Yahoo: On 27 September it’s Google’s 10th birthday. According to the official Google history, ‘Google opened its doors in September 1998.’ You gotta believe it, although how a search engine can open doors is a tricky thing to comprehend.

You can be sure of the 27 September date, though. As the official Google history puts it, ‘The exact date when we celebrate our birthday has moved around over the years, depending on when people feel like having cake,’ but it now really is 27 September, at least, it was, according to the last Google search.

Danny Sullivan, a writer for searchengineland.com, though, says Google’s birthday is a moveable feast and it’s not just the date but the actual age that moves, depending on when you start counting. Google cofounders Larry Page and Sergey Brin started working on BackRub, which became Google, Sullivan points out, in January 1996, which would make Google 12 years old this month.

Confused? Join the club.

The only way to find out the exact truth is to google Google’s birthday.

Wikipedia puts the birth date at 7 September, 1998, when Page and Brin formally incorporated Google. According to Sullivan, though, a search of California company records indicates Google was officially incorporated on 4 September, 1998. Either way, Google is 10 this month, unless you check when Google registered google.com, which was on 15 September 1997, which makes it 11 this month.

Can we trust all this information on the web? Why, sure, because Google uses PageRank – US Patent 6,285,999 – which is surely not, ahem, vulnerable to manipulation.

What is this PageRank thingy?

According to Google, ‘PageRank relies on the uniquely democratic nature of the web by using its vast link structure as an indicator of an individual page’s value. In essence, Google interprets a link from page A to page B as a vote, by page A, for page B, but Google looks at more than the sheer volume of votes, or links a page receives; it also analyses the page that casts the vote. Votes cast by pages that are themselves “important” weigh more heavily and help to make other pages “important.”’

According to David Vise, in The Google Story, counting the numbers of links pointing to a website was a way of ranking that site’s popularity, but popularity and quality don’t go hand in hand. That’s why Page and Brin developed a mechanism that combined the number of links to a webpage, which is useful, with the ‘importance’ of a webpage, which is more useful.

Great, but how does PageRank figure out ‘importance’? Put simply, it uses a link analysis algorithm to determine probability distribution by assigning a numerical weighting to each element of a hyperlinked set of documents valued by the dominant eigenvector centrality measure used commonly in network analysis to identify an adjacency matrix – kinda, sorta.

One of the problems with the way PageRank privileges links, though, is that a new page, even a really ‘important’ one, will need time before it generates many links, or gains many votes, from other sites, unless it’s part of an existing site. As Gideon Haigh nicely explained in ‘Infomation Idol: How Google is making us stupid’ in the February 2006 edition of The Monthly, PageRanks are essentially self-reinforcing. ‘The same sites get visited…because the same sites get visited,’ leaving great chunks of the so-called ‘dark web’ ungoogled.

Mind you, Google claims to light up most of the web – indexing more than three billion web pages and more than two-thirds of the 40 million or so websites in existence. Without Google – okay and Yahoo, and Exalead, and Ask Jeeves and the rest – the world wide web would just be an, um, web.

Of course, Google and the rest are baddies as well as goodies: they can lead you directly where you want to go or lead you totally astray. So what does Google turn up when you ask ‘How old is Google?’ According to an entry on WikiAnswers, highly rated by PageRank, ‘It’s, like, old as hell and God shuns those who use Google.’

Happy birthday, maybe.

This month’s Last Word was written by Steve Holden, Editor of Teacher.

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