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## Undesirable results

### The right wing's perception of the politics of search engines

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## Undesirable Results: The US Right Wing's Perception of the Politics of Search Engines

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# Undesirable Results: The US Right Wing's Perception of the Politics of Search Engines

OLOF SUNDIN

“**T**O AN UNPRECEDENTED EXTENT [sic], GOOGLE controls reality.” This quote does not come from a critical media scholar, an information researcher, or a tech journalist from a leading newspaper, people who have dedicated years of their professional careers to regularly criticizing Google and its search engine. Instead, it comes from the right-wing media star Tucker Carlson on his former Fox News show, *Tucker Carlson Tonight*.<sup>1</sup> Near the end of the broadcast, Carlson asserts that “Google should be regulated like the public utility it is.” At a superficial level, Carlson’s critique overlaps in some respects with concerns raised in academic literature. Already in 2000, Lucas D. Introna and Helen Nissenbaum argued for algorithmic transparency and the need for societal regulation of search engines.<sup>2</sup> They advocated for “the Web as a public good” that requires “more egalitarian and inclusive search mechanisms.”<sup>3</sup> It might seem surprising to put side by side the arguments of a right-wing political pundit and serious academics. What unites them is their interest in discussing the politics of search engines and their important role in controlling and shaping access to information in society. In this article, I examine how the right-wing movement in the United States critiques Google Search and what this critique reveals about the intersection of politics and search engines.

Understanding how the discussion of search engines, especially Google Search, unfolds in the United States is important for several reasons. First, as Introna and Nissenbaum argue, we need to study the politics of search engines because of the absolutely central role they have in access to information in today’s world.<sup>4</sup> Most of today’s major Big Tech

## ABSTRACT:

This article aims to provide an in-depth understanding of the reasoning behind the current US right-wing movement’s articulated politics of search engines. The aim is pursued through the prism of metapolitics, understood as a culture war focused on formulating and establishing dominant societal norms and values. Methodologically, the study uses qualitative content analysis to examine how Google Search was discussed in US right-wing online media outlets from 2020 to 2024. The analysis reveals an ongoing ideological struggle over who defines relevance, neutrality, and truth in the digital information landscape. Presented as a defense of free speech and neutrality, this critique operates as a form of metapolitics aimed at reshaping the normative assumptions embedded in search engine functionality. The analysis demonstrates that search engines, far from being neutral intermediaries, are sites of political tension where ideological boundaries are negotiated.

## KEYWORDS:

politics of search, metapolitics, right wing, neutrality

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companies relevant to the Global North are based in the United States, making information politics in the country highly significant beyond its borders. The importance of such studies has also been confirmed by numerous scholars.<sup>5</sup> With this article, I aim to push the discussion further by exploring how the significance of search engines and their results is discursively constructed in specific social, political, and institutional contexts. I discuss how the right-wing US media criticizes Google Search, including how it appropriates elements of critical research, while ideologically inverting the intentions of the original academic critique.

Second, we are currently facing a significant shift in information politics as the current Trump administration actively seeks to influence the policies and legislations of other countries and international organizations, including Canada, Brazil, the European Union (EU), South Korea, the United Kingdom (UK), and UNESCO.<sup>6</sup> In a speech at the Munich Security Conference on February 14, 2025, US Vice President J. D. Vance stated:

In Britain, and across Europe, free speech, I fear, is in retreat. And in the interest of comity, my friends, but also in the interest of truth, I will admit that sometimes the loudest voices for censorship have come not from within Europe but from within my own country, where the prior administration threatened and bullied social media companies to censor so-called misinformation—misinformation like, for example, the idea that coronavirus had likely leaked from a laboratory in China. Our own government encouraged private companies to silence people who dared to utter what turned out to be an obvious truth.<sup>7</sup>

A week later, the White House published a “fact sheet” in which EU laws, such as the Digital Markets Act (DMA) and the Digital Services Act (DSA), were criticized: “The Administration will review whether any act, policy, or practice in the European Union or United Kingdom incentivizes US companies to develop or use products and technology in ways that undermine free speech or foster censorship.”<sup>8</sup> The DSA includes, among other things, the Code of Conduct on Disinformation, portrayed as the Trump administration’s primary enemy in information politics.<sup>9</sup> A post by the official Department of State account on X dated July 22, 2025, stated: “All the DSA protects is European leaders from their own people.”<sup>10</sup> The rhetoric by Tucker Carlson quoted above has here shifted from regulation to deregulation. However, like Carlson’s 2015 recognition of the importance of aligning Google Search and other Big Tech platforms with conservative perspectives, the current Trump administration has recognized the strategic value of information control for advancing its conservative agenda, notably by weaponizing the concept of free speech. Terms such as “misinformation” and “science” are put in quotation marks to cast doubt on their legitimacy. While policy regulations and initiatives across the democratic world have sought to address the challenges of misinformation by protecting citizens from its harms, the current Trump administration targets these very efforts, labeling them as “Orwellian” censorship.<sup>11</sup>

The focus on Google Search is warranted, given its unparalleled market dominance and central role in shaping information access. Alphabet, the parent company of Google, is one of the largest Big Tech corporations. Its product Google Search holds a market share of almost 90 percent, and as of March 2025, Google Search handled approximately fourteen billion queries per day.<sup>12</sup> Given its global influence and its importance in people’s everyday lives, it is not surprising that the workings of Google Search have become a political

issue. Grounded in the understanding that all knowledge systems are situated, this study assumes that search engines cannot be neutral or free from bias, since no neutral vantage point exists from which to algorithmically assess and organize information.<sup>13</sup> Thus, when Tucker Carlson, along with other right-wing US media voices, argues for a neutral search engine, the idea is neither theoretically nor practically feasible. However, even if unattainable, this argument for search engine neutrality has the potential to influence information politics in the coming decade. Thus, investigating how such a project of neutrality is articulated, motivated, and implemented can reveal much about the ideological commitments that underpin it, particularly the ways in which appeals to neutrality often serve to legitimize exclusionary or reactionary agendas. As a researcher, my positionality is firmly grounded in the principles of liberal democracy, which take equality, inclusion, and social justice as their foundation. In relation to neutrality, this means I am not neutral regarding the norms and values of liberal democracy itself.<sup>14</sup>

