

# Google — A Dictator Unlike Anything the World Has Ever Known

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September 11, 2022

## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Robert Epstein is a Harvard trained psychologist who has exposed how Google is manipulating public opinion through their search engine so they can change the results of elections and many other important areas
- › His research shows how Google is using new techniques of manipulation that have never existed before in human history. If this weren't bad enough, these tools are ephemeral and leave no paper trail of their devious behavior
- › According to Epstein's calculations in 2020, Google had the capability of shifting 15 million votes leading up to the U.S. presidential 2020 election
- › Because Google has become an everyday tool that's used for more than 90% of searches worldwide, as of 2020, the company had likely determined the outcomes of 25% of the national elections in the world
- › Search suggestions — shown in a drop-down menu when you begin to type a search term — is another powerful manipulation tool capable of turning a 50/50 split among undecided voters into a 90/10 split, with no one having the slightest idea that they've been manipulated

Robert Epstein, who received his Ph.D. in psychology from Harvard in 1981 and served as the former editor in chief at Psychology Today, is now a senior research psychologist for the American Institute of Behavioral Research and Technology, where for the last decade he has helped expose Google's manipulative and deceptive practices. In this

interview, he explains what got him interested in investigating the internet search monopoly in the first place:

*"In 2012, January 1st, I received some emails from Google saying my website contained malware and that they were somehow blocking access. This means I had gotten onto one of Google's blacklists.*

*My website did contain some malware. It was pretty easy to get rid of, but it turns out it's hard to get off of a Google blacklist. That's a big problem. I started looking at Google just a little bit differently. I wondered, first of all, why they were notifying me about this rather than some government agency or some nonprofit organization? Why was a private company notifying me?*

*In other words, who made Google sheriff of the internet? Second, I learned they had no customer service department, which seemed very strange, so if you have a problem with Google, then you have a problem because they don't help you solve the problem.*

*I learned also that although you can get onto a blacklist in a split second, it can take weeks to get off a blacklist. There have been businesses that have gotten onto their blacklists and have gone out of business while they're trying to straighten out the problem.*

*The thing that really caught my eye — because I've been a programmer my whole life — was I couldn't figure out how they were blocking access to my website, not just through their own products ... Google.com, the search engine, or through Chrome, which is their browser, but through Safari, which is an Apple product, through Firefox, which is a browser run by Mozilla, a nonprofit organization.*

*How was Google blocking access through so many different means? The point is I just started to get more curious about the company, and later in 2012, I happened to be looking at a growing literature, which was about the power of search rankings to impact sales.*

*This was in the marketing field and it just was astonishing. In other words, if you could push yourself up one more notch in their search results, that could make the difference between success or failure for your company; it could mean a lot more income.*

*It turns out that this initial research was saying that people really trust those higher ranked search results. I simply asked a question. I wondered whether, if people trust those higher rank search results, I could use search results to influence people's opinions, maybe even their votes."*

What Epstein discovered through his subsequent research, which began in 2013, is that yes, biased search results can indeed be used to influence public opinion and sway undecided voters. What's more, the strength of that influence was shocking. He also eventually discovered how Google is able to block website access on browsers other than their own. His findings were published in 2016 in U.S. News & World Report.<sup>1</sup>

## **Google's Powers Pose Serious Threats to Society**

Google's powers pose three specific threats to society:

1. They're a surveillance agency with significant yet hidden surveillance powers. As noted by Epstein:

*"The search engine ... Google Wallet, Google Docs, Google Drive, YouTube, these are surveillance platforms. In other words, from their perspective, the value these tools have is they give them more information about you. Surveillance is what they do."*

2. They're a censoring agency with the ability to restrict or block access to websites across the internet, thus deciding what people can and cannot see. They even have the ability to block access to entire countries and the internet as a whole.

The most crushing problem with this kind of internet censorship is that you don't know what you don't know. If a certain type of information is removed from search,

and you don't know it should exist somewhere, you'll never go looking for it. And, when searching for information online, how would you know that certain websites or pages have been removed from the search results in the first place? The answer is, you don't.

