Social Research with the Web
Digital Methods Initiative, Amsterdam

We look at Google results and see society, instead of Google. That is a shorthand way of saying that we see institutions and issues in the ranked lists that are returned in the search results. Query the word rights in google.com and you are returned with the top Websites in the English-language space doing rights, in a variety of ways. You can also see which rights types are higher than others. For example, LGBT rights appear in the top ten of google.com, but not in google.fr, where youth rights are much higher.

But the question that is often asked is, where does social research end, and Google studies begin? Isn’t it Google that determines the rankings? Surely Google has more to do with the hierarchies than societal dynamics. Can Google ever be removed from the picture when one is using it to perform research? These questions are classic ones in social research, as they concern the possibility of being able to isolate phenomena dependent on a context for them to exist. However, this question also should be put to Web studies more generally. Can one only study the Web with the Web?

The two research projects presented are attempts at a Web studies, where the devices themselves are a part of the analysis, and one is always aware of the significance of the question of where Google studies ends, and social research with Google begins. It is a question and approach that also may be applied to other devices as Twitter.

What kinds of findings may be made by reinterpreting search engine results, especially the rankings of sites for particular queries? What kinds of findings can be made by comparing results across the many local versions of Google, such as the new Palestinian one, google.ps? In the project “The Nationalities of Issues: Rights Types,” we entered the word rights in various languages into the local Googles, in order to obtain hierarchies of rights types per country. Are there distinctive rights that rise to the top in Finland, the Netherlands, France, Italy, Switzerland, Germany, Austria, Sweden, Russia, Japan, Canada, the U.K., Australia, Philippines, Ivory Coast and other countries? Cultural rights in Mexico, pollution victims’ rights in Switzerland, right to education in native sign language in Finland, rights of the over-indebted in Ivory Coast – countries could be said to have distinctive concerns, compared to other countries, as read from local Google results.

Twitter, generally, but also during the Iran election crisis (June 2009 and beyond), has been described as banal. The question is, could the hundreds of thousands of tweets about the Iran election crisis be made into a comprehensible account of what has been happening on the ground as well as online? The project, “For the ppl of Iran - #iranelection RT,” is such an attempt. In order to filter the most significant tweets, and order them so as to recount the crisis, the digital methods researchers chose to assemble the top three retweets per day, and order them chronologically, from 10 June to 30 June. The resulting output is a capsule account of the crisis, which the researchers also subsequently edited, and made into sub-storylines, on arrests, violence, Neda, censorship as well as the Internet. The entire set of top 3 retweets with the #iranelection hash tag from 10-30 June 2009 is printed. The sub-threads are online at http://www.rettwt.net/ (requires issuecrawler.net login).

The Digital Methods Initiative (DMI), Amsterdam, is a collaboration of the New Media program, Media Studies, University of Amsterdam and the Govcom.org Foundation. DMI is dedicated to reworking method for Internet research, and in particular to learning and developing technique for studying societal conditions and cultural change with the Web. Its director is Richard Rogers, Chair, New Media & Digital Culture, University of Amsterdam. Its coordinators and project facilitators are the New Media PhD candidates, Anne Helmond, Sabine Niederer, Michael Stevenson and Esther Weltevrede. Anat Ben-David, the PhD candidate with dual affiliation, also facilitates. Staff include Erik Borra, Marieke van Dijk, Andrea Fiore, Koen Martens and Marijn de Vries Hoogerwerff. DMI is online at http://www.digitalmethods.net/.

Text by Richard Rogers, Michael Stevenson and Esther Weltevrede.
The Nationalities of Issues

Most significant rights types per country according to local Google results of the query for rights in the local languages.

RESEARCH STRATEGY
Employ Google to show most prominent types of rights per country.

METHOD
Query the term “rights” in the local languages in the local Google versions, e.g., “oigused” in Google.ee and “direitos” in Google.pt. Manually, read the results and make lists of the top ten, distinctive rights types, leaving them in the order that Google provided.

