INTERNET REVIEWS: THE RISE OF CONTENT FARMS

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WHAT ARE CONTENT FARMS?

Content farm is a pejorative term for any website that tries to game the search engines so that mass-produced, sometimes low-quality content appears high up in search results.

HOW DO THEY WORK?

Content farms gather and analyze web traffic to figure out what kinds of topics people are looking for on the Internet. They then hire freelancers to create articles and videos on those topics. The writers, in turn, are paid based on how often their article is viewed by Internet users. The price per article can be around $15-20, though the exact arrangements vary from company to company (Lee par. 5). Content farms make money by selling advertisements on the pages their writers create. One such company, Demand Media, uses Google's AdSense to create contextually sensitive ads that are only paid for by the advertiser if a searcher clicks on them (Joel par. 4). The kinds of articles range from the commonplace, like "how do I wash corduroy?" to the very specific "Types of Kelp in the Epipelagics."

WHY SHOULD LIBRARIANS CARE?

Content farm articles are churned out at a breakneck pace – try approximately 3,000 articles per day for one company (Lee par. 4). In March 2011, Demand Media freelancers created 150,000 articles ("Emperors" par. 4). Consequently, these articles are reviled for being shallow on content. Besides shallow content, the authors' credentials are often unknown. For instance, an Ehow.com article – "How to Prevent Global Warming" – is merely a list of twenty things we can all do to help deal with that issue, but the article's author is merely listed as "Ehow contributor." Librarians try to teach students to investigate the authority of Internet sources and this particular site offers no clues as to who the author is.

Content farm articles offer short chunks of information that are easily digested for use in a research paper or speech. From anecdotal evidence alone, most librarians know that many students will take the easily digestible web source over the chewier more detailed web source.

Even the traditional gatekeepers like newspapers are also turning to content farms to help populate their websites. *The San Francisco Chronicle* website, Sfgate.com, uses Demand Media content for some of its sections ("U.S. newspapers" par. 2).

To be fair, it should be noted that some of the content farms have editors and fact-checkers who make sure the information is not plagiarized. A good portion of the content is not the kind of thing cited in an English 101 research paper.

WHAT ARE THE SEARCH ENGINES DOING?

Considering that approximately two-thirds of all Internet searches are done on Google (Guynn par. 14), librarians can be glad that Google at least is doing something productive to deal with the content farm issue. Early in 2011, Google announced changes to its algorithm – the mathematical formula that determines which sites appear higher up in search results – that were intended to move content farm sites, and any site loaded down with advertising, further down in search results (par. 5). Matt Cutts, Google's Principal Engineer, stated in a Jan. 21, 2011 blog post that, among other things:

> "We're evaluating multiple changes that should help drive spam levels even lower, including one change that primarily affects sites that copy others' content and sites with low levels of original content."

Is Google's approach working? Not always. The aforementioned Ehow site on "How to Prevent Global Warming" appears near the top of Google results on the query *preventing global warming*. It is unknown if the other big search engines (Ask, Bing and Yahoo) will also adopt similar measures to marginalize the content farms.

In conclusion, some content farm articles can be good starting points for basic "how-to" kinds of queries. Some of the articles even provide suggested sources, much like Wikipedia. But the chief issues still remain: the articles provide too little depth, and too little useful information on the credentials of the authors.

Many websites may or may not qualify as content farms, including Squidoo, Triond, Hubpages, Helium, Ezinearticles, Bukisa, and Brighthub. One way to find them is to search Google for one of the big names below, then click on the Similar link. Below are three of the biggest and most well-known content farms:

Demand Media – http://www.demandmedia.com
Demand Media's most well-known "properties" are Ehow.com and Livestrong.com. Ehow.com contributors write not only brief articles on everything from commonplace questions like how to select the best sunscreen, but also tackle more serious queries like how to prevent global warming. Freelancers are not always identified except by informal "handles."

Associated Content – http://www.associatedcontent.com/
Purchased by Yahoo, Inc. in May 2010, Associated Content's trademark is "The world's largest source of community-created content.™" It claims over 2.9 million "articles, videos, audio clips and slideshows" as of this writing. Contributors are clearly identified and have biographies outlining their qualifications and backgrounds.

Examiner – http://www.examiner.com
This Denver-based company uses contributors (or "Examiners") in many cities around the country to write about everything from the weather to public policy issues in that city. Article authors are usually identified by first and last name.

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READINGS ON CONTENT FARMS

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