there was any need for trademark and unfair competition law.”\textsuperscript{326}

This seems quite right. Given that those courts that have carefully considered search results have found them currently defensible under traditional tests assessing the likelihood of consumer confusion, there seems to be no pressing need for a new doctrine


\textsuperscript{322} Dinwoodie & Janis, Contextualism, supra note __, at 1608-15; Dinwoodie & Janis, Lessons, supra note __, at 1706-08; \textit{see also} Sarah J. Givan, Using Trademarks as Location Tools on the Internet: Use in Commerce, 2005 UCLA J. L. & TECH. 4 47 (2005) (concluding keyword uses are a “use in commerce” under the Lanham Act).

\textsuperscript{323} Dogan & Lemley, Grounding, supra note __, at ___ (“[T]he law’s normative goals require a more fluid approach to that [statutory] language in the infringement context, making the strict definition inapplicable to infringement”).

\textsuperscript{324} Dogan & Lemley, Grounding, supra note __, at ___ (“Contrary to Dinwoodie and Janis’s charge, this form of common-law evolution of trademark doctrine is neither revolutionary nor unique. Indeed, common law development has been at the heart of a wide variety of IP doctrines…”)

\textsuperscript{325} Dinwoodie & Janis, Lessons, supra note __, at 1719.

\textsuperscript{326} \textit{Id.}; \textit{see also} Frank A. Pasquale & Oren Bracha, Federal Search Commission? Access, Fairness and Accountability in the Law of Search (forthcoming) at *4, *32, draft available at: \url{http://ssrn.com/abstract=1002453} (critiquing arguments that market discipline will correct problems with search results).
designed to provide categorical immunization for certain Internet business practices.327 While Google would benefit substantially from a determination that search result pages are outside the scope of trademark law, this would also remove perhaps the only existing legal tool powerful enough to potentially influence Google’s search results. Trademark law is essentially a bid for Google’s Law.

While proponents of “use” have been correct in pointing out how the expansion of trademark rights can lead to consumer harms, they have done little to persuasively address why trademark law needs to vacate entirely from certain arenas of commercial activity. Initial interest confusion and dilution are errant doctrines in need of close scrutiny and correction, but there is a serious danger, if trademark use proponents are successful, of needlessly overcorrecting trademark doctrine.

If the Scylla of initial interest confusion and the Charybdis of trademark use can be avoided, we are left to ponder where the public interest in Google’s results lies and how trademark law might be used to promote that interest. This is considered in the next two sections.

B. Space versus Index

It is important to understand how Google’s practices take place in a commercial arena divergent from past spaces.328 Courts and commentators discussing search engines often use spatial analogies in justifying decision and policies, be they the highways and signposts of Brookfield or the store shelves that Judge Berzon referenced in Netscape.329 But while it is true that consumers desire and should be provided with a broad range of choices, it is important to see how Google’s business model differs from the model of the paradigmatic supermarket shelf.330 Store owners stock both Coke and Pepsi (if they do).331

327 Cf. James Grimmelmann, The Structure of Search Engine Law, 94 IOWA L. REV. ___ (forthcoming 2008), draft available at: http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=979568 (“The search engine’s proper defense is that it is not misleading users, not that it is not using the trademark. It is easy to imagine search engines that deliberately cause serious confusion.”).

328 Sarah J. Givan, Using Trademarks as Location Tools on the Internet: Use in Commerce, 2005 UCLA J. L. & TECH. 4 &5 (2005) (“Consumers navigate the internet through the use of words… In effect, words are location in the online domain.”).

329 I have used spatial analogies this way myself, explaining that search engines might be used to “recreate some of the spatial realities of the marketplace” by placing “goods in spatial proximity” and “providing consumers with more choices.” F. Gregory Lastowka, Note: Search Engines, HTML, and Trademarks: What’s The Meta For?, 86 VA. L. REV. 835, 877 (2000).

330 As Dinwoodie & Janis explain:

[T]he all-too-ready resort to offline analogies to justify outcomes in Internet trademark cases gives us pause. Courts should not automatically assume that proximity in the online environment and proximity in the offline environment have the same effects. The context is different, and there are great risks in taking analogies too seriously.
simply because the store owner profits from the sale of either product. No supermarket on earth operates by selling search terms to advertisers and giving away its products for free to consumers.