## RESEARCH AIM AND OBJECTIVE

THE AIM OF THIS ARTICLE IS TO PROVIDE AN IN-DEPTH UNDERSTANDING OF THE REASONING underpinning the current US right-wing movement's articulated politics of search engines. In this article, the term "right wing" refers to a political movement characterized by nationalism, anti-immigration sentiment, and an opposition to liberalism and globalization. It may sometimes include a conspiratorial rhetoric. Understanding the current political dynamics surrounding search engines requires an examination of how critiques evolved prior to the current US administration. Therefore, to approach the aim, the objective is to analyze how US right-wing online media outlets discussed Google Search between 2020 and 2024, a period that overlaps with the Biden administration. I use the term right wing as a broad category, although some of the media outlets analyzed could be labeled as far right (see also under the "Method and Material" section).

I approach the aim through the prism of metapolitics of the right wing. Metapolitics is a political strategy that attempts to challenge what the right wing identifies as the cultural hegemony of the so-called liberal left and progressive Enlightenment ideals, such as equality, social justice, diversity, and antiracism, over right-wing cultural values.<sup>15</sup> Rather than traditional political organization and activism, metapolitics can be seen as a culture war with the aim of formulating and establishing the dominant norms and values in society regarding what is seen as both normal and abnormal.<sup>16</sup> The inspiration for right-wing metapolitics comes from the Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci and his concept of hegemony, which refers to the consensus of culture, ideas, and values in a society.<sup>17</sup> Just as Gramsci in the 1930s argued for a counterhegemonic struggle against a fascist and capitalist Italian society, the metapolitics of the right wing is about a counterhegemonic struggle against the norms and values of the liberal left, which, according to the right wing, has come to dominate following the Second World War. The metapolitics of the right wing takes its starting point in the French Nouvelle Droite movement of the late 1960s. However, I refer to the metapolitics of the right wing in a broad sense as an ideological movement that lacks formal organization and that is performed in right-wing online media, among other places.

Today, the right wing's appropriation of the struggle for cultural hegemony takes place primarily in and about the digital sphere, including search engines.<sup>18</sup> Ico Maly argues how "algorithms of search engines have potentially powerful metapolitical effects."<sup>19</sup> In this

article, I analyze the US right-wing movement's articulation of search engine politics in online media as metapolitics in its attempt to make conservative content more visible and thereby promote right-wing norms and values. For example, Tucker Carlson was conducting metapolitics when he criticized Google by referring to the search engine's ability to convey norms and values that he wants to combat.

The next section presents previous research on search engine politics and the way Google weights sources and prioritizes links to websites and other media. I then present the method, material, and analytical procedure. I present the subsequent analysis through four themes, which include accounts of the different ways in which Google Search has been criticized by the right-wing media, including the alleged methods used by the search engine, the ideal of a neutral search engine, and the proposed solutions to the problem identified. Finally, I discuss and conclude the analysis by drawing on the concept of metapolitics and on previous research.

## POLITICS OF SEARCH

SEARCH ENGINES ARE GATEKEEPERS OF INFORMATION, AND SINCE MOST PEOPLE TEND TO trust the results of search engines, the premises of how these gatekeepers work are crucial.<sup>20</sup> Introna and Nissenbaum refer to how search engines include and exclude certain voices by making certain sources visible and others less visible as the “politics of search.”<sup>21</sup> The researchers state that exclusive reliance on market principles and algorithms that favor popularity risks excluding alternative voices and special interests and that consideration should be given to “developing more egalitarian and inclusive search mechanisms and for research into search and meta-search technologies that would increase transparency and access.”<sup>22</sup> In a later article, Laura A. Granka argues that research on the politics of search is often based on the argument that diversity in search engine results is necessary to challenge existing power structures in society.<sup>23</sup> Since then, research has repeatedly examined how search engines affect society and “who we are” and, more specifically, different types of biases in search engine results.<sup>24</sup> This article engages with the research tradition on the politics of search, as outlined by Introna and Nissenbaum, by investigating right-wing political perceptions of Google Search.

Since Google Search has such a strong dominance on search engine traffic in most parts of the world, critical search engine research has often focused on Google. Since its inception in 1998, Google has reached what Ken Hillis, Michael Petit, and Kylie Jarrett refer to as a “politically neutral” and even a “consecrated status.”<sup>25</sup> Important examples of how search engines reinforce existing power structures include Safiya Umoja Noble's research on how discrimination such as racism and sexism is built into Google's algorithms.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, Rosie Graham shows how Google reinforces stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination in relation to LGBTQ+ topics, among others, particularly through its autocomplete function.<sup>27</sup> Graham asks “whether or not search engine companies have a duty to identify aggregated patterns of discrimination and work to actively combat them,” to which her answer is yes.<sup>28</sup> Research on the role of search engines in reinforcing existing power structures has zoomed in not only on how Google Search ranks links on the search engine results page or makes suggestions through its autocomplete function but also on what becomes forgotten or ignored. Jutta Haider and Malte Rödl have investigated how Google Search cocreates an “algorithmic logic of ignorance” of climate change.<sup>29</sup> Their critical investigation is grounded in the view, particularly exemplified by the PageRank

algorithm, that search engines, which measure relevance primarily through the number of in-links, are deeply embedded in a capitalist ideology that primarily frames users as consumers.<sup>30</sup> In his book *Semantic Media: Mapping Meaning on the Internet*, Andrew Iliadis examines in detail how knowledge is constructed through semantic media.<sup>31</sup> Iliadis discusses Google Search and extends the politics of search to include the politics of factual statements displayed on the search engine results page. This body of critical research challenges the understanding of Google as a neutral tool for searching for information. However, in this article, I shift the focus to how Google Search is perceived by the right wing.

