

# AP Webmasters May Shape Search Results

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By Genaro C. Armas, Associated Press Writer

## Webmasters' Behind-The-Scene Decisions May Help Make Search Results Differ

STATE COLLEGE, Pa. (AP) -- Not all Internet search engines yield the same results for the same query, but that may have as much to do with how Web sites are managed as how search engines work.

Web site administrators increasingly are barring some search engines from all or part of their sites, while granting others more access, according to a recent study by Penn State University researchers.

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C. Lee Giles, an information sciences and technology professor and the lead author of the study, said site administrators may allow crawlers from Google Inc. the most access among search engines because they know Google produces a lot of traffic.

"When they first grew, did administrators say, 'Hmmm, this is really good, let's give them better access?'" he said. "And as a consequence, they're getting even (more)."

Search engines comb the Internet using programs known as "robots," "spiders," "crawlers"

or "bots." A programmer can use a "robots.txt" file to police the crawlers trying to access a site.

"It's not that the search engines are better, but it's the people out there making policy and making decisions on what to crawl to," Giles said.

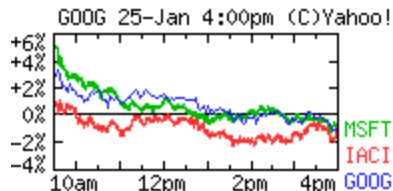
Robot.txt files are not mandatory, though they are becoming more popular. More than one-third of the 7,600 sites Giles and his team studied between December 2005 and October 2006 had such files.

The vast majority of robots.txt files -- nearly 94 percent -- managed overall access to a given site, the study found. Other files named spiders from specific places. They welcomed crawlers from Google most often, followed by the engines at Microsoft Corp.'s MSN and Yahoo Inc.

"There's definitely a bias toward the traffic benefits Google offers vis a vis other search engines," Kevin Heisler, executive editor of Search Engine Watch, wrote in an e-mail.

But Rahul Lahiri, vice president of search product management for Ask.com, owned by IAC/InterActiveCorp, said Google's advantage makes little difference to consumers because other search engines can get to blocked sites through other links.

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Ask doesn't use robots.txt files in marketing or product strategies but does use them to contact sites that may block it, Lahiri said.

Google Inc. spokeswoman Jessica Powell said the company has "worked with many Web publishers (and) done a lot of outreach to make their content discoverable," but sites are ultimately the ones to decide which search engines to let in.

Representatives of Yahoo Inc. and Microsoft Corp. did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

Read the study at: <http://botseer.ist.psu.edu/>

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