If a supermarket shopper were to request Coke specifically, the store owner would have little incentive to respond with an offer of Pepsi in its place, unless some arrangement with Pepsi allowed the storeowner to recoup a higher profit margin from that sale. Generally speaking, responding to a request for Coke with an offer of Pepsi or another product is a way to court customer dissatisfaction. While it is true that stores offer “choice” by stocking multiple product choices shelves clustered by genre, this is a complex phenomenon that is the byproduct of economic incentives, social customs, and spatial coordination.

Google operates in a radically different environment. In theory, Google lacks spatial limitations and therefore faces no spatial limit on the “products” (hyperlinks) it can offer to consumers. Yet Google is still constrained by the size of a monitor display and the search practices of Web users. With regard to its “stocking” incentives, everything “on the shelves” (present on the World Wide Web) is free. Google profits not by selling products to consumers, but by obtaining consumer attention and channeling it toward advertisers.

Google is therefore “inherently biased towards the advertisers and away from the needs of the consumers.” Yet, so are broadcast media entities. Just as television viewers and radio listeners must endure the “inherent bias” of advertising to receive desired content, users of Google endure the “marry[ing of] the user experience to the information that advertisers want to communicate.”

Spatial analogies can therefore easily be misleading. As discussed above, trademarks within real space are often situated in contexts that lend meaning to terms and consumer activities. Spaces are importantly fluid and continuous in ways that Google is not. A supermarket aisle smoothly blends to a checkout counter to a parking lot to a city

Dinwoodie & Janis, Lessons, supra note __, at 1720. See also Sarah J. Givan, Using Trademarks as Location Tools on the Internet: Use in Commerce, 2005 UCLA J. L. & TECH. 4 ¶ 5 (2005) (“In this physical world, Safeway does not use Kellog’s trademarks to sell Safeway products.”).

331 Many venues today have exclusive arrangements that lead them to stock only Coke or Pepsi. See, e.g., Michele Simon, Can Food Companies Be Trusted to Self-Regulate? An Analysis of Corporate Lobbying and Deception to Undermine Children’s Health, 39 LOY. L.A. L. REV. 169 (2006) (“With public schools so desperate for funding, over the past two decades many districts have opened their doors to major beverage companies such as Coca-Cola and Pepsi-Cola, often forming exclusive contracts also known as “pouring rights.””)

Dinwoodie & Janis, Contextualism, supra note __, at 1632 (explaining how offering more choices does not necessarily decrease consumer search costs).

332 See supra note 1.


334 See supra note 2.

335 See supra Part II.B.
street. Google’s digital search engine results, on the other hand, are algorithmically ranked and delineated around set terms. Information does not spill across digital boundaries unless Google desires this. Consumers in Google’s “space” of search results are potentially blind not just to adjacent products, but to many other important contextual clues. They cannot “see,” for instance, the traffic patterns of other consumers, the appearance of a shopkeeper, or the need for a cleanup on aisle five. Allowing Google to sell search terms will affect the user experience, but it will not magically transform Google into a corner drug store.

There is no way to turn back the clock and restore the marketplace to a “natural” pre-Internet order. Instead, trademark law must be reconceived as it is applied to indexical spaces. So far, that transformation has been characterized by significant missteps, among them cases like Brookfield and 1-800 Contacts. However, it would be premature to claim that trademark law has no ability to transform in ways that facilitate the public interest in the organization of indexical space. Ten years is a very short time in which to expect a common law evolution to occur.

At its heart, Google is not a space, but a massive index of the World Wide Web. Some courts, seeking to find appropriate analogies for search engines, have compared meta tags to “card catalogs” found in libraries. The library analogy might be fitting for Google as well, especially given the predominance of search engines in the cataloguing of library systems today. The analogy is also nice given the fact that at present Google is extending its search technology to index and allow the retrieval of books.