Google.se with query “rattigheter” (13.07.09)
Google.fi with query “oikeudet” (13.07.09)
Google.ee with query “oigused” (15.07.09)
Google.lv with query “tiesibas” (16.07.09)
Google.co.uk with query “rights” (13.07.09)
Google.nl with query “rechten” (13.07.09)
Google.be with query “rechten van” (15.07.09)
Google.be with query “droits” (14.07.09)
Google.lu with query “rechte” (15.07.09)
Google.de with query “rechte” (15.07.09)
Google.at with query “rechte” (15.07.09)
Google.ch with query “rechte” (15.07.09)
Google.fr with query “droits” (14.07.09)
Google.pt with query “direitos” (14.07.09)
Google.es with query “derechos” (13.07.09)
Google.it with query “diritto al” OR “diritto all” OR “diritto alla” (13.07.09)
Google.ro with query “drepturile” (13.07.09)
Google.mo with query “drepturile” (13.07.09)
Google.ru with query “prava” (13.07.09)
Google.com.tr with query “haklari” (17.07.09)
Google.jp with query “権利” (16.07.09)
Google.hk with query “權利” (17.07.09)
Google.com.ph with query “karapatang” (16.07.09)
Google.ca with query “droits” (17.07.09)
Google.com.au with query “rights” (14.07.09)
Google.ca with query “rights” (15.07.09)
Google.ca with query “droits” (15.07.09)
Google.com with query “derechos” (14.07.09)
Google.com.mx with query “derechos” (15.07.09)
Google.com.br with query “direitos” (15.07.09)
Google.ar with query “derechos” (15.07.09)
Google.pe with query “derechos” (15.07.09)

DATA STORAGE
The top 100 results per query are stored for validation purposes. In Firefox, save page as, web page, complete. Data sets available at http://wiki.digitalmethods.net/Dmi/NationalityofIssues/.

Note the local Google versions were chosen on the basis of the language skills of the participants of the Digital Methods Summer School, 2009. Note too that when faced with a large quantity of Google versions for a single language, a further selection was made, e.g., the top three Spanish-speaking countries according to population.

For those local Google versions where multiple languages are spoken, the two dominant languages were queried. We queried google.be (Belgium) in Flemish and French, and queried google.ca (Canada) in English and French.

FINDINGS
Countries could be said to have distinctive concerns, compared to other countries, as read from Google results. For example, everyman’s rights in Finland, prostitutes’ rights in the Netherlands, computer programmers’ rights in Japan and the right to oblivion in Italy (not saving everything) are unique to the respective countries. The specific rights language per country has been retained, meaning that LGBT rights in the United States, and homosexual rights in Hong Kong, are not regarded as equivalents. Also, given the limited sample of countries and the method for selection, the most widely shared rights across countries are not the subject of analysis.

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DESIGN: Vera Bekema and Anne Helmond.
For the ppl of Iran - #iranelection RT

#iranelection RT tells the story of the day-to-day unfolding of the Iran election crisis as seen through Twitter. #iranelection RT is a collection of all the tweets that have been tagged #iranelection from the first one on 10 June up to 30 June 2009, some 650,000 in all. The most “retweeted” tweets (RTs) have been filtered and organised chronologically, as opposed to the reverse chronology that Twitter uses. In “reversed realtime” the most significant #iranelection retweets show the urgency and the emotion of those twenty days in June, when the tensions on the streets and the coverage in the media were at their height. The crisis unfolds on Twitter with the discovery of the value of the #iranelection hashtag, and tweeters both in and outside Iran begin using it to mark all tweets about the events there. Mousavi holds an emergency press conference. The voter turn-out is 80%. SMS is down, Mousavi’s website and Facebook are blocked. Police are using pepper spray. Mousavi is under house arrest, and declares he is prepared for martyrdom. Neda is dead. There is a riot in Batherstan Square. First aid info here. Bon Jovi sings “Stand by Me” in support. Ahmadinejad confirmed the winner. Light a candle for the ppl of Iran.

The collection of tweets also shows how tweeters respond to what is happening online and on the ground. Tweets reporting important websites blocked are followed up by proxies being offered. Accounts of police using pepper spray are followed up by links to websites with first aid information.

For the ppl of Iran - #iranelection RT is an exercise in transforming the supposed banality of Twitter into a machine that recounts events on the ground and in social media.

Number of Twitter users using #iranelection with 1 tweet - 53,109
Number of Twitter users using #iranelection who were retweeted - 36,913
Number of Twitter users using #iranelection who were retweeted multiple times - 16,336
Number of Twitter users using #iranelection who were retweeted 10 times or more - 2,829
Number of Twitter users using #iranelection who were retweeted 1 time - 20,577
Number of languages used in #iranelection - 26
Number of tweets in #iranelection in English - 612,373
Number of tweets in #iranelection in Farsi - 6,248

“For the ppl of Iran - #iranelection RT” is a production of the Digital Methods Initiative, Summer School, 2009, session on media attention formats, led by Richard Rogers. Programming by Erik Borra, design by Marieke van Dijk and editorial by Kimberley Spreeuwenberg and Esther Weltevrede. #iranelection RT is online at http://www.rettiwt.net/ (requires issuecrawler.net login).