For example, Google has been investing in DNA repositories for quite a long time, and are adding DNA information to our profiles. According to Epstein, Google has taken over the national DNA repository, but articles about that — which he has cited in his own writings — had vanished in 2020.

Some of the articles have now resurfaced, but to get a better view of what Google has been doing since at least 2011, a new search engine, Freespoke.com, is a great source for those searches.

3. They have the power to manipulate public opinion through search rankings and other means.

*"To me, that's the scariest area," Epstein says, "because Google is shaping the opinions, thinking, beliefs, attitudes, purchases and votes of billions of people around the world without anyone knowing that they're doing so ... and perhaps even more shocking, without leaving a paper trail for authorities to trace.*

*They're using new techniques of manipulation that have never existed before in human history and they are for the most part, subliminal ... but they don't produce tiny shifts.*

*They produce enormous shifts in people's thinking, very rapidly. Some of the techniques I've discovered are among the largest behavioral effects ever discovered in the behavioral sciences."*

While surveillance is Google's primary business, their revenue — which in 2022 exceeds \$256 billion a year<sup>2</sup> — comes almost exclusively from advertising. All that personal

information you've provided them through their various products is sold to advertisers looking for a specific target audience.

## **How Google Can Shift Your Perception Without Your Knowledge**

Epstein's controlled, randomized, double-blind and counterbalanced experiments have revealed a number of different ways in which Google can shift public perception. The first effect he discovered is called SEME, which stands for search engine manipulation effect. For a full description of the basic experiment used to identify this effect, please listen to the interview.

In summary, the aim of his experiment was to see whether search results biased toward a particular political candidate would be capable of shifting users' political opinion and leanings.

*"I had predicted, when we first did this, that we would get a shift," Epstein says, "because ... people do trust higher ranked search results, and of course we had biased the search results so that, if in that first group, someone was clicking on a high-ranking search result, that would connect them to a webpage which made one candidate look much better than the other ...*

*I predicted we could get a shift in voting preferences of 2% to 3%. I was way off. We got ... a shift of 48%, which I thought must be an error because that's crazy ...*

*I should note that in almost all of our experiments, especially those early ones, we deliberately used undecided voters. That's the key. You can't easily push the opinions or voting preferences of people who are partisan, who are strongly committed to one party or another, but people who are undecided, those are the people who are very vulnerable. In our experiments, we always find a way to use undecided voters.*

*In these early experiments, the way we guaranteed that our voters were undecided was by using people from the U.S. as our participants, but the election we chose was the 2010 election for the prime minister of Australia.*

*They're real candidates, a real election, real search results, real webpages, and of course, because our participants were from the U.S. they were not familiar with the candidates. In fact, that's why, before they do the search, we get this almost perfect 50/50 split regarding who they're going to vote for, because they don't know these candidates. The information they're getting from the search, that, presumably, is why we get a shift."*

## **Simple Trick Effectively Masks Search Bias**

Another thing Epstein noticed was that very few seemed to realize they were seeing biased search results. In other words, the manipulation went virtually undetected.

In a second experiment, they were able to achieve a 63% shift in voter preference, and by masking the bias — simply by inserting a pro-opponent result here and there — they were able to hide the bias from almost everyone.

*"In other words, we could get enormous shifts in opinions and voting preferences with no one being able to detect the bias in the search results we were showing them," Epstein says. "This is where, again, it starts to get scary. Scarier still is when we moved on to do a national study of more than 2,000 people in all 50 states."*

What this large-scale investigation revealed is that the few who actually notice the bias are not protected from its effects. Curiously, they actually shift even further toward the bias, rather than away from it.

As evidenced by other studies, the pattern of clicks is a key factor that makes search bias so powerful: 50% of all search selections go to the top two items and 95% of all clicks go to the first page of search results.