Physical books in almost all public libraries today are spatially organized in accordance with the Dewey Decimal System, the hierarchical system created by Melvil Dewey in 1876. Physical tomes are spatially ordered in accordance with ten broad categories, further grouped by 10 subcategories, and clustered in spatial proximity, ultimately following alphabetical orderings. However, the Dewey Decimal System has limited utility. Just as a book’s index adds utility to its sequential page ordering,

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337 The term “index,” like many terms, has a variety of meanings in different contexts. I am using it here to refer to “Something that serves to guide, point out, or otherwise facilitate reference.” See THE AMERICAN HERITAGE DICTIONARY OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE (4th ed. 2004).

338 Paccar Inc. v. Telescan Techs., 319 F.3d 243 (6th Cir. 2003) (“Metatags have been ‘analogized to the subject index of a card catalog indicating the general subject of a book.’”); citing J. THOMAS MCCARTHY, TRADEMARKS AND UNFAIR COMPETITION § 25:69 (4th ed.); Playboy Enterprises, Inc. v. Welles, 7 F. Supp. 2d 1098, 1104 (S.D. Cal. 1998) (“Much like the subject index of a card catalog, the meta tags give the web surfer using a search engine a clearer indication of the content of the website.”); cf. Shea ex rel. American Reporter v. Reno, 930 F. Supp. 916 (D.N.Y. 1996) (“with access to the web of computer networks known as the Internet… a researcher can peruse the card catalogs of libraries across the globe”)


340 Sarah N. Lynch & Eugene Mulero, Dewey? At This Library With a Very Different Outlook, They Don’t, NEW YORK TIMES, July 14, 2007, at A7 (describing how a library in Arizona “is one of the first in the nation to have abandoned the Dewey Decimal System of classifying books”).

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computerized card catalogs offer more sophisticated indices to facilitate more useful ways of locating information.

The concept of any “index” follows a general pattern. First, a categorical field is established that includes certain entries and excludes other information. For instance, the index at the back of a book is constituted by “subjects” within the book and excludes the contents of other books. Google’s index is constituted by a certain number of websites, but the Google index actually excludes a vast amount of data.341 In the case of Google, different parties have different interests with regard to how thoroughly Google performs its process of indexical inclusion and exclusion.342

As a second step, some mechanism is used for heuristically narrowing the categorical field in order to make the index more useful. For instance, in a book index, only important subjects appear. The difficulty of defining importance is what makes indexical creation into an art rather than a technical procedure.343 Google narrows its categorical fields by the process of ranking results. The considerable flexibility in this process is what led the courts in *Kinderstart* and *Search King* to conclude that Google’s relevancy algorithms constituted an opinion.344

Finally, once the index is constituted, it is displayed. In a book, the index generally lists the subjects alphabetically with corresponding page numbers so that users can search and retrieve the information they are seeking. Google’s index is organized by search terms that are revealed—in fact, dynamically constructed—in response to user queries.

Originally, the intent of Google closely tracked the goals pursued by librarians attempting to create useful indexes. The Google founders envisioned an index that would be “transparent and in the academic realm.”345 Today, however, the structure of Google’s index is a secret and the company is fully in the commercial realm. Google strives to please both users and its advertisers. As stated above, this is not unusual, since many media companies follow the same model. Media companies, however, are generally not index companies. As Professor Frank Pasquale has noted, indexical companies raises novel policy concerns.346

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343 The author of a good index must understand the nature of the text, anticipate what subjects the reader may need to locate, and present an index that is usefulness and concise. Hand-created indices are therefore creative works subject to copyright protection. *See* Laura Gasaway, *Do indexes qualify for copyright protection?*, 8:12 INFO. OUTLOOK 40-41 (2004).

344 *See supra* Part II.A.

345 *See supra* note 1.

Offline, advertising-funded indexes are not unusual. Analogies might be drawn to “buying guides” for cars or apartments, which are often made available for free and are subsidized by advertising payments for inclusion. GoTo.com was originally described, by its founder, as an online version of the Yellow Pages.  

Google has since defended AdWords in litigation before the Second Circuit using the same analogy. The appeal of the analogy for Google lies in the fact that trademark law has had little to say, at least historically in the offline context, about the shape of indices. If a given business fails to pay the Yellow Pages in order to appear within a commercial category where it “belongs,” trademark law does not give the excluded business a cause of action for inclusion. In short, faulty indices offline generally do not raise issues of trademark law.