About the #iranelection collection of tweets (10-30 June 2009)

Tweets tagged with #iranelection - 653,883
Unique number of Twitter users using #iranelection tag - 99,811
Number of Twitter users using #iranelection with multiple tweets - 46,702
Number of Twitter users using #iranelection with greater than 20 tweets - 6,000
#iraneelection RT Top 3 retweets per day

**Jun 10** Wow - Twitter search can let you see all the Iran election tweets coming out of Tehran http://bit.ly/5C8p #IranElection 3 retweets Prosecutor General declares unequal airtime given to candidates is against the law http://bit.ly/1bhCHk #IranElection 2 retweets Mousavi boycotts TV debate due to unfair time allocation: 20 min to Ahmadinejad, 1:41 to Mosuavi #IranElection

**Jun 11** RT@LaraABCNewsAhmedinejad = Bush, Mousavi = #Obama? Sadjapour's neat analysis of #iraneelection http://bit.ly/14jyoY 4 retweets Marc Lynch asks "Could there be a Mousavi Effect?" http://bit.ly/12hKAW #IranElection #retweet_thursday 4 retweets RT: @alexlobov: RT @keyvan Expect internet connection problems and new wave of filtering in Iran within next 72 hours. #IranElection 3 retweets Jun 12 Mousavi will hold emergency press conference in 15 mins in Tehran http://havadaran.net/archive/00309.php #IranElection 6 retweets My conclusions after seeing 100s of #IranElection photos: Tehran looks a lot like Tel-Aviv and ALL Iranian girls are beautiful 5 retweets Reports says more that 80% are electing. This is very high, first time in the history of islamic republic #iraneelection 6 retweets Jun 13 Latest photos from Tehran: www.flickr.com/mousavi1388/ (updated every minute) #IranElection 11 retweets Mousavi has been arrested!!!!! http://tr.im/oopK #iraneelection 11 retweets SMS is down, Mousavi's websites and Facebook are filtered, state TV is celebrating and people are in the streets. #IranElection

**Jun 14** PLEASE RT (Retweet) these pictures http://twitpic.com/7c85l AND http://tw.it/e11H and this hashtag 348 retweets Dear Iranian People, Mousavi has not left you, he has been put under house arrest by Ministry of Intelligence #IranElection 80 retweets #iraneelection We witnessed police spraying pepper gas into the eyes of peaceful female protesters 36 retweets Jun 15 Functioning Iran proxies 218.128.112.18:8080 218.206.94.132:808 218.253.65.99:808 219.0.16.70:8080 #iraneelection 410 retweets Our Iranian friends can access Twitter from 148.233.239.24 Port:80 in Tehran. Can avoid gov't filters from here. #iraneelection 131 retweets to other sources: this isn't the police! police is still outside! we're under attack by Ansar-Hezbollah. #IranElection 67 retweets Jun 16 Twitter Reschedules Maintenance Around #IranElection Controversy http://bit.ly/2wWNy (via 223 retweets RT From Iran: CONFIRMED!! Army moving into Tehran against protesters! PLEASE RT! URGENT! #IranElection 222 retweets RT Open Letter to the World from the People of Iran: http://tinyurl.com/nw95ev Please RT. 129 retweets Jun 17 Simple ways to help Iranian free speech: http://is.gd/13U0V #IranElection #gr88 Pls RT 536 retweets RT from Iran: #IranElection Regime still pretending there's no protest outside Tehran RT this HUGE demo pic NOW- http://twitpic.com/7k.i6e 250 retweets U.S. Government Asks Twitter to Stay Up for #IranElection Crisis http://bit.ly/5Cade 116 retweets Jun 18 RT Add your username to the Green Wall to show support for #iraneelection http://iran.greenthumbsails.com 272 retweets Mindblowing #IranElection Stats: 221,744 Tweets Per Hour at Peak http://bit.ly/3xmvpE 209 retweets to protect us all followers pls change your twt location to IRAN GMT+3.30 - #iraneelection RT RT RT 69 retweets Jun 19 MOUSAVI APPEALS TO THE WORLD TO PARTICIPATE IN SEA OF GREEN IN ALL CAPITAL CITIES THIS SUNDAY #iraneelection RT RT - confirmed 108 retweets RT From Iran: "I have one vote. I gave it to Moussavi. I have one life. I will give it for Freedom." #IranElection 59 retweets RT from Iran: The
situation in Iran is now CRITICAL - the nation is heartbroken - suppression is iminent - #Iranelection