*"In other words, people spend most of their time clicking on and reading content that comes from high-ranking search results. If those high-ranking search results favor one candidate, that's pretty much all they see and that impacts their opinions and their voting preferences," Epstein says.*

Subsequent experiments revealed that this click pattern is the result of conditioning. Most of the things people search for are simple matters such as local weather or the capital of a country. The most appropriate and correct answer is always at the very top. This conditions them to assume that the best and truest answer is always the most high-ranked listing.

## **Google May Have Shifted Millions of Votes in 2016 Elections**

The ramifications of the search engine manipulation effect can be immense. Of course, having power to shift public opinion is one thing; actually using that power is another. So, Epstein's next target was to determine whether Google is using its power of influence or not.

*"Early 2016, I set up the first-ever monitoring system, which allowed me to look over the shoulders of people as they were conducting election-related searches on Google, Bing and Yahoo in the months leading up to the 2016 presidential election. I had 95 field agents (as we call them), in 24 states.*

*We kept their identities secret, which took a lot of work. And this is exactly, by the way, what the Nielsen company does to generate ratings for television shows. They have several thousand families. Their identities are secret. They equip the families with special boxes, which allow Nielsen to tabulate what programs they're watching ...*

*Inspired by the Nielsen model, we recruited our field agents, we equipped them with custom passive software. In other words, no one could detect the fact that they have the software in their computers. But that software allowed us to look over their shoulders as they conducted election related searches ...*

*We ended up preserving 13,207 election-related searches and the nearly 100,000 webpages to which the search results linked ... After the election, we rated the webpages for bias, either pro-Clinton or pro-Trump ... and then we did*

*an analysis to see whether there was any bias in the search results people were seeing.*

*The results we got were crystal clear, highly significant statistically ... at the 0.001 level. What that says is we can be confident the bias we were seeing was real, and it didn't occur because of some random factors. We found a pro-Clinton bias in all 10 search positions on the first page of Google search results, but not on Bing or Yahoo.*

*That's very important. So, there was a significant pro-Clinton bias on Google. Because of the experiments I had been doing since 2013, I was also able to calculate how many votes could have been shifted with that level of bias... At bare minimum, about 2.6 million [undecided] votes would have shifted to Hillary Clinton."*

On the high end, Google's biased search results may have shifted as many as 10.4 million undecided voters toward Clinton, which is no small feat — all without anyone realizing they'd been influenced, and without leaving a trace for the authorities to follow.

According to Epstein's calculations, tech companies, Google being the main one, it was possible to shift 15 million votes leading up to the 2020 election, which means they had the potential to select the next president of United States.

## **Google Has the Power to Determine 25% of Global Elections**

Many who look at Epstein's work end up focusing on Google's ability to influence U.S. politics, but the problem is much bigger than that.

*"As I explained when I testified before Congress, the reason why I'm speaking out about these issues is because, first of all, I ... think it's important that we preserve democracy and preserve the free and fair election. To me, it's pretty straight forward.*



*But the problem is much bigger than elections or democracy or the United States. Because I calculated back in 2015 that ... Google's search engine – because more than 90% of searches worldwide are conducted on Google – was determining the outcomes of upwards of 25% of the national elections in the world.*

*How can that be? Well, it's because a lot of elections are very close. And that's the key to understanding this. In other words, we actually looked at the win margins in national elections around the world, which tend to be very close. In that 2010 Australian election, for example, the win margin was something like 0.2% ...*

*If the results they're getting on Google are biased toward one candidate, that shifts a lot of votes among undecided people. And it's very, very simple for them to flip an election or ... rig an election ... It's very, very simple for Google to do that.*

*They can do it deliberately, which is kind of scary. In other words, some top executives at Google could decide who they want to win an election in South Africa or the U.K. or anywhere. It could be just a rogue employee at Google who does it. You may think that's impossible ... [but] it's incredibly simple ...*

*[A] senior software engineer at Google, Shumeet Baluja, who's been at Google almost since the very beginning, published a novel that no one's ever heard of called 'The Silicon Jungle' ... It's fictional, but it's about Google, and the power that individual employees at Google have to make or break any company or any individual.*

*It's a fantastic novel. I asked Baluja how Google let him get away with publishing it and he said, 'Well, they made me promise I would never promote it.' That's why no one's ever heard of this book."*

## **A Dictator Unlike Anything the World Has Ever Known**

Another, and even more frightening possibility, is that Google could allow its biased algorithm to favor one candidate over another without caring about which candidate is being favored.

