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## Google's Reputation System Roils Web World

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By Clint Boulton

A drop in reputation scores for hundreds of prominent Web sites this week has bloggers buzzing that Google has tweaked its PageRank algorithm.

Google hasn't admitted to tweaking PR (PageRank), which appears in the Google Toolbar and is Google's system for weighing a Web page for its relevance to a specific query based on the number of links that it has to it.

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Search Engine Land, one of many search-oriented sites to notice the move, [pointed out the PR drops on Oct. 24](#), noting that Forbes.com, WashintonPost.com, SFGate.com, SunTimes.com and Engadget.com all dropped from PR7 to PR5.

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While PR score is one factor that determines if a page will rank well in a search, it is also a factor in how much the Mountain View, Calif., company can charge its AdSense network affiliates, who pay to get connected to advertisers all over the world. Lower rankings can affect advertising dollars as well as how much Google charges these Web site operators.

This is a big deal to many site owners, and some of them may try to beat the system by paying for extra links, said Forrester Research analyst Charlene Li.

"I could link to a pig farm, and I have nothing to do with a pig farm but because they pay me I'll do it," Li told eWEEK, offering perhaps no finer example of site owners trying to hog traffic.

Li added that Google reserves the right to create technology to weed out site proprietors who try to use the system to boost their relevancy.

**Read more here about Google's command of the search market.**

Bloggers believe paid links, the mass interlinking of blog networks and other practices are among the potential culprits for the PR drops, but no one knows for sure what conflicts with Google's [Webmaster guidelines](#).

Google won't admit to changing the algorithm this week, though comments from a company spokesperson indicated that it's not out of the realm of possibility.

"Values in the Google Toolbar can fluctuate for a number of reasons, including changes in how we crawl or index the Web, or changes in the link structure of the Web itself," the spokesperson told eWEEK.

Google may also update the PageRank indicator in the Google Toolbar to incorporate Google's view on the back links to a page or site, as well as the company's opinion of the forward links for a site, the spokesperson said.

**To read more about Google tinkering with its technology, click here.**

Stephen Arnold, an IT expert who has spent the last four years examining technical documents to get a better understanding of how Google and other search engines work, said that site proprietors miss the point.

Arnold said there are no humans at Google intentionally trying to sabotage Web properties, noting that the PR changes merely reflect the maturation of semantic Web technologies the search engine is employing to sniff out rampant abuse.

"Obviously, the algorithm is not perfect so there are legitimate sites where people think they're doing nothing wrong and they're being affected," Arnold told eWEEK. "The reality is the people running these sites think they know a hell of a lot more than Google and they build sites with no understanding of how Google looks for signs of trouble."

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