The quick and the dead: Learning to search and learning to slow down

Search technology is increasingly ubiquitous in contemporary society. Our reliance upon search engines, coupled with their governance by a few secretive, profit-driven companies, has attracted much attention. Several researchers have problematised the power search engines wield to privilege certain discourses. Little research, however, investigates the day-to-day discursive practices affording Google and others this power, including in education. This research critiques the way online search, and searchers, are discursively constructed in Australian home-schools. It responds to evidence that online search is one of the most prolific internet activities conducted (in schools and in home-schools), to repeated reports of search-skill deficits among students, and to preliminary reports of a relationship between discursive practice and search success. The work situates online search as a discursive and social practice shaped-and-limited-by sociocultural factors and technological affordances. It problematises how discourses of 'fast' search have been particularly privileged, who this privileging serves, as well as the likely consequences. Theoretically grounded in a post-structuralist paradigm, the research applies Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis with language taken as a "social practice determined by social structures" (2015, p. 51). Materials were collected during observations, proficiency-tests, and interviews with five home-schooling families. Analysis revealed a discursive -and disadvantageous- privileging of 'fast' search processes. Not surprisingly, hasty search processes were predominantly observed, but were found alongside infrequent search success. Participants continued, nonetheless, to discursively represent search as fast and easy, even whilst watching footage of their own unsuccessful searches. This dissonance is identified as being unremarkable in contemporary society and as illustrative of ideologies privileging efficiency, particularly in the digital realm. The paper problematises how these ideologies are negotiated through discourse (both locally and algorithmically-created discourse), and the educational implications when efficiency is valued over accuracy. COVID-19 highlighted the importance of investigating such alternate systems of education, but search's ubiquity means the present study has broad transdisciplinary relevance. Findings can contribute to a greater understanding of the temporal dynamics underlying search practices. While undoubtedly, the technologies promising speedy solutions will change (e.g. ChatGPT), this paper instead draws attention to the social and discursive changes required if we are to reclaim control over dominant global discourses.

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