At the same time, research has shown that in recent years Google Search has mediated conspiracy theories, nonapproved medicines for COVID-19, and Russian propaganda to a lesser extent than its competitors.<sup>32</sup> During the COVID-19 pandemic, Google Search actively curated search results to promote sources that reflected the scientific consensus and made, for example, antivaccine sources less visible. In my own work, together with colleagues, I have highlighted the difference in search results that can arise when someone searching for antivaccine websites is instead presented with established medical websites, which illustrates the distinction between individual relevance and societal relevance.<sup>33</sup> When Richard Rogers returned to some of the many examples of critical search engine research documented by both journalists and researchers and reran them some years later, he identified a difference in moderation: “Compared to results from 5 to 10 years ago, Google Images (and Google Web Search) have removed a series of offensive results, having diversified and desexualized results for people and ethnicities, albeit with some gaps. Specific queries that once resulted in offensive or shocking results (‘unprofessional hair’) have been somewhat remedied.”<sup>34</sup> It appears that, over the past ten years, Google Search has to some extent sought to moderate its operations in response to issues such as racism, sexism, and pseudoscience. A closer look at Google’s *General Guidelines* for raters might provide a partial explanation. For what Google calls “Your Money or Your Life (YMYL) Topics,” Google has given priority to sources that score high on what the company refers to as “Experience, Expertise, Authoritativeness, and Trust (E-E-A-T).”<sup>35</sup> According to Google, YMYL topics “have a high risk of harm because content about these topics could significantly impact the health, financial stability, or safety of people, or the welfare or well-being of society.”<sup>36</sup> As an example, Google’s *General Guidelines* for raters describe the following as a YMYL topic: “Personal opinion about why a racial group is inferior.”<sup>37</sup> YMYL was introduced by Google Search 2014 but has continuously been developed.<sup>38</sup> As demonstrated in the empirical analysis presented in this article, these efforts are a frequent target of condemnation in right-wing media discourse.

Previous research has also underlined the importance of search query formulation in relation to what can be found. Michael Golebiewski and danah boyd have suggested the concept of “data voids” to describe how certain topics for which there is little material of high quality published online could be strategically used to promote a certain agenda.<sup>39</sup> Ov Cristian Norocel and Dirk Lewandowski make visible how extreme right content on migration finds its way high up in search results due to weaponization of such data voids; for certain queries there were not many alternative documents to be retrieved other than extreme right websites.<sup>40</sup> In a study on the performance of Google Search for political queries during a Dutch election, Guillén Torres and Richard Rogers show how “there is a considerably high probability that junk news is outputted on the first page of results when the queries concern right-wing parties and their issues.”<sup>41</sup> Francesca Bolla Tripodi’s

ethnographic research focuses on how two politically Republican communities in the United States draw on the trope “do your own research” to bypass what members of the investigated groups describe as mainstream media.<sup>42</sup> Tripodi’s research underlines how the algorithms of search engines are just one actor in the digital ecosystem of the right wing. Equally important is the way queries are phrased by users. Of interest in relation to Tripodi’s research is research that illuminates patterns of exposure to partisan news in the United States during the 2018 and 2020 elections.<sup>43</sup> According to Ronald Robertson and colleagues, “Right-leaning partisans, but not left-leaning ones, are more likely to follow identity-congruent news sources from Google Search, even when accounting for the contents of their search queries.”<sup>44</sup> In other words, research has examined how conservative actors on the right have weaponized Google Search in a strategic manner to advance their political agenda; however, there is a lack of an empirically grounded understanding regarding how the right wing perceives and publicly criticizes Google Search.

Yochai Benkler, Robert Faris, and Hal Roberts argue that traditional center-right media in the United States has been increasingly marginalized, while the right-wing media ecosystem has become more ideologically radicalized.<sup>45</sup> They also demonstrate that this development is the result of decades of right-wing criticism directed at so-called mainstream journalism. According to Benkler and colleagues, part of the problem lies in journalism’s adherence to the ideal of neutrality rather than prioritizing the investigation of established knowledge or verifiable facts, particularly the practice of “giving equal weight to opposing views.”<sup>46</sup> This practice, often referred to as “false balance,” is especially problematic in media reporting about science, such as debates over vaccines and autism or climate change.<sup>47</sup> This ideal of balancing opposing views can be extended to the functioning of search engines and can be discussed in relation to how Google handles YMYL queries. According to Maly, under Google’s “increasing moderation, far-right actors search for new ways to keep themselves technologically and culturally integrated into this mainstream digital ecology.”<sup>48</sup> The aforementioned exploitations of data voids represent one way of appropriating the so-called mainstream digital ecology for specific ideological purposes. This article advances the empirical investigation of this phenomenon.

Highly significant for my study is the research by Astrid Mager on how the politics of search engines are conceptualized, particularly her analysis showing how “Europe is imagined as regaining control over a globally operating IT industry that is described as having invaded European territory.”<sup>49</sup> Mager draws on the concept of the “sociotechnical imaginary” to highlight the interplay between the construction of a European identity and the politics of control in the context of resisting the perceived dominance of global IT corporations. My study shifts the focus to exploring how the right wing in the United States positions itself in the media against perceived liberal or so-called globalist control of information. In doing so, the analysis reveals how search engines function as sites for identity construction and metapolitical struggle.

## METHOD AND MATERIAL

I CARRIED OUT THIS STUDY AS A QUALITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS, INVESTIGATING THE WAY Google Search is discussed in US right-wing online media outlets from 2020 to 2024. The qualitative approach has made it possible to identify, contextualize, and interpret nuanced patterns within the material, resulting in an empirically rich analysis supported by numerous quotations.