Jun 20 I am prepared For martyrdom, go on strike if I am arrested #Iranelection

Jun 21 Courage! Please, please, read this short piece & RT: http://bit.ly/1QUIS #Iranelection

STOP supporting US backed coup in Iran. #Iranelection #Iranelection

RT If an innocent girl gets shot halfway across the world, does she make a sound? Yes, and the whole world hears her. #Iranelection #Iranelection

On 9/11, the world said we were all Americans. Tonight, we're all Iranian" #Iranelection #Neda

RT RT WIDELY FIRST AID INFO IN Farsi! http://gr88.tumblr.com/ #Iranelection

PLEASE RT: THIS IS WHY WE PROTEST. @ http://digg.com/d1uPU9 #iran #iranelection


MOUSAVI Declares ALL IRAN STRIKE TUESDAY & Rest of Week! Do NOT WORK! STAY HOME OR PROTEST! Close ALL Bazaars! #Iranelection #Neda #Iranelection RT

http://iran.greenthumbnails.com/ learn, understand, support FREE SPEECH! DO NOT SUPPORT BLOODY COUP IN IRAN! #Iranelection Tehran http://tinyurl.com/m7W4p9 #Iranelection

Jun 24 New pictures of Neda along with a profile of her life http://bit.ly/14ebTK #neda #Iranelection #Iranelection

in Baharestan we saw militia with axe choping ppl like meat - blood everywhere - like butcher - Allah Akbar - #Iranelection they pull away the dead into trucks - like factory - no human can do this - we beg Allah for save us - #Iranelection #Iranelection #Iranelection

Jun 25 RT URGENT FOR WOUNDED!! English & Farsi FIRST AID INFO: (http://gr88.tumblr.com/)

#Iranelection RT Please RT Video June 24th Riot in Baherstan Sq. posted today http://bit.ly/Hrh71 #iranelection #Iranelection

Plz send your videos to for media, esp CNN. When filming show newspaper to prove date. Very Imp RT RT #iranelection #Iranelection

Jun 26 RT - natarsim natarsim ma hame ba ham hastim - Don't be afraid, don't be afraid. We are all in this together #Iranelection #iran #Iranelection #Iranelection

Doctor who was with Neda in her last moments took a risk to speak to BBC: http://tinyurl.com/nrrg63 #Iranelection #Iranelection


#neda RT RT everybody #Iranelection


Check out the new tribute video for #iranelection. Dedicated to those protesting in Iran. Amazing video.RT RT http://tinyurl.com/lqpxxv #Iranelection

Jun 29 British embassy staff arrested in Iran, Foreign Office confirms http://bit.ly/6jJnP #iranelection #Iranelection #Iranelection #Iranelection

Iran government TV: Eight local British embassy staffers arrested http://bit.ly/13hAZ8 #iranelection #Iranelection

amiss. RT! #iranele #Iranelection

Jun 30 Jun 30 Bon Jovi, Andy Madadian & Richie S. sing "Stand By Me" 2 support #iranelection #iranelection http://bit.ly/q3hj #Iranelection

#Neda (You Will Not Defeat The People) #music video 4 neda and the ppl of Iran #Iranelection

#Neda #Iranelection #Iranelection

Bon Jovi & Iranian Superstar Andy M. sing "Stand By Me" 2 support #iranelection http://bit.ly/q3hj #Iranelection #Iranelection

RT Support your local Iranians! Only shop at 7-11. FREE IRAN!! ... with purchase of any medium size slurpee...

#Iranelection #Iranelection #Iranelection #Iranelection #Iranelection #Iranelection

RT Ahmadinejad WINS!!! Everyone else can SUCK IT!!!! #iranelection #Iranelection #Iranelection #Iranelection #Iranelection #Iranelection

RT Please LIGHT A CANDLE for those who have DIED! PLZ RT! #iranelection #Iranelection #Iranelection #Iranelection #Iranelection #Iranelection