

MISQ Archivist

Do Search Engines Influence Media Piracy? Evidence from a Randomized Field Study

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Abstract

Many papers in the literature have analyzed the role search rank plays in influencing user choices for the same product offered through different links. However, the literature has not analyzed whether search position can cause users to change their consumption between two *ex ante* distinct product categories.

We analyze this question in the context of the ongoing public policy debate surrounding the role search engines can play in anti-piracy efforts. Specifically, we analyze whether reducing the prominence of infringing links can impact users choices between legal and infringing content. To do this we design a customized search engine that allows us to manipulate the positions of infringing and legal links in users' search results. We then use this search engine to conduct experiments on a general population of users and on a subset of college-aged users.

Our data show that reducing the prominence of infringing links in search results causes users who otherwise would have consumed infringing content to switch their consumption to paid legal content, and that these results hold even among users whose initial search queries express an explicit preference for infringing content. This result suggests that even small changes in the cost of discovering pirated content can have a relatively large impact on user behavior. As such, our result informs an important public policy debate by showing that search engines have a vital role to play in the fight against online copyright theft.

Keywords: Search engines, piracy, copyright, anti-piracy, randomized experiment