Yet one cannot lose sight of the differences between offline and online indices. Yellow Pages are structured categorically, offering the advertisements of commercial businesses under generic groups such as “automotive repair.” Individuals to do not search the Yellow Pages by a particularized process. The listings in the Yellow Pages are also not, like AdWords, priced by an auction that reflects their value as trademarks. In some ways, Google’s index is more similar to the White Pages, in that it often provides data in response to name-specific queries for individuals and business. Yet a search for a company in the White Pages generally leads to a single result, not a variety of “choices.” Offline analogies once again fail to capture the novelty of Google’s business model.

C. Trademark Law & the Internet Index

Though trademark law has never been particular relevant to offline indices such as the Yellow Pages, in the last ten year, courts have been utilizing trademark law as a tool to improve the quality of online indices. Ironically, this common law evolution has been

that search engines deserve special solicitude under copyright law); Frank A. Pasquale, Rankings, Redundationism, and Responsibility, 54 CLEV. ST. L. REV. 114 (2006).

347 The search supra note __, at 112.

348 See Brief for Defendant-Appellee at 16 n.5, Rescuecom Corp. v. Google, 06-4881-cv (2d Cir., filed Feb. 12, 2007):

There is a directory service that does something far closer to what Google does – provides a list of results for a particular area of interest (say, taxicabs), and sells advertising space to one company directly across from the listing for a competing company. That directory service is the Yellow Pages, and no one (except perhaps Rescuecom) would claim that companies advertising in the Yellow Pages, much less the Yellow Pages itself, are engaged in unlawful trademark use.

349 For an interesting examination of the strategies that attorneys use in advertising in Yellow Pages, see Daniel M. Filler, Lawyers in the Yellow Pages, 14 CARDOZO STUD. L. & LIT. 169 (2002).


351 Dinwoodie & Janis, Lessons, supra note __, at 1720.

352 This attempt is understandable since, as Professor Pasquale has explained in two recent articles, the information wealth of the Web creates a new demand for authoritative and responsible metadata. Frank
directed largely at obtaining the same goals that Professors Dogan and Lemley seek to achieve by promoting trademark use: a reduction in the search costs of consumers looking for information on the internet.

These attempts by courts have hardly been a smashing success. There is ample room for criticism. What is not debatable, however, is that courts have been pursuing this new objective in online index cases in a way that changes the historic role of trademark law. The use of trademark law to supervise indexical integrity is truly a “common-law evolution.” Additionally, it is a common-law evolution that has found support in a major legislative enactment amending trademark law.

The interaction between trademarks and online indices began with domain names. Domain names were originally awarded to registrants on a first come-first serve basis. In 1994, individuals could register whatever domain names they wanted: a Wired journalist registered “mcdonalds.com” and wrote about the strangeness of the experience. Early speculators, sniffing out how these new index values were up for grabs, were soon busy grabbing up popular domain names. Perhaps the most well-known domain name dispute was over the ownership of “sex.com.” The domain name was originally acquired for free, yet it generated millions of dollars of income for the thief who stole it from the original registrant.

Though domain names were never intended to serve as a Web index, in the late 1990’s, many courts believed (perhaps correctly) that many people treated them as such, attempting to find information on the Web by “guessing” at domain names. Where domain names corresponded with trademarks, trademark owners were understandably upset that “their” names were being freely appropriated by others. Judge Frank Easterbrook, in a 1996 address, complained about the proliferation in domain names of

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Eric Goldman, Deregulating Relevancy in Internet Trademark Law, 54 EMORY L.J. 507, 543 (2005) (“Although the DNS has a different technical architecture and origin than search engines, the DNS has always functions as a search tool.”).  


Joshua Quittner, Billions Registered: Right Now There Are No Rules to Keep You from Owning a Bitchin’ Corporate Name as Your Own Internet Address, WIRED, Oct. 1994, at 50-51.