The selection of material first focused on which media outlets to include and subsequently on specific articles published by those outlets. The primary inclusion criteria included the following: (1) the media outlets had to lean right-wing ideologically, and (2) the outlets had to have some topical interest in discussing search engines. The selection of conservative media outlets to include was initially informed by Wikipedia's list of conservative US newspapers, as well as by a study of the right-wing US media sphere during the 2015 presidential election campaign.<sup>50</sup> Taking these two sources as a starting point, I identified media outlets to include using a snowball sampling method by following links from the initially collected articles. The analyzed material includes articles from the following media outlets: *The American Conservative*, *American Thinker*, *Breitbart*, *The Daily Caller*, *The Federalist*, *Gateway Pundit*, *Infowars*, *The New American*, *The Patriot Post*, *Daily Wire*, *The American Spectator*, and *Town Hall*. I excluded outlets that required a subscription or had content hidden behind paywalls. I also excluded the conservative Fox News from the material, as it is primarily a television channel. Some of these media outlets are on the far-right end of the right-wing media spectrum (e.g., *Gateway Pundit* and *Infowars*), while others can be considered to be less extreme (e.g., *The American Conservative*, *The American Spectator*).

My focus is exclusively on articles that explicitly discuss Google Search. Thus, I excluded from the sample articles that do not meet this criterion. I performed searches using each media outlet's own search function. When I had collected approximately one hundred articles (including news reports, opinion pieces, and commentaries), a pattern of repetition became apparent: The articles frequently cited one another or referenced the same posts on X by conservative politicians or media figures, often commenting on the same events from a right-wing conservative perspective. As a result, I narrowed the selection criteria from then on to include only those articles that offered new insights or arguments in relation to the aim of the article. In total, I gathered almost two hundred articles for analysis before saturation was achieved.<sup>51</sup> I archived the articles in PDF format and uploaded them to a private Zotero folder. The material includes different formats: journals and magazines (e.g., *The American Conservative*, *The Federalist*, *The New American*), as well as news websites (e.g., *Breitbart*, *The Patriot Post*, *The Daily Caller*, *Infowars*) with more frequent publishing.

At least one of the media outlets included in the material was started as part of a US metapolitical mission. Breitbart "was set-up [*sic*] to be integrated in mainstream digital media so they could reach a broad audience or in other words to normalize and popularize its ideological agenda."<sup>52</sup> Following its launch in 2007, Breitbart quickly became a central media hub of the US political right wing, and Benkler and colleagues show that the news website was among the most frequently shared sources on social media during the 2015 presidential campaign.<sup>53</sup> *Breitbart* is also frequently quoted or referred to by the other articles included in this study. The included sources sometimes refer to articles published by each other; posts on X; reports by *Media Research Center: America's Media Watchdog*, which is a conservative platform for media critique from the right; and the website *Reclaim the Net*, which focuses specifically on censorship from a politically right-wing perspective. The data collection followed the principle of strategic sampling and is not intended to be exhaustive, and there are other media outlets, as well as articles, that could have been included. However, given the scope and size of the material, I am confident that it captures the significant aspects of the right-wing media's discussion of Google in the United States between 2020 and 2024.

I carried out the analysis through in-depth reading of the included articles. In the first reading, I marked up the articles with codes (e.g., free speech, censorship, science, misinformation, blacklisting, advertisement, alternative search engines). I then analyzed the articles through themes based on recurring patterns in the material.<sup>54</sup> The identified themes used for the analysis are “Censorship: blacklisting, advertising policies, and downgrading”; “Censorship: misinformation and science”; “The marketplace of ideas”; and “The alternative search engine.” In the analysis, I presented and contextualized forty-nine quotes taken from thirty-eight different articles. Since I did not place the analytical emphasis on the individual authors of the articles, I omitted their names from the citations. Both the construction of themes and the discussion of the analysis were informed by a theoretical understanding of metapolitics and based on existing research literature.

## ANALYSIS

DURING THE FOUR-YEAR PERIOD EXAMINED IN THIS STUDY, SEVERAL EVENTS AND INCIDENTS occurred where right-wing media outlets criticized Google Search, accusing it of failing to present information in a neutral way. These events include, for example, the two US presidential campaigns and elections, the Black Lives Matter demonstrations, the war in Ukraine, the assassination attempt on Donald Trump, and lawsuits against the search engine’s market dominance. Google Search was also criticized for suppressing alternative scientific perspectives, particularly in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic but also regarding climate change and abortion. The analysis refers to these events and incidents, but it is organized thematically rather than chronologically.

### *Censorship: Blacklisting, Advertising Policies, and Downgrading*

The narrative of freedom of speech is strong throughout the material and is often argued for in contrast to Google’s (and other Big Tech companies’) supposed censorship. When Google Search is criticized by the right-wing media, it is often done within the frame of the centralized state, supported by Big Tech and mainstream media, acting against individual freedom and liberty: “The U.S. is moving quickly towards a centralized state. Our liberties, our culture, and our national greatness are being subverted. Subverted by a corrupt, clever, twisted, amorphous blob of powerful people.”<sup>55</sup> The article continues, “They want to silence you. Censor you. Not allow you to speak the truth.”<sup>56</sup> In the narrative of freedom of speech, the liberal left is accused of using Big Tech, including Google, to make this happen. Many of the analyzed articles feature different variants of the argument that the “fate of free speech” is in danger for conservatives.<sup>57</sup> The norms and values upheld by conservatives are perceived to be under threat: “Straight, Caucasian, Christian, American men: you might as well preemptively cover your mouth with duct tape and never touch an electronic device again, because it’s time for you to be silent and ‘listen.’”<sup>58</sup> There is also criticism of Republican politicians for not doing enough to ensure freedom of speech: “But as Republicans failed to impose any consequences on Google or other tech companies for their growing political interference and erosion of Americans’ ability to exercise their First Amendment rights online, Google and other tech companies became less concerned about hiding their acts of censorship.”<sup>59</sup> This quote illustrates how right-wing media is pushing Republican politicians toward a right-wing information-political agenda.

