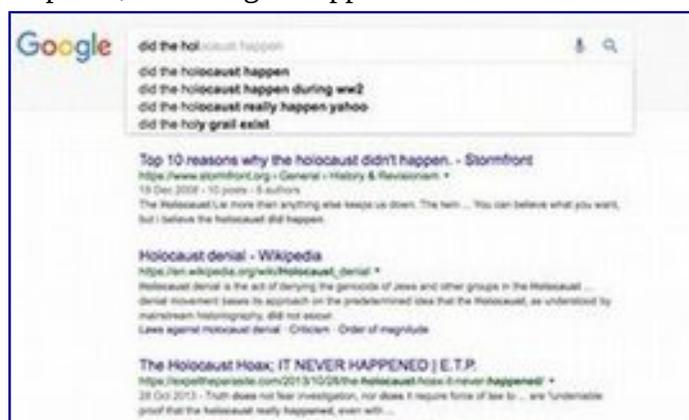


Google is not ‘just’ a platform. It frames, shapes and distorts how we see the world



[Carole Cadwalladr](#)

Last week, we reported how extremist sites ‘game’ the search engine, boosting their propaganda. In response, the web giant appears to have modified some results, but would like us not to notice



Did the holocaust happen? Google search for Carole Cadwalladr Photograph: Google

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Did the Holocaust really happen? No. The Holocaust did not really happen. Six million Jews did not die. It is a Jewish conspiracy theory spread by vested interests to obscure the truth. The truth is that there is no evidence any people were gassed in any camp. The Holocaust did not happen.

Are you happy with that answer? Happy that if you have children, this is what they’re being exposed to? That all across America and France and Hungary and Holland and Britain, when people ask that

question, this is what they are clicking on and reading and absorbing? No? Well, then, we really, really need to talk about Google. Right now. Because these are the “facts” of what happened according to the number one source of information to the entire planet. Type this into your Google search bar: “did the hol”. And [Google](#) suggests you search for this: “Did the Holocaust happen?”

And this is the answer: no. The top result is a link to stormfront.org, a neo-Nazi site and an article entitled: “Top 10 reasons why the Holocaust didn’t happen”. The third result is the article “The Holocaust Hoax; IT NEVER HAPPENED”. The fifth is “50 reasons why the Holocaust didn’t happen.” The seventh is a YouTube video “Did the Holocaust really happen?” The ninth is “Holocaust Against Jews is a Total Lie – Proof.”

This is what Danny Sullivan, the editor of [SearchEngineLand](#), a leading expert on Google search, means when he says “something has gone terribly wrong with Google’s algorithm”. Stormfront describes itself as “the voice of the new, embattled white minority... a community of racial realists and idealists”. It’s the kind of site that Gideon Falter, the chair of the [Campaign Against Antisemitism](#), says is being used to radicalise a new generation of extreme, violent, rightwing individuals. It’s where Anders Breivik used to hang out online. It’s where, on its discussion forum, users gathered to celebrate the murder of Jo Cox.

And, according to Google, it’s the most authoritative source on the internet on the “question” of whether or not the Holocaust actually happened. Sceptical, educated people will of course look for other evidence. These are the searches that Google lists at the bottom of the page as suggestions for what to search next: “Holocaust never happened theory” “proof the Holocaust happened” “Holocaust fake proof” “Holocaust never happened movie” “Holocaust didn’t happen conspiracy” “did the Holocaust happen during ww2.”

A week ago I wrote in the *Observer* [about how rightwing websites have successfully colonised a vast swathe of the internet](#). About how they have gamed Google’s algorithm. About how Jonathan Albright, an associate professor at Elon University in the US, had mapped them to show how they have become a vast and growing ecosystem that is encroaching on the mainstream news and information infrastructure like a cancer. How Google, with all its money and resources, is being owned by hate sites who have hijacked its search results.

One week on, Google is still quietly pretending there’s nothing wrong, while surreptitiously going in and fixing the most egregious examples we published last week. It refused to comment on the search results I found – such as the autocomplete suggestion that “jews are evil”, with eight of its 10 top results confirming they are – and, instead, hand-tweaked a handful of the results. Or as, we call it in the media, it “edited” them. It did this without acknowledging there was any problem or explaining the basis on which it is altering its results, or why, or what its future editorial policy will be. Its search box is no longer suggesting that Jews are still evil but it’s still suggesting “Islam should be destroyed”. And, it is spreading and broadcasting the information as fact.

This is hate speech. It's lies. It's racist propaganda. And Google is disseminating it. It is what the data scientist Cathy O'Neil calls a "co-conspirator". And so are we. Because what happens next is entirely down to us. This is our internet. And we need to make a decision: do we believe it's acceptable to spread hate speech, to promulgate lies as the world becomes a darker, murkier place?

Because Google is only beyond the reach of the law if it we allow it to be. It's selling ads against these searches. It's profiting from Holocaust denial. Its algorithm is helping Stormfront reach new recruits – the next generation of Thomas Mairs and Breiviks – all the while adding to its bottom line, its quarterly profits. This week, Chi Onwurah, the shadow secretary of state for culture, media and sport tweeted her concern about the subject but noted "I'm sure @google will argue they aren't responsible for the results".

Only, here's the thing: that's exactly what they are. Responsible. Google writes the code that drives the algorithm that returns the results. How they write this code, what they use to assess authority and credibility, how that enables Stormfront to spread its lies and spew its poison is entirely its responsibility. When the shadow minister whose brief this includes fails to realise this, we have some idea of the scale of the problem.

Our problem too: because do we let these multinational corporations own us and all aspects of our lives? Is that the plan? The [Google Transparency Project](#) has documented how the company has become one of the biggest spenders on government lobbyists in the US. It has also shown how in the US, UK and Europe there has been an open door between government and senior positions at Google – the GTP found 251 instances of staff moving between the two in the US and 80 in Europe.

That is how power works. This is how power works too: the last time I wrote a story that Google didn't like, I got a call from Peter Barron, Google's UK head of press, who was at pains to point out the positive and beneficial relationship that Google has with the Guardian Media Group, our owners.

Google's business model is built around the idea that it's a neutral platform. That its magic algorithm waves its magic wand and delivers magic results without the sullyng intervention of any human. It desperately does not want to be seen as a media company, as a content provider, as a news and information medium that should be governed by the same rules that apply to other media. But this is exactly what it is. This week's editing of the content around evil Jews has demonstrated exactly that. And our failure – the failure of our politicians and the mainstream press – to reckon with it makes us an accessory to the crime. We are colluding with it in broadcasting hate speech and lies.

The right is on the rise everywhere. And that includes on the internet. It is creating more content that is travelling wider and further. It has changed both the questions being asked – did the Holocaust actually happen? Are Jews evil? Should Islam be destroyed – and answered. It is in the process of remaking the world, rewriting history, rewiring minds, changing the conversation, reframing the questions and answers. It's our world. Our internet. Our history. And we have to wake up to what is happening right now on the laptop on our desk, the phone in our pocket, the tablet in our children's bedrooms. This is

our choice: do something. Or accept the truth according to Google. That six million didn't die. That the Holocaust never happened. That we didn't care enough to remember.

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