See Kremen v. Cohen, 337 F.3d 1024 (9th Cir. 2003).

practices he considered an “[a]ppropriation of names and trademarks.”\(^\text{359}\) Clearly, Judge Easterbrook had no misgivings about who the proper owners of domain names were, regardless of how the system for their distribution had been organized.

One early domain name case was *Planned Parenthood v. Bucci*,\(^\text{360}\) where the defendant had registered the website “plannedparenthood.com” and used it to promote an anti-abortion message. Planned Parenthood sued to prevent Bucci from using the domain name, alleging trademark infringement and dilution. It prevailed on both theories. From the standpoint of traditional trademark law principles, the *Bucci* opinion was quite innovative. Setting aside the question of how the site could have created confusion among consumers, it is not clear how *Bucci* had used the Planned Parenthood mark in commerce, given that he lacked any product or service.\(^\text{361}\) Those who advocate for an expansion of trademark use often criticize *Bucci* for this reason.\(^\text{362}\)

The *Bucci* court found the defendant had used the plaintiff’s trademark in commerce, in part, because the registration of the domain name was designed to capture the social value of the domain’s indexical function:

> [D]efendant’s use of plaintiff’s mark is “in connection with the distribution of services” because it is likely to prevent some Internet users from reaching plaintiff’s own Internet web site. Prospective users of plaintiff’s services who mistakenly access defendant’s web site may fail to continue to search for plaintiff’s own home page, due to anger, frustration, or the belief that plaintiff’s home page does not exist.

Though the court spoke in the language of trademark law, the subtext of the opinion seemed to indicate that Bucci should be liable for trademark infringement largely because to hold otherwise would be to sanction public anger and frustration. Bucci was liable, in part, because he had created a faulty public index.

Later district and circuit courts developed this idea, regularly citing the “anger” and “frustration” language from *Bucci* in order to establish that the registration of domain

\(^{359}\) 1996 U. CHI. LEGAL F. at 212.


\(^{361}\) The use of a trademark, while it need not be a “profit-seeking activity,” must be a commercial activity. See United We Stand Am., Inc. v. United We Stand, Am. N.Y., Inc., 128 F.3d 86, 92-93 (2d Cir. 1997).

names amounted to a “use in commerce” under the trademark statute. In one opinion citing Bucci, the Ninth Circuit took the concept even further. Rather than simply using the Bucci language to support a finding of “use in commerce,” the court provided a general statement about trademark dilution by registering a domain name: “dilution occurs because prospective users of plaintiff’s services may fail to continue to search for plaintiff’s own home page, due to anger, frustration or the belief that plaintiff’s home page does not exist.” Trademark dilution had been transformed into a kludge to improve the domain name system as an index.

Another well-known corruptor of indexical value was Dennis Toeppen, who lost two of the earliest domain name case in 1996 pursuant to trademark dilution theories. In one case, Toeppen had registered the domain name “panavision.com” and used it to host views of Pana, Illinois. There was no evidence that any consumers had been confused about source or sponsorship as a result of Toeppen’s registration of the “panavision” domain, and, as in Bucci, it seemed a quite a stretch to say that Toeppen was using the Panavision trademark in commerce. Yet the California district court found Toeppen’s conduct was a commercial use (because he sought to sell the domain to Panavision) and constituted trademark dilution. The Ninth Circuit affirmed.

In its opinion, the Ninth Circuit referenced the “anger” and “frustration” language from Bucci. Other parts of its opinion offered additional examples of how the harm was not seen merely as “theft” of the trademark owner’s value, but as a corruption of the value of the domain name system as an index:

A domain name is the simplest way of locating a web site. If a computer user does not know a domain name, she can use an Internet “search engine.” To do this, the user types in a key word search, and the search will locate all of the web sites containing the key word. Such key word searches can yield hundreds of web sites. To make it easier to find their web sites, individuals and companies prefer to have a recognizable domain name.