Blacklisting is one method that the right-wing media claims is used to censor it. One incident in 2020, in which the apparent blacklisting of conservative websites was discussed in the analyzed material, involved claims that several conservative media outlets suddenly became unsearchable: “Google appeared to test its ability to blacklist conservative media Tuesday from its monopolized search engine.”<sup>60</sup> In this context, blacklisting refers to the systematic exclusion of certain media outlets from search engine results. As one article puts it, “Today I have discovered that Google’s search engine has somehow suppressed not only this blog, but a number of conservative blogs and websites.”<sup>61</sup> The text continues in bold: “We on the Right—especially religious people—have to prepare ourselves for life as dissidents under soft totalitarianism.”<sup>62</sup> Blacklisting is also related to demonetization, which here should be understood as restrictions on the ability of media outlets to make a profit from their material through Google’s advertising network. One article referred to a social media post that criticized Google for demonetization when Russia invaded Ukraine: “Google says they will demonetize websites which report ‘Ukraine is attacking its own citizens.’”<sup>63</sup> Another example that is discussed in relation to advertisements is abortion. One article stated, “Google has changed its search results to distinguish pro-life pregnancy centers from abortion clinics in search results for people dealing with crisis pregnancies.”<sup>64</sup> The change made by Google only concerned advertisement, but in the article this was translated to search results in general.

The censorship, according to the right-wing voices in the material, is conducted not only via blacklisting and demonetizing but also through the ranking algorithm. Where blacklisting and demonetization concern exclusion from search results or advertisements, algorithmic downgrading is thought to make conservative content less likely to be found by reducing its visibility: “Indeed, we’ve long known that Google censors and slants search results, making it almost impossible to locate information on conservative-leaning sites.”<sup>65</sup> Robert Epstein and Ronald E. Robertson have done research on what they termed the search engine manipulation effect (SEME), by which they argued that Google can decide the outcome of elections.<sup>66</sup> Subsequently, Epstein was referred to and hosted by right-wing media outlets. In June 2020, he appeared on *The Alex Jones Show*, where he argued, “They [Google] are the most powerful mind control machine that has ever been invented.”<sup>67</sup> These events exemplify how the right wing appropriates research for its cause.

The right-wing narrative of Google Search downgrading conservative content was particularly visible during the months in advance of the presidential election 2024. Many articles discussed various types of election interference: “Google’s election bias has been evident for months.”<sup>68</sup> Many outlets referred to how Google seemingly hid the assassination attempt on Donald Trump from the search engine’s autosuggest: “Google’s election bias has been evident for months, with the search engine giant suppressing information about Trump’s first assassination attempt.”<sup>69</sup> During the presidential campaign, Google Search was also criticized for letting the 2024 presidential campaign of Kamala Harris run advertisements containing links to established news articles with rewritten headlines “to make it appear as if the leftist mainstream media are backing her campaign.”<sup>70</sup> The article stated: “The classic leftist disinformation campaign is hardly a surprise coming from the Harris machine.”<sup>71</sup> In a criticism of Google’s advertisement policy, one article had the following headline: “Huge! Google Strategist Reveals Pro-Kamala Search Manipulation in Latest Example of Big Tech Election Interference.”<sup>72</sup>

In the last few months before the 2024 presidential election, Elon Musk figured more and more often as the number one representative of free speech and Kamala Harris as his opponent: “Vice President Kamala Harris and her running mate, Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz, want government and its proxies to muzzle us, limiting what we can post on social media, and censoring *[sic]* whatever government deems ‘misinformation’ or hate.”<sup>73</sup> Another article quoted Donald Trump: “Former President Donald Trump threatened on Friday that he will request the criminal prosecution of Google ‘at maximum levels’ when he returns to office, accusing the tech giant of ‘illegal activity’ through its bias against him in search results.”<sup>74</sup> After the election, one article anticipated the forbidding of on-line censorship: “Fortunately, now that Trump and the MAGA movement have won, they can dismantle this vast propaganda leviathan. . . . No longer would Google, YouTube or Facebook be secretly compelled to hide the content of conservative influencers and conservative publications.”<sup>75</sup> What are described as different kinds of election interference are portrayed as a serious threat to freedom of speech and, ultimately, to democracy itself.

A consistent narrative of free speech and opposition to censorship runs throughout the analyzed articles, spanning the entire period. Central to this narrative are claims that Google Search employs methods such as blacklisting, demonetizing, and downgrading conservative content in its search results. In the next theme, I show how Google Search is accused of exploiting the terms of misinformation and science as rhetorical tools for censorship.

### *Censorship: Misinformation and Science*

Right-wing media voices complain that conservative content is difficult to find, claiming that Google Search justifies this by labeling such content as misinformation or not aligned with science. One article argued that the label “misinformation” is used as a silencing method for the sake of democracy: “You can’t have a free society that suppresses speech. And yet, the Left—in the name of saving democracy—is hellbent on using whatever it can to silence Americans.”<sup>76</sup> In the quote, “the Left” is identified as foreign, something un-American and a threat to real democracy. The way Google Search handled COVID-19, particularly vaccination, is recurrently criticized in the material. One article connects Google Search’s prebunking of COVID-19 misinformation to “the likes of globalist George Soros and his philanthropic Open Societies Foundation” and continues in a conspiratorial tone: “The technocratic elite need to psychologically manipulate the masses to suppress a global awakening and keep Infowars’ message of truth from resonating.”<sup>77</sup> A guest commentary in *The Patriot Post* states, “Facebook, Google, and Twitter are actively censoring valid ideas and critical information, manipulating search results, and shutting down accounts while spreading their views on a wide array of issues.”<sup>78</sup> Fact-checkers related to COVID-19, among other topics, are in the same article equated with “manipulated propaganda” and seen as a hidden censorship apparatus orchestrated “internally from the Deep State, and externally from the Chinese or other foreign actors.”<sup>79</sup> What Google interprets as science and facts is transformed by the right-wing voices in the analyzed articles into a question of values and opinions.

