Detecting Spam Web Pages

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About me



- 1989-1993: UIUC (home of NCSA Mosaic)
- 1993-2001: Digital Equipment/Compaq
 - Started working on web search in 1997
 - Mercator web crawler (used by AltaVista)
- 2001-now: Microsoft Research
 - Measuring web evolution
 - Link-based ranking (algorithms and infrastructure)
 - Web spam detection

About MSR Silicon Valley

- One of six MSR labs (founded in 2001)
- Located in Mountain View
- About 30 full-time researchers
- Areas
 - Algorithms & Theory
 - Distributed Systems
 - Security & Privacy
 - Software Tools
 - Web Search & Data Mining
- We're growing & hiring!



There's gold in those hills

- E-Commerce is big business
 - Total US e-Commerce sales in 2004: \$69.2 billion (1.9% of total US sales) (US Census Bureau)
 - Grow rate: 7.8% per year (well ahead of GDP growth)
 - Forrester Research predicts that online US B2C sales (incl. auctions & travel) will grow to \$329 by 2010 (13% of all US retail sales)



Search engines direct traffic

- Significant amount of traffic results from Search Engine (SE) referrals
 - E.g. Jacob Nielsen's site "HyperTextNow" receives one third of its traffic through SE referrals
- Only sites that are highly placed in SE results (for some queries) benefit from SE referrals



Ways to increase SE referrals

- Buy keyword-based advertisements
- Improve the ranking of your pages
 - Provide genuinely better content, or
 - "Game" the system
- "Search Engine Optimization" is a thriving business
 - Some SEOs are ethical
 - Some are not …



Web spam (you know it when you see it)





Defining web spam

- Working Definition
 - Spam web page: A page created for the sole purpose of attracting search engine referrals (to this page or some other "target" page)
- Ultimately a judgment call
 - Some web pages are borderline useless
 - Some pages look fine in isolation, but in context are clearly "spam"



Why web spam is bad

- Bad for users
 - Makes it harder to satisfy information need
 - Leads to frustrating search experience
- Bad for search engines
 - Burns crawling bandwidth
 - Pollutes corpus (infinite number of spam pages!)
 - Distorts ranking of results



Detecting Web Spam



- Spam detection: A classification problem
 - Given salient features, decide whether a web page (or web site) is spam
- Can use automatic classifiers
 - Plethora of existing algorithms (Bayes, C4.5, SVM, ...)
 - Use data sets tagged by human judges to train and evaluate classifiers (this is expensive!)
- But what are the "salient features"?
 - Need to understand spamming techniques to decide on features
 - Finding the right features is "alchemy", not science
 - Spammers adapt it's an arms race!

Taxonomy of web spam techniques

- "Keyword stuffing"
- "Link spam"
- "Cloaking"



Keyword stuffing



- Search engines return pages that contain query terms
 - (Certain caveats and provisos apply ...)
- One way to get more SE referrals: Create pages containing popular query terms ("keyword stuffing")
- Three variants:
 - Hand-crafted pages (ignored in this talk)
 - Completely synthetic pages
 - Assembling pages from "repurposed" content



Examples of synthetic content





Examples of synthetic content

Creative ideas for valentine's day gifts and christening gift idea including holiday office par - Microsoft Internet Exp...
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Creative ideas for valentine's day gifts and christening gift idea including holiday office party ideas

[Follow Ups] [Post Followup] [Wedding Forum for Comments]

Posted ByHoliday office party ideas and Creative Ideas for Valentine's Day gifts on August 29, 2005 at 01:26:26:

Wedding decorations ideas in http://christening-gift-idea.iemkt.com christening gift idea. http://wedding-centerpieceideas iemkt com wedding centerpiece ideas and Bedroom Design Ideas, http://free-scrapbook-ideas.iemkt.com free scrapbook ideas and kids birthday party ideas. Gift ideas for mom in http://girl-slumber-party-ideas.iemkt.com Girl Slumber Party Ideas. http://scavenger-hunt-ideas.iemkt.com scavenger hunt ideas and special event ideas. http://halloween-costume-ideas.iemkt.com Halloween Costume Ideas and scrapbook layout ideas. Romantic gift ideas in http://work-at-home-home-businessidea.iemkt.com work at home home business idea. http://gift-ideas-for-cat-lovers.iemkt.com gift ideas for cat lovers and Girlfriend Gift Ideas. Deck ideas in http://creative-ideas-for-valentine-27s-day-gifts.iemkt.com Creative Ideas for Valentine%27s Day gifts. gift idea unique ideas for wedding reception, bachelorette ideas business idea, decoration halloween idea party, christening gift idea Free Tattoo Ideas wedding planning idea, wedding invitation ideas Baby Shower Cake Ideas graduation gift ideas Recipe ideas, christmas gift idea. Tattoo Design Ideas Girl Slumber Party Ideas design ideas gourmet gift basket ideas vacation ideas home decor ideas, Home Decorating Ideas Cake Ideas cost saving ideas, bridal shower ideas, outdoor advertising idea, arts and crafts ideas kitchen design ideas over the hill party ideas home based business idea Back to School Bulletin Board Ideas Fireplace Design Ideas proposal ideas free home decorating idea business ideas for home Party Ideas The romantic gift idea of these porcelain rose nightlights unique event ideas fund raiser ideas fathers day ideas home decoration ideas free craft ideas Ideas for Company Name bridal shower gift ideas home business ideas. marriage proposal ideas baby nursery ideas talent show ideas home decorating ideas patio ideas social event ideas Ideas for Decorating Cupcakes Birthday. Birthday Gift Ideas great gift ideas Ideas for Self Employment christmas gift ideas marketing idea. Business Ideas family reunion ideas team building ideas Baby Shower 🥝 Internet