Using a company’s name or trademark as a domain name is also the easiest way to locate that company’s web site. Use of a “search engine”

363 See e.g., E. & J. Gallo Winery v. Spider Webs, Ltd., 286 F.3d 270, 275 (5th Cir. 2002); People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, Inc. v. Doughney, 113 F. Supp. 2d 915, 919 (E.D. Va. 2000);
364 See Avery Dennison Corp. v. Sumpton, 189 F.3d 868, 880 (9th Cir. 1999) (emphasis added and quotations omitted).
can turn up hundreds of web sites, and there is nothing equivalent to a phone book or directory assistance for the Internet.\textsuperscript{368}

That the Ninth Circuit thought Toeppen interfered with this process was clear. It stated that Toeppen’s “business” is to register trademarks as domain names and then sell them to the rightful trademark owners.”\textsuperscript{369} Implicit here is the notion that it would be “rightful” for Panavision to own the domain name. This would be congruent with the belief that the domain name system should operate as a socially useful index of information.

Trademark infringement and dilution were used by courts to remedy what they perceived as social harms to the value of indices created by abuses of the \textit{laissez faire} system of domain name distribution. Findings of trademark dilution and infringement were premised on policy considerations about the social utility of the practice involved. Courts found the speculative purchasing and reselling of domain names for indexical value created significant harms to trademark owners \textit{and} to Internet users while creating no cognizable benefits to society. And this idea was not entirely inconsistent with trademark law. Policing domain name registration under the rubric of trademark law prohibited what was seen as unfair competition and reduced search costs incurred by consumers using domain names as information indices.

Since that time, those judicial innovations have been legislatively endorsed and superseded by specific legislative amendments to the federal trademark law. The Anti-Cybersquatting Consumer Protection Act (“ACPA”), passed in 1999, enunciated decisions like \textit{Bucci} and \textit{Panavision} in a new section of the Lanham Act found at 15 U.S.C. 1125(d).\textsuperscript{370} The ACPA prohibits registration of domain names in “bad faith,” \textit{e.g.,} an intention to merely resell them to trademark owners for a profit.\textsuperscript{371} Some commentators have characterized the ACPA as an ill-considered grant of property rights to trademark holders.\textsuperscript{372} While the current law is hardly perfect, it might be defended as an attempt by Congress to improve the social utility of the domain name system as a Web index.

\textsuperscript{368} 141 F.3d at 1327.

\textsuperscript{369} 141 F.3d at 1325.

\textsuperscript{370} \textit{See} Pub. L. No. 106-113 (1999), which effectively provided a new cause of action (generally sounding in trademark and placed within the trademark statutes) under which the cybersquatting claims could be brought. \textit{See} 15 U.S.C. § 1125(d).)

\textsuperscript{371} \textit{See} Virtual Works v. Volkswagen, 238 F.3d 264 (4th Cir. 2001) (applying the ACPA and finding bad faith on the part of the domain name registrants).

\textsuperscript{372} \textit{See, e.g.,} Radin, \textit{supra note} ___ at 32:

If courts had explicitly referred to competition policy and free speech policy in these cases, we might have gotten better reasoned decisions, with more explicit consideration of competing free speech policies in the case of parody and protest sites, more explicit consideration of the needs of competitors of the plaintiff, and some exploration of the baseline question of who initially owns this new asset … [I]t would have been better for the issue to have gotten the thorough analysis it deserved.
Today the internet index is Google. In the ten years since Bucci and Panavision were decided, and the eight years since the passage of the ACPA, search engines have improved to the point where the factual characterizations of them in earlier opinions is wholly inaccurate. Rather than being inferior to domain names as an index, search engines have effectively replaced the domain name system. Domain name guessing is not the norm and makes little sense. Google did not exist when Bucci and Panavision were being litigated, but today most people turn to Google rather than guessing randomly at possible domain names. This is eminently rational, as Google is much more likely than the domain name system to provide the desired result.

With the movement from domain names to search engines, courts lost none of their solicitude for protecting the social value of useful Web indices. This concern continues to be expressed under the rubric of trademark law. The meta tag cases discussed above demonstrate how courts continued to incorporate concerns about the social utility of online indices in their efforts to apply trademark law to search engines.