The same conflict between values and opinions, on the one hand, and facts and science, on the other, can be found in relation to climate change. One article states, “We’re witnessing a partisan public relations campaign masquerading as objective science.”<sup>80</sup> The article quotes Google’s advertisement policy and continues: “Google has already banned

advertisements that ‘contradict well-established scientific consensus around the existence and causes of climate change.’”<sup>81</sup> The same article concludes: “Once again, it involves politicians, Big Tech, and the country’s expert class working in tandem to silence opposing voices by targeting free speech online.”<sup>82</sup> Another article reported that a UN representative at a World Economic Forum (WEF) event mentioned that Google Search would give extra visibility to UN sources on climate change, connecting this to globalism: “A United Nations representative revealed her globalist organization had partnered with Google to prioritize messages underscoring the gravity of the climate crisis.”<sup>83</sup> Since the presidential election in 2024, the climate emergency has been referred to as a myth that Donald Trump will slay: “Antarctic ice is up 17% since 1979 (you won’t find it on Google, only on X) and various climatic events such as hurricanes, tornadoes, and tsunamis continue apace as they always have.”<sup>84</sup> In the analyzed articles, both the concepts of science and misinformation are portrayed as tools used to suppress conservatism.

Another example of the argument that accusations of misinformation are used as a weapon for silencing conservative voices is seen in the discussion of Google Search’s AI feature, Overview, during 2024. For example, “Google’s transformation from a simple search engine into the ultimate gatekeeper and filterer of information has profound implications. This isn’t just about making searches more efficient; it’s also about control.”<sup>85</sup> Another article refers critically to a letter sent by the Democrat Adam Schiff to Google CEO Sundar Pichai in which Schiff urged Google to rely on “authoritative, accurate resources” for Google Overview. The article raises “skepticism about the idea of government intervention, given that it involves the regulation of information and speech,” and the Democrat’s emphasis on authoritative sources is linked to “an attempt to limit criticism of vaccine efficacy and other COVID-19 measures, which have been contentious topics.”<sup>86</sup> For the right wing, if Google Overview makes sources less visible to users, the type of sources it relies on, whether “authoritative” or “alternative,” becomes even more important to ensure that conservative sources are included in AI-generated overviews.

The analyzed articles frequently reference how Google Search weaponizes the concepts of misinformation and science as tools for censoring conservative content. In these narratives, misinformation is framed as a politically charged label used selectively to discredit viewpoints that challenge liberal, progressive, or so-called globalist positions. Similarly, science is portrayed as an ideological instrument used to enforce consensus and marginalize conservative dissent. The next theme presents a narrative arguing that market mechanisms should replace censorship.

### *The Marketplace of Ideas*

The right wing’s criticism of Google conveys, implicitly and explicitly, the possibility of an unbiased and neutral search engine through which opinions can compete in a fair way. There is a repeated claim that Google’s curation is a hindrance, a kind of censorship, of the free trade of ideas: “Leftist journalists have pressured Google to change everything from their autocomplete search bar function, to the Google Image results for ‘scientists,’ to the search results for certain topics. Yet there is no need for Google to guard against ‘misinformation’ when the free market of ideas generally takes care of that.”<sup>87</sup>

Another article has the headline “Google whistleblower says Google News altered its algorithm against President Trump,” referring to a book published by a former Google employee.<sup>88</sup> Google Search’s moderation against misinformation and science is put in

contrast to an open competition of ideas: “The idea of a fair, hard-fought fight of ideas, followed by shaking hands and solving problems together, was replaced by an ethic that was unfamiliar to the history of the nation.”<sup>89</sup> The market, where ideas can compete without censorship, is presented as a preferable way to resolve disputes.

How Google Search used to work when the search engine was introduced in the 1990s is described in terms that come close to a myth of the golden age of search: “Traditionally, internet search algorithms have provided results based on popularity and relevance, in effect creating a free market of ideas.”<sup>90</sup> The quote refers to the PageRank algorithm, which made Google Search so popular in the late 1990s. This algorithm stipulates, to simplify, that a webpage with more in-links is considered more important to users than one with fewer in-links and should therefore appear higher on the search results page. That principle, if untouched by any moderation, is supposed to mirror a neutral marketplace of ideas where supply and demand can meet without interference. Another article refers to a report that indicated that “mothers searching for information about abortion clinics received different results depending on their financial background.”<sup>91</sup> The article contends that the algorithm yields accurate results, provided it remains free from external manipulation.

Some articles emphasize the need to break up the market dominance of Google: “It’s a monopolistic trust that, through a variety of different products, operates with a single goal: To manipulate information to remake the American mind and American values.”<sup>92</sup> The article refers to a post on X by J. D. Vance, and the suggested solution is close to what was suggested by Tucker Carlson in the quotation at the beginning of this article.<sup>93</sup> However, when the Biden administration took Google to court for monopolism, this was also condemned: “Rather than focus on consumer impact, these agencies seem intent on punishing successful technology companies.”<sup>94</sup> Also, lawsuits in the EU are criticized and seen as a way for “socialist Europe” to prevent fair competition: “The European search engines are so inferior that nobody wants to use them. . . . Since they can’t compete, they invent sore-loser lawsuits.”<sup>95</sup> Where the United States stands for a free market, Europe stands for the opposite.

Above all, this theme demonstrates a strong trust in the notion of a neutral search engine, one that facilitates the free competition of ideas through the support of a non-biased algorithm. This trust reflects a broader ideological commitment to market-based principles, where information is expected to succeed or fail on its own merits without institutional interference. In the next theme, the narrative about the marketplace of ideas is developed further, with alternative search engines to Google being suggested.