*"That's the scariest possibility," Epstein says, "because now you've got an algorithm, a computer program, which is an idiot ... deciding who rules us. It's crazy."*

While this sounds like it should be illegal, it's not, because there are no laws or regulations that restrict or dictate how Google must rank its search results. Courts have actually concluded that Google is simply exercising its right to free speech, even if that means destroying the businesses they demote in their search listings or black listings.

The only way to protect ourselves from this kind of hidden influence is by setting up monitoring programs such as Epstein's all over the world. "As a species, it's the only way we can protect ourselves from new types of online technologies that can be used to influence us," he says. "No dictator anywhere has ever had even a tiny fraction of the power that this company has."

Epstein is also pushing for government to make the Google search index a public commons, which would allow other companies to create competing search platforms using Google's database. While Google's search engine cannot be broken up, its monopoly would be thwarted by forcing it to hand over its index to other search platform developers.

## **The Influence of Search Suggestions**

In 2016, Epstein also discovered the remarkable influence of search suggestions — the suggested searches shown in a drop-down menu when you begin to type a search term. This effect is now known as the search suggestion effect or SSE. Epstein explains:

*"Initially the idea was they were going to save you time. That's the way they presented this new feature. They were going to anticipate, based on your history, or based on what other people are searching for, what it is you're*

*looking for so you don't have to type the whole thing. Just click on one of the suggestions. But then it changed into something else. It changed into a tool for manipulation.*

*In June 2016, a small news organization ... discovered that it was virtually impossible to get negative search suggestions related to Hillary Clinton, but easy to get them for other people including Donald Trump. They were very concerned about this because maybe that could influence people somehow.*

*So, I tried this myself, and I have a wonderful image that I preserved showing this. I typed in 'Hillary Clinton is' on Bing and on Yahoo, and I got those long lists, eight and 10 items, saying, 'Hillary Clinton is the devil. Hillary Clinton is sick' ... all negative things that people were actually searching for.*

*How do I know that? Because we checked Google trends. Google trends shows you what people are actually searching for. Sure enough, people were actually searching for all these negative things related to Hillary Clinton. Those [were] the most popular search terms.*

*So, we tried it on Google and we got, 'Hillary Clinton is winning, Hillary Clinton is awesome.' Now you check those phrases on Google trends and you find no one is searching for 'Hillary Clinton is awesome.' Nobody. Not one. But that's what they're showing you in their search suggestions.*

*That again got my research gears running. I started doing experiments because I said, 'Wait a minute, why would they do this? What is the point?' Here's what I found in a series of experiments: Just by manipulating search suggestions, I could turn a 50/50 split among undecided voters into a 90/10 split — with no one having the slightest idea that they've been manipulated."*

## **YouTube's Up Next Algorithm**

YouTube, which is owned by Google, also has enormous influence on public opinion. According to Epstein, 70% of the videos people view on YouTube are suggested by

Google's top secret Up Next algorithm, which recommends videos for you to view whenever you're watching a video.

Just like the search suggestions, this is a phenomenally effective ephemeral manipulation tool. There's no record of the videos recommended by the algorithm, yet it can take you down the proverbial rabbit hole by feeding you one video after another.

*"There are documented cases now in which people have been converted to extreme Islam or to white supremacy, literally because they'd been pulled down a rabbit hole by a sequence of videos on YouTube," Epstein says.*

*"Think of that power. Again, it's not powerful for people who already have strong opinions. It's powerful for the people who don't, the people who are vulnerable, the people who are undecided or uncommitted. And that's a lot of people."*

## **The Creepy Line**

Most people now have Amazon Prime. If you are one of those who do, you can watch the following documentary on Prime. It is well worth your time to do so. Epstein and many other experts provide a very compelling overview of the dangers that we discuss in our interview. In my view, this is a must-watch and one to recommend to your friends and family.