Someone's wedding site!

Features identifying synthetic content



- Average word length
 - The mean word length for English prose is about 5 characters
- Word frequency distribution
 - Certain words ("the", "a", ...) appear more often than others
- N-gram frequency distribution
 - Some words are more likely to occur next to each other than others
- Grammatical well-formedness
 - Alas, natural-language parsing is expensive



Really good synthetic content



Content "repurposing"

- Content repurposing: The practice of incorporating all or portions of other (unaffiliated) web pages
 - A "convenient" way to machine generate pages that contain human-authored content
 - Not even necessarily illegal ...
- Two flavors:
 - Imporporate large portions of a single page
 - Incoporate snippets of multiple pages



Example of page-level content "repurposing"





Example of phrase-level content "repurposing"



Techniques for detecting content repurposing



- Single-page flavor: Cluster pages into equivalence classes of very similar pages
 - If most pages on a site are very similar to pages on other sites, raise a red flag
 - (There are legitimate replicated sites; e.g. mirrors of Linux man pages)
- Many-snippets flavor: Test if page consists mostly of phrases that also occur somewhere else
 - Computationally hard problem
 - Have probabilistic technique that makes it tractable

Detour: Link-based ranking

- Most search engines use hyperlink information for ranking
- Basic idea: Peer endorsement
 - Web page authors endorse their peers by linking to them
- Prototypical link-based ranking algorithm: PageRank
 - Page is important if linked to (endorsed) by many other pages
 - More so if other pages are themselves important



Link spam

- Link spam: Inflating the rank of a page by creating nepotistic links to it
 - From own sites: Link farms
 - From partner sites: Link exchanges
 - From unaffiliated sites (e.g. blogs, guest books, web forums, etc.)
- The more links, the better
 - Generate links automatically
 - Use scripts to post to blogs
 - Synthesize entire web sites
 - Synthesize *many* web sites (DNS spam)
- The more important the linking page, the better
 - Buy expired highly-ranked domains
 - Post links to high-quality blogs

Link farms and link exchanges





The trade in expired domains





Web forum and blog spam

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Features identifying link spam

- Large number of links from low-ranked pages
- Discrepancy between number of links (peer endorsement) and number of visitors (user endorsement)
- Links mostly from affiliated pages
 - Same web site; same domain
 - Same IP address
 - Same owner (according to WHOIS record)
- Evidence that linking pages are machine-generated

• ...



Cloaking



- Cloaking: The practice of sending different content to search engines than to users
- Techniques:
 - Recognize page request is from search engine (based on "user-agent" info or IP address)
 - Make some text invisible (i.e. black on black)
 - Use CSS to hide text
 - Use JavaScript to rewrite page
 - Use "meta-refresh" to redirect user to other page
- Hard (but not impossible) for SE to detect

How well does web spam detection work?

- Experiment done at MSR-SVC:
 - (joint work with Fetterly, Manasse, Ntoulas)
 - using a number of the features described earlier
 - fed into C4.5 decision-tree classifier
 - corpus of about 100 million web pages
 - judged set of 17170 pages (2364 spam, 14806 non-spam)
 - 10-fold cross-validation
- Our results are **not** indicative of spam detection effectiveness of MSN Search!



How well does web spam detection work?

• Confusion matrix:

classified as \rightarrow	spam	non-spam
spam	1,918	446
non-spam	367	14,439

• Expressed as precision-recall matrix:

class	recall	precision
spam	81.1%	83.9%
non-spam	97.5%	97.0%



Questions

http://research.microsoft.com/aboutmsr/labs/siliconvalley/