### *The Alternative Search Engine*

Instead of breaking up Google, some articles recommended that readers exercise their consumer choice and change from Google to alternative search engines. Joe Rogan, a well-known right-leaning podcast host, was quoted in *The Daily Wire* accusing Google of hiding important information regarding COVID-19: “It’s one of the reasons I stopped using Google to search things, too,” Rogan replied. “They’re doing something to curate information. Look, if I wanted to find specific cases about people who died from vaccine related injuries, I had to go to DuckDuckGo.”<sup>96</sup> In the same narrative, Google Search is said to discriminate “against viewpoints and studies that have a right-leaning perspective. That’s definitely a problem, but there are many other search engines available, like Bing and

DuckDuckGo, that consumers can use as alternatives to Google.”<sup>97</sup> The argument is also said to be supported by research: “But new research has shown that Google does in fact manually manipulate its search results for content, more than rivals such as DuckDuckGo, Bing, and even Russia’s Yandex. In fact, Russia’s Yandex is the search engine that has censored some ‘conspiracy theories’ the least, according to new research.”<sup>98</sup> As shown in the section on earlier literature, research indicates some support for this, but in the article, the phrase “conspiracy theories” is put in quotation marks.<sup>99</sup>

One of the articles in the material referenced tweets by *The Daily Caller*’s editor in chief, Geoffrey Ingersoll, in which he alleged that Google had hidden a critical article discussing the World Health Organization’s proabortion stance from its search results. The article noted that Ingersoll “pointed out that this problem doesn’t occur on other algorithm-free search engine platforms such as Bing, DuckDuckGo, and Yandex.”<sup>100</sup> The idea of an algorithm-free search engine is related to the idea that there is a neutral way for a search engine to work, one that is not manipulated by Democrats and the liberal left. The same belief in the possibility of search engine result neutrality comes forward in this quote: “There’s one big question for anyone who believes Google does not provide search results in an objective and politically neutral manner: Why haven’t you changed your default search engine to DuckDuckGo?”<sup>101</sup> However, in March 2022, DuckDuckGo was also heavily criticized by some right-wing media voices for censorship: “Popular privacy-focused search engine DuckDuckGo, commonly considered an alternative to Google, has announced that it will be ‘down-ranking’ sites associated with ‘disinformation,’ along with adding ‘information boxes’ to ‘highlight quality information.’”<sup>102</sup> “Disinformation” and “quality information” are referred to with quotation marks, indicating a distance from the concepts as such. Another article has the title “And Just Like That, DuckDuckGo Becomes Google—One Time Free Search Engine Now Down-Ranks Conservative Content—Bans Gateway Pundit” and claims that DuckDuckGo has “become Google.”<sup>103</sup> The reason behind DuckDuckGo’s changed policy was Russia’s full invasion of Ukraine, which was accompanied by Russian disinformation, but many voices felt they had been betrayed. The need for an alternative digital foundation for conservatism is also discussed in another, more radical narrative. Two articles published in 2021 underscore that the challenge extends beyond the mere development of an alternative search engine: “It’s much more revolutionary than that. It’s much more American, too. It’s building from scratch to battle back against overwhelming odds. Our task is to foster the very infrastructure upon which a new search engine or a new social media platform could be entirely safe from deplatforming.”<sup>104</sup> The second article, a few months later, argues: “After all, if conservatives wish to genuinely engage in the culture war, it’s time to build and support infrastructure not operated by people who hate us.”<sup>105</sup>

Another search engine mentioned in the analyzed material is Freespoke, which was launched in 2022 and presents itself as an unbiased alternative to Google Search. On December 6, 2022, one article in *The Daily Caller* features a short opinion piece by Todd Ricketts, CEO of Freespoke, in which he outlined the rationale behind the creation of his company’s search engine and its intended role as an alternative to Google: “Freespoke is a new kind of search engine that shows you what Google won’t. We don’t take sides. Instead, we show you everything, so you can decide for yourself. And Freespoke does not secretly collect your personal information or follow you around the internet like Google does. We call it information independence.”<sup>106</sup> Freespoke’s start page states: “The search engine built to be unbiased.”<sup>107</sup> The about page starts: “Don’t compromise when it comes

to biased search results or election coverage. Download Freespoke and access unfiltered truth at your fingertips.”<sup>108</sup> Freespoke also claims that its search engine provides equal access to news from both the left and the right. For example, it labels the *New York Times* as left-leaning and *Breitbart* as right-leaning. *The Conversation*, a platform where researchers communicate their work to a broader audience, is also labeled as left, while *The Daily Caller*, one of the media outlets included in the empirical material of this article, is labeled as right. This labeling practice is positioned by Freespoke as a form of ideological balance and algorithmic transparency, with the attempt to appeal to concerns among conservatives who believe that Google Search obscures or devalues right-leaning sources. However, the act of labeling itself raises questions about how ideological boundaries are drawn and operationalized within search technologies. While Freespoke presents its classifications as neutral or balanced, they could easily contribute to a false balance.

This theme encompasses not only criticism of Google Search but also advocacy for the development and use of alternative search engines. In this way, it includes arguments in favor of constructing a right-wing digital infrastructure. In the next section, I discuss the four presented themes together and in relation to earlier research and the prism of metapolitics.

## DISCUSSION

THE ANALYSIS REVEALS HOW THE US FAR-RIGHT MOVEMENT IN THE PERIOD 2000–2024, through its media outlets, portrays Google Search as a politically motivated gatekeeper, asserting that the search engine’s moderation practices are employed as tools to marginalize or even to eliminate access to conservative voices and viewpoints. This narrative builds on arguments of supposed censorship, elite collusion, and ideological bias of Big Tech, positioning Google Search not as a neutral intermediary but as an active player in shaping political reality. According to the analyzed media, Google’s monopoly poses a direct threat to freedom of expression and the marketplace of ideas central to US democracy. In this context, it is claimed that various forms of so-called censorship serve as tools with which the liberal-left elite attempt to control public opinion. Throughout the material, Google is accused of using overlapping methods—blacklisting, advertising policies, downgrading, and blaming misinformation and science—to silence dissenting conservative views. Indeed, these techniques exist to some degree. However, in some right-wing media, these features are embedded in a conspiratorial narrative.