A question Epstein raises is, "Who gave this private company, which is not accountable to any of us, the ability to determine what billions of people around the world will see or will not see?"

That is perhaps one of the biggest issues. Epstein and others attempt to answer this question in this documentary, "[The Creepy Line](#)," which is a direct quote from Google's executive chairman Eric Schmidt.

*"Traditional media have very serious constraints placed on them, but Google, which is far more penetrating and far more effective at influencing people, has none of these constraints," Epstein says.*

*"There are lots of good people in ['The Creepy Line'], lots of good data, and it explains my research very clearly, which is wonderful. It explains my research better than I explain my research. 'The Creepy Line' is available on iTunes and on Amazon. I think it costs \$3 or \$4 to watch ... If you're an Amazon Prime Member it's free [from time to time]. It's an excellent film."*

## **Google Runs a Total Surveillance State**

In his article<sup>3</sup> "Seven Simple Steps Toward Online Privacy," Epstein outlines his recommendations for protecting your privacy while surfing the web, most of which don't cost anything.

*"My first sentence is 'I have not received a targeted ad on my computer or mobile phone since 2014.' Most people are shocked by that because they're bombarded with targeted ads constantly.*

*More and more people are telling me that they're just having a conversation with someone, so they're not even doing anything online per se, but their phone is nearby — or they're having a conversation in their home and they have Amazon Alexa or Google Home, these personal assistants — and the next thing they know they start getting targeted ads related to what they were talking about.*

*This is the surveillance problem ... The point is that there are ways to use the internet, tablets and mobile phones, to preserve or protect your privacy, but almost no one does that. So, the fact is that we're now being surveilled 24/7, generally speaking, with no awareness that we're even being surveilled.*

*Maybe some people are aware that when they do searches on Google the search history is preserved forever ... But it goes so far beyond that because now we're being surveilled through personal assistants, so that when we speak, we're being [surveilled].*

*It goes even beyond that, because a few years ago Google bought the Nest company, which makes a smart thermostat. After they bought the company, they put microphones into the smart thermostats, and the latest versions of the smart thermostats have microphones and cameras.*

*Google has been issued patents in recent years, which give them, basically, ownership rights over ways of analyzing sounds that are picked up by microphones in people's homes.*

*They can hook you up with dentists, they can hook you up with sex therapists, with mental health services, relationship coaches, et cetera. So, there's that. Location tracking has also gotten completely out of hand. We've learned in recent months that even when you disable location tracking ... on your mobile phone, you're still being tracked."*

This is one of the reasons I strongly recommend that you use a VPN on your cellphone and computer, as this will prevent virtually anyone from tracking and targeting you. There are many out there but I am using the one Epstein recommends, Nord VPN, which is only about \$3 per month and you can use it on up to six devices. In my view, this is a must if you seek to preserve your privacy.

## **How Google Tracks You Even When You're Offline**

You can learn a lot about a person by tracking their movements and whereabouts. Most of us are very naïve about these things. As explained by Epstein, location tracking technology has become incredibly sophisticated and aggressive.

Android cellphones, for example, which are a Google-owned operating system, can track you even when you're not connected to the internet, whether you have geo tracking enabled or not.

*"It just gets creepier and creepier," Epstein says. "Let's say you pull out your SIM card. Let's say you disconnect from your mobile service provider, so you're absolutely isolated. You're not connected to the internet. Guess what? Your*

*phone is still tracking everything you do on that phone and it's still tracking your location."*

As soon as you reconnect to the internet, all that information stored in your phone is sent to Google. So, even though you may think you've just spent the day incognito, the moment you reconnect, every step you've made is shared (provided you had your phone with you).

In terms of online tracking, it's also important to realize that Google is tracking your movements online even if you're not using their products, because most websites use Google Analytics, which tracks everything you do on that website. And, you have no way of knowing whether a website uses Google Analytics or not.

