

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

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Abstract

There is an ongoing policy debate regarding the role search engines can play in the fight against intellectual property theft. However, for such interventions to be effective it must first be the case that search engine results influence consumer piracy choices, and there is very little empirical evidence one way or the other on this question. The goal of this study is to use a randomized field study to analyze whether search results can influence consumers choices for piracy versus legal consumption channels.

Specifically, our study uses an experiment in which participants were asked to acquire a movie online. Subjects who choose to use a search engine in this task were presented with results from a custom-built search interface. Our search interface manipulates the search results from a major search engine such that in one treatment condition piracy sites are artificially promoted in the search results and in another treatment condition legal sites are artificially promoted.

Our results show that relative to the non-manipulated (control) condition, consumers are more likely to choose a legal option to acquire the movie when legal sites are promoted, and are more likely to choose a piracy option when piracy links are promoted. These results suggest that reducing the prominence of piracy links can have a significant impact on consumer behavior and thus is a viable policy option in the fight against intellectual property theft.