Maly discusses far-right metapolitics in relation to Google Search, focusing on attempts to directly exploit algorithms to benefit certain conservative content, for example, by utilizing data voids.<sup>109</sup> I use the prism of metapolitics to investigate how metapolitics is exercised indirectly, such as by arguing in right-wing media for changes in algorithms or suggesting alternative search engines. Ideals of social justice, egalitarianism, and inclusiveness have frequently served as taken-for-granted starting points for many search engine researchers. As a result, critical research on search engines has commonly adopted a normative stance in favor of antidiscrimination, particularly regarding ethnicity, sex and gender, immigration, and science.<sup>110</sup> In relation to this and similar critical research, Google Search has taken steps against the spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories, as indicated in research by Rogers, Aleksandra Urman and colleagues, and Evan Williams and Kathleen Carley.<sup>111</sup> Right-wing metapolitics in relation to Google Search involves a translation of science into opinions that can be tested on a market, which should be

ensured by an unbiased search engine. This translation recalls Hannah Arendt's classic analysis of the way facts are translated into opinions in political language.<sup>112</sup> When scientific facts are translated into opinions, they can also be evaluated by search engine algorithms that prioritize popularity over quality. Misinformation and science are described by the far right as being strategically deployed to suppress conservative content. In this narrative, misinformation becomes "misinformation," and moderation in favor of scientific facts, as done through Google's YMYL and E-E-A-T, is interpreted as an assault on freedom of speech. Indeed, the very notion of science as something that is debated according to market principles contrasts with the way science is carried out.<sup>113</sup>

I argue that the criticism of Google, as formulated in US far-right media outlets between 2020 and 2024, can be interpreted as a form of metapolitics aimed at normalizing far-right norms and values. Within this analytical framework, arguments against what is referred to as Google Search censorship and bias are weaponized to advance conservative values such as nationalism, America, prolife, science skepticism (particularly climate change and vaccines), individuality, truth, market capitalism, and a vague and general notion of freedom. Equally important are the negative associations constructed to define the "other." The analysis reveals how far-right voices portray Google Search's alleged control of information through the techniques mentioned above as fundamentally anti-American, European, liberal, globalist, and even socialist. Research on climate change, vaccines, and abortion is also positioned as part of this oppositional other. Of course, a broader repertoire of conservative values is communicated in the selected outlets and elsewhere; the examples discussed here represent only a sample. In comparison to Mager's study on European search engine imaginaries, which makes visible how a European identity is constructed through politics of control, my analysis demonstrates how metapolitical discourse in right-wing media similarly constructs a right-wing American conservative identity, one that is fundamentally oppositional to the European model.<sup>114</sup>

The notion of a neutral search engine is based on the assumption that there is an objective way—a pure algorithm—to present search engine results where web content competes on a free market. As Hillis, Petit, and Jarrett argue, this notion is sustained by Google itself, a point further developed in Iliadis's research on how semantic media has contributed to Google's transformation into a fact machine.<sup>115</sup> However, to let the ranking algorithm be based on a commercial principle of popularity is no more unbiased than a principle that weights quality, as expressed in Google's use of YMYL and E-E-A-T for certain topics (such as medicine). Google Search, like many other search engines, finds itself in a difficult position when attempting to appear neutral while still providing relevant information, particularly when relevance for most users does not entail giving prominence to antivaccine disinformation or conspiracy theories. The case of DuckDuckGo, which in 2022 began actively prioritizing high-quality information on certain topics, exemplifies this dilemma. Rather than risking false balance or obscuring important viewpoints without explaining why, I argue that search engines' underlying positions regarding what is considered socially relevant on specific topics should be made explicit. This is in line with Introna and Nissenbaum's call for "more egalitarian and inclusive search mechanisms."<sup>116</sup>

The study presented in this article is qualitative in nature and does not make claims about frequency or volume. The findings are an attempt to interpret ways in which conservative voices in right-wing media outlets make sense of and express their search engine criticism. The empirical material is formed from a specific political context viewed through a metapolitical prism and my positionality as a researcher. The selection of media outlets,

while informed by previous research, was qualitative and strategic rather than statistical and exhaustive. It was guided by the purpose of capturing a range of voices within the right-wing media ecosystem rather than producing a representative sample. I could have expanded the empirical material to include social media, but I chose to prioritize a narrower focus on news media outlets. This type of media has certain advantages, as it can be interpreted as setting the tone for broader public debates. However, social media is also included in my material in the sense that it is sometimes referenced by the analyzed articles. For similar reasons of empirical stringency, I did not include discussions of generative AI in right-wing media in the scope of this study—except for Google Overview, which is based on the technique of retrieval-augmented generation—as these raise distinct issues related to content generation rather than information retrieval.

## CONCLUSION

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO, INTRONA AND NISSENBAUM STATED THAT TO “REALIZE THE VISION of the Web as a democratizing technology or, more generally, as a public good, we must take the question of access seriously.”<sup>117</sup> Search engines provide access, but access is never neutral; it always involves control. The right-wing critique of Google Search reveals an ongoing ideological struggle over who defines relevance, neutrality, and truth in the digital information landscape. Framed as a defense of free speech and neutrality, this critique operates as a form of metapolitics aimed at reshaping the normative assumptions embedded in search engine functionality. It positions so-called liberal (as understood in the United States) and left-wing values and trust in science as forms of ideological control while promoting an alternative vision grounded in nationalism, individualism, market logic, and right-wing ideology. The analysis highlights how search engines, far from being neutral intermediaries, are sites of political tension where ideological boundaries are negotiated. A similar critique from the political right wing concerning a lack of neutrality can also be found about other parts of the information infrastructure, for example, of public libraries, of semantic media, of generative AI, and of Wikipedia.<sup>118</sup> In this way, the current article adds to the understanding of how the information infrastructure is not purely technical. The information infrastructure, of which search engines are a central component, is also highly social and cultural, continually shaping which norms and values are affirmed or contested. I argue that the underlying principles guiding algorithmic ranking and moderation should be made explicit rather than hidden behind claims of objectivity or neutrality. This also applies to other central nodes in our digital infrastructures whose gatekeeping functions shape public access to knowledge, such as public libraries, semantic media, Wikipedia, or generative AI. Looking ahead, it remains to be seen whether Google Search will adjust its policies in response to demands from the Trump administration or whether the popularity of far-right alternative search engines will continue to grow.

## NOTES

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