## **Steps to Protect Your Online Privacy**

To protect your privacy, Epstein recommends taking the following steps, seven of which are outlined in "[Seven Simple Steps Toward Online Privacy](#)." The last one, Fitbit, is a more recent concern.

**Use a virtual private network (VPN) such as Nord**, which is only about \$3 per month and can be used on up to six devices. In my view, this is a must if you seek to preserve your privacy. Epstein explains:

*"When you use your mobile phone, laptop or desktop in the usual way, your identity is very easy for Google and other companies to see. They can see it via your IP address, but more and more, there are much more sophisticated ways now that they know it's you. One is called browser fingerprinting.*

*This is something that is so disturbing. Basically, the kind of browser you have and the way you use your browser is like a fingerprint. You use your browser in a unique way, and just by the way you type, these companies now can instantly identify you.*

*Brave has some protection against a browser fingerprinting, but you really need to be using a VPN. What a VPN does is it routes whatever you're doing through some other computer somewhere else. It can be anywhere in the world, and there are hundreds of companies offering VPN services. The one I like the best right now is called Nord VPN.*

*You download the software, install it, just like you install any software. It's incredibly easy to use. You do not have to be a techie to use Nord, and it shows you a map of the world and you basically just click on a country.*

*The VPN basically makes it appear as though your computer is not your computer. It basically creates a kind of fake identity for you, and that's a good thing. Now, very often I will go through Nord's computers in the United States. Sometimes you have to do that, or you can't get certain things done. PayPal doesn't like you to be in a foreign country for example."*

Nord, when used on your cellphone, will also mask your identity when using apps like Google Maps.

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**Do not use Gmail**, as every email you write is permanently stored. It becomes part of your profile and is used to build digital models of you, which allows them to make predictions about your line of thinking and every want and desire.

Many other older email systems such as AOL and Yahoo are also being used as surveillance platforms in the same way as Gmail. ProtonMail.com, which uses end-to-end encryption, is a great alternative and the basic account is free.

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**Don't use Google's Chrome browser**, as everything you do on there is surveilled, including keystrokes and every web page you've ever visited. Brave is a great alternative that takes privacy seriously.

Brave is also faster than Chrome, and suppresses ads. It's based on Chromium, the same software infrastructure that Chrome is based on, so you can easily transfer your extensions, favorites and bookmarks.

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**Don't use Google as your search engine, or any extension of Google**, such as Bing or Yahoo, both of which draw search results from Google. The same goes for the iPhone's personal assistant Siri, which draws all of its answers from Google.

Alternative search engines suggested by Epstein include SwissCows and Qwant. He recommends avoiding StartPage, as it was recently bought by an aggressive online marketing company, which, like Google, depends on surveillance.

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**Don't use an Android cellphone**, for all the reasons discussed earlier.

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**Don't use Google Home devices in your house or apartment** — These devices record everything that occurs in your home, both speech and sounds such as brushing your teeth and boiling water, even when they appear to be inactive, and send that information back to Google. Android phones are also always listening and recording, as are Google's home thermostat Nest, and Amazon's Alexa.

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**Clear your cache and cookies** — As Epstein explains in his article:<sup>4</sup>

*"Companies and hackers of all sorts are constantly installing invasive computer code on your computers and mobile devices, mainly to keep an eye on you but sometimes for more nefarious purposes.*

*On a mobile device, you can clear out most of this garbage by going to the settings menu of your browser, selecting the 'privacy and security' option and then clicking on the icon that clears your cache and cookies.*

*With most laptop and desktop browsers, holding down three keys simultaneously — CTRL, SHIFT and DEL — takes you directly to the relevant menu; I use this technique multiple times a day without even thinking about it. You can also configure the Brave and Firefox browsers to erase your cache and cookies automatically every time you close your browser."*

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**Don't use Fitbit**, as Google purchased it in 2021, a move that will provide them with

all your physiological information and activity levels, in addition to everything else that Google already has on you.

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