Though competitor meta tag cases like Brookfield strained the limits of trademark law’s internal coherence, they were motivated by a noble, if misapplied, sentiment. Meta tag “abusers” were understood by courts as the new incarnation of domain name cybersquatters. The use of competitor trademarks in meta tags, pursuant to the Brookfield “signpost” analogy, was not really about wasting the time of the search engine user. Indeed, the only way Brookfield makes sense under a “bait and switch” theory is when it is the search engine’s index that is being deceived. The index, as a proxy for the consumer’s interests, was understood as the victim. Meta tags, being “invisible,” could not deceive users, but they could deceive search engines into awarding websites an undeserved high ranking. Rulings preventing meta tag abuses were therefore seen (generally incorrectly) as vindicating the interests of search engine users.

This principle can be seen best when courts refused to find infringement liability. The defendants in Faber and Welles prevailed only because courts found they did not corrupt the value of the search engine’s index. Users seeking information about “bally” might benefit from finding the type of criticism Faber offered. Those seeking “playboy” might be interested in finding the website of Welles, a former Playboy model. In the Netscape

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373 See Eric Goldman, Deregulating Relevancy in Internet Trademark Law, 54 EMORY L.J. 507, 548 (2005) (noting how some of the most popular search engine queries are for terms where the searcher is obviously aware of the domain names, e.g. “www.yahoo.com” and “www.hotmail.com”).


375 Id.

376 Welles, 279 F.3d at 804.
district court opinion, the court seemed primarily concerned that playboy’s assertion of trademark rights threatened the utility of search engines as indices.\footnote{Netscape, 55 F. Supp. 2d at 1083.}

In \textit{Welles}, one cautionary note by the Ninth Circuit is also important to observe: “our decision might differ if... Welles’ site would regularly appear above PEI’s in searches for one of the trademarked terms.”\footnote{Welles, 279 F.3d at 804.} Here the Ninth Circuit seemed to be suggesting trademark could provide an index policy attuned to relevance-ranked listings. Welles was granted the right to be included in search results, but it was a different question whether she could appear more prominently than the Playboy site.

There are certainly dangers in going this far. Trademark law simply lacks the power to provide a completely optimal index to the Internet, given the fact that much of the information users seek and the problems they encounter are not matters where trademark law has much purchase. As explained above with regard to initial interest confusion, allowing trademark law to dominate the indexical value of search results poses serious risks: trademark meanings might usurp other understanding of terms.\footnote{Cf. Dinwoodie & Janis, Contextualism, supra note \_\_\_, at 1639 (explaining trademark may need to adapt if it is used as a “principle tool of information policy.”

Yet, by the same token, allowing Google to completely control the indexical function of its search results might lead to other varieties of harm. Google’s index and AdWords model seems defensible at this point. Google is not an ideal index of the Web, but it does not \textit{currently} seem to be acting in ways that harm the public’s interest in finding information. Google seems biased toward commercial and popular results, yet trademark law cannot fix this problem. Yet trademark law must retain its power to police Google’s results.

It is possible that some day, like Dennis Toeppen, Google will pursue profits in a way that threatens the interests of trademark owners \textit{and} threatens the public indexical interest. Market discipline may prevent this result but that cannot be assured. It is hard to predict what shape abuses might take, but for some reason creative judicial intervention in advance of a legislative solution might be justified, as it was in the \textit{Panavision} case. Indeed, the mere knowledge that trademark law stands ready to curb abusive index practice may have an ameliorative effect on the commercial conduct of Google and other search engines.

\section*{Conclusion}

Google currently occupies a central role in online commerce and information retrieval. It operates as an online index, connecting the public to information about where to find people, places, products, and knowledge. Google’s power over “results” has vast
commercial significance that is in many ways unprecedented in society. Google also generates substantial wealth as a result of this power. One of the few areas of law that seems to retain some supervisory control over Google’s conduct is trademark law. That supervisory power should not be surrendered by the courts.

It is important that courts not cede the law of search results entirely to Google, but it is also important that they understand the limitations of trademark law in policing search results. Trademark law has so far failed in many ways to appropriately police search results by failing to hew to its historical purposes, failing to recognize the difference between indexical and spatial orderings, and failing to recognize its own inherent limitations as a tool for improving indices.

Yet courts have only had ten years to consider these issues. As their experience grows and the online marketplace continues to develop, the judiciary may eventually be able to play a much more important and constructive role in shaping Google’s Law.