

Building communities with snow

By Udayan Debasis Das
STAFF WRITER



Snowpocalypse, Snowmageddon, Snowtorious B. I. G., Snowverload: the monikers keep on coming, but it must be admitted that the great snow event wasn't what it was made out to be. This is a good thing.

From all accounts, only one death in the city of Chicago, and that to someone who didn't quite have their wits about them, walking out by the lakeside on such a night as that person did. (I imagine the discovery was made so expediently, because of all the people who were stuck in the cars on Lake Shore Drive – the ones who had the real ordeal, the ones who really faced the brunt of the blizzard, being stuck in the snow, without food, drink or access to facilities, for up to 11 hours or more – someone must have seen something and raised the alarm.)

What has been most interesting for me, other than actually watching the blizzard through apartment windows (the blizzard seems to have finally taken care of a number of plastic bags that hung on high branches in various places), has been the aftermath, the clearing up process, the general sense of community.

On Wednesday, when I walked out after the storm had subsided, there was a sense of good cheer all around, the distant wailing of

kids, the sounds of makeshift sleds crashing against each other in the parks (accompanied with appropriate shrieking), aggressive sculpting – snowmen emerging out of the snow, complete with scarves, pipes, and carrot-noses – and a lot of “pleases” and “after-yous.” The shovelers were out already, starting to make some headway into the piles. It was worth reflecting that these people didn't need to go anywhere, but were doing this for the sake of those who might. This was seen in other ways, too, as on Wednesday, as on the next two days, people were seen coming off the sidewalks to help people push their cars out of a jam. People in cars behind a line of cars came forward and shoveled while the cars ahead gradually made their way out. Again, the infectious warm feeling was visible everywhere.

And so, I say, what a snow-storm this has been, not for its record-worthy snowfall, but for this reaching out of helping hands after. I wish Dickens were alive and recording all this.

The city gets a lot of flak for doing things wrong, but at 2 AM on Friday, crews were still out there with many-limbed machines, shoveling, still shoveling.

What's your angle?

An ethical discussion on current topics

By Annie Hutches & Phil Theisen
TECHNEWS WRITERS

“Hey, Drake, check out this article. Apparently, a Disney executive received a lot of money in bonuses, while the company as a whole didn't do so hot that year, and a lot of people got laid off. How did this happen? Where did all that bonus money come from?”

“Whoa, calm down, Josh. I do see your point about the bonuses, but a few million dollars, as much money as that is, really isn't all that much, compared to the billions in revenue that the company makes. I'm sure they can afford that.”

“Yeah, but does one need so much money? I think they're overpaying this guy.”

“Who knows? Whether he needs it or not, he must have the skills to back up his high salary. Given his position in the company, maybe he accomplished enough things to deserve it. He must have gotten to that position somehow.”

“Drake, running a company isn't a one-man show, you know. Behind every highly paid executive, there are many employees that work hard for him without all the glam-

our, or the money. It may seem like he is accomplishing so much for the company, but in truth, there are others behind the scenes, who make it all possible.”

“It's all about quality over quantity, Josh. A single visionary can be worth more in the eyes of a company than an army of replaceable workers.”

“That's the thing. All this company cares about is the balance sheet at the end of the fiscal year. True, it's a business, and they need to make a profit to survive, but they don't seem to care about the hundreds of people that

lost their jobs or the families they have to support. Maybe they could have used the millions to invest back in the company, such as making their employees happy. That might yield bet-

ter results in the long run.”

“I could also argue that the potential to earn more is a good motivation for hard workers, and this extra incentive could lead to an increase in productivity as well. But I do agree with your concern for those that were laid off. Businesses should serve the society and people, including its own, rather than the other way around.”

What's your angle? Send your thoughts to peds.iit@gmail.com

This week:
How much is enough?



A hard-earned Disney Dollar! (Photo courtesy graciepoo/flickr)

Is Bing copying from Google?

Does Google really have a hit on the line with this one?

By Ed Scanlon
TECHNEWS WRITER

If you haven't seen Google's [Amit Singhal's] blog post (googleblog.blogspot.com), let me summarize. Google suspected Microsoft's Bing of “copying our search results” and, naturally, Microsoft denies this. Google thinks they can prove it. But is what they're proving really a problem at all?

Google's case

In order to prove this accusation, Google set up a “sting,” in which gibberish terms were artificially set up to return an unrelated result.

The people at Google searched their gibberish terms on Google with the Bing Toolbar on, and then clicked their unrelated results. After some delay, they saw Bing searches for the same gibberish terms returning the same unrelated results.

The blog post says:

We look forward to competing with genuinely new search algorithms out there - algorithms built on core innovation, and not on recycled search results from a competitor.

The clear implication is that Bing doesn't have the ability to search, and instead it simply copies from Google, since Google is the king of kings. “Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!” ... quite literally, I guess.

The exact situation

It is important to make clear exactly what is happening here. The implication is that Bing is simply an interface, taking data from Google, but this is not the case. They certainly have written in a slightly misleading way.

What Google is actually saying is that Bing Toolbar is recording when you click on things,

and altering the results it returns to fit the data it gathers. Their accusation, with misleading commentary stripped away, is that when you search Google with Bing Toolbar active, and it writes back home with data on which link you clicked, this amounts to copying from their own engine.

As they put it,

Put another way, some Bing results increasingly look like an incomplete, stale version of Google results - a cheap imitation.

The experiment conducted by Google does, indeed, prove that Bing search has learned from the data that Bing Toolbar has gathered. Bear in mind of course that this does not mean that Bing search is just a copy of Google search. Searching without Bing Toolbar on both engines will not yield identical results.

Why Google's complaint is bogus

The first thing I have to make clear is that Bing's search results are not copied from Google. As mentioned, searching for the same thing does not yield identical results on both engines.

What is [supposedly] copied is whatever the users of Bing Toolbar click on. So if you search for xyz and click on a link, the toolbar writes home about it, and Bing search now knows that the link is related to xyz. Not because they contain similar terms, or because the keywords or names are the same, but because you clicked on it.

Modern search engines are not yet smart enough to truly know what it is that you want when you search. As a result, they need to

guess at what you might want. They rank the results, such that the results on the first page are more likely (by their measure) to be what you want, and the results are less likely as you continue through the pages.

Google's famous Page Rank Algorithm has done this for years. When you search on Google for something, it also pays attention to which results you click on. These results are then ranked higher (by a tiny, tiny amount). These algorithms essentially borrow the brains of the users to determine what is relevant. Basically, since you know what you want, whatever you click on is the right answer. So I would be wise to pay attention to what you click on.

This is what Bing Toolbar is doing. The only difference between this and Page Rank is that the toolbar is watching you on other sites, while Page Rank only knows what you click on when you're using Google itself.

The other thing you need to know is that Google Toolbar does the same thing. It also knows what you're doing on other sites, and writes home about it. While we don't know the inner workings of Google, it is conceivable that Google search would consider this data.

What does it mean?

In short, Google is accusing Microsoft of doing something that they themselves are doing. Additionally, it isn't exactly the worst thing in the world. At least, it definitely isn't “copying” or stealing. And now you know. And knowing is half the battle.

Syndicated from www.blog.over-yonder.com