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## It's a New Me (As Seen on Google)

By JULIA ANGWIN



For years, I winced at what popped up when I Googled my name.

The top result of a search on "Julia Angwin" was an article I wrote for The Wall Street Journal in 2005 after I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby was indicted for making false statements, perjuring himself and obstructing justice by lying about how and when he learned the identity of CIA operative Valerie Plame.

I hated seeing the story at the top of the list for a number of reasons: It was not a topic I normally wrote about; it had an underwhelming headline, "Novak's Role is Still Largely Unknown"; and -- most horrifyingly -- the story contained an error and had a correction appended to it.

Mysteriously, this article had become my hallmark online, showing up in my top-five search results for years. As a longtime media and technology reporter who is coming out with a book, I didn't feel the article represented my career. So a few months ago, I began trying to figure out how I could knock that story -- and a few others, while I was at it -- out of my search results. It was the beginning of a long and arduous introduction into the murky art of search-engine optimization, or SEO.

One of the paradoxes of the digital age is that the boundless freedoms of the Internet also constrain our identity. Before the ubiquity of search engines you could go on a date or a job interview and construct a narrative about your life that fit the situation. No one in your book group had to know that you were a punk-rocker in high school. But it's much harder to package yourself in the Google era. Online, your digital identity often comes down to the top 10 links on your SERP, or search-engine results page.

Of course, Google is not the Internet's only search engine. But since it is the most dominant one, I only focused on improving my Google SERP.

My first thought was to try to remove the unwanted article from my SERP. But search-engine expert and consultant Danny Sullivan advised me that it is extremely difficult to remove items from Google search results.

If you can prove to Google that a Web site has stolen your Social Security, credit card or bank-account numbers and posted them online, then Google will consider removing the offending data, he said. Even in those cases, Google urges people to contact the Web site directly to seek removal. "They don't really intervene unless there is some good legal reason to do that," Mr. Sullivan told me.

Still, Google does encourage people to boost their results by creating content about themselves. "People should take control of their own presence," says Adam Lasnik, search expert at Google. The best way to do that, he advises, is to create original compelling content about yourself that is easily accessed by Google and earns links from authoritative and relevant Web sites.

For details, I turned to WSJ.com's search-engine-optimization consultant Alex Bennert, who advised me to bury the annoying article underneath more favorable material, such as my social-networking profiles on LinkedIn, Facebook and MySpace, as well as blogging site Twitter.

Next, I contacted Rhea Drysdale, a search-engine-optimization expert at OutspokenMedia.com. Ms. Drysdale explained that I needed to focus on linking my online presences to each other -- that is, my Twitter page would link to my LinkedIn page, which would link to my biography on my book-publisher's site. These interlinkages are key to understanding Google's page-ranking system. Google rates Web sites, in part, by how many links they have from other credible Web sites.

Ms. Drysdale explained that this interlinkage system was the reason that my Novak article had been appearing so high in my SERP. Using Yahoo's Site Explorer, a tool that identifies sites that are linking to a Web address, she found that the Novak article had 25 links from sites that included the Washington Post, Instapundit and 13 different places in the archives of a conservative blog.

By interlinking my sites, my efforts soon began to pay off. Two weeks into the project, the Novak article disappeared from the first page of my results. My LinkedIn profile jumped to the No. 1 spot.

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*One lesson: You can work to boost your results, and then lose control in an instant.*

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Soon, my results got another boost as I launched a new blog and a column on WSJ.com. Within a month of the launch of both, traffic and links to these sites pushed two older articles I had written down or off my top results altogether. Of course, it's easier for me to move my results because I'm a journalist. Every time I publish a new article on WSJ.com, it immediately becomes part of my SERP equation.

For most non-journalists who do not maintain their own blog or Web site, it's a bit harder to create such a steady stream of new content on topics they want to associate with themselves. But it's not impossible. Ms. Drysdale recommends submitting articles to Web sites such as Squidoo.com, eHow.com or Google Knol on topics on that show off your expertise. "It's a huge branding opportunity," she says.

Still, visibility has a downside, which I unwittingly learned. The day that Apple Inc.'s Chief Executive Steve Jobs announced his "hormonal imbalance," I went on camera with a colleague at WSJ.com to talk about the possible impact on Apple's business.

Within hours, Apple enthusiasts at MacDailyNews.com started trash-talking me and my colleague for allegedly casting aspersions on their leader. As a result, these posts, some of them quite vulgar and nasty, shot up near the top of my search-results page. Luckily, they sank back down to the fourth page of my results within two days.

The whole unpleasant experience was an object lesson in another aspect of SEO: It's never over. You can work to boost your results, and then lose control in an instant. Constant

vigilance is required. That's why big companies hire experts to monitor their search results on a full-time basis.

Still, I hoped to strike the knockout blow for my SERP with the creation of a new personal Web site. With its launch approaching, I sent it to Ms. Drysdale, who made some specific technical recommendations. The front page was too graphical, she said. It needed to have more text that Google could categorize when its systems examined the site, a process called crawling. So the Web designer I was working with changed some of the text to make it more crawlable, sacrificing a beautiful typeface on the altar of SEO.

She also weighed in on the importance of the text and coding -- some of it invisible -- called metadata that's embedded in a Web site that helps search engines categorize the content. When building a page, Web programmers include a "title tag," which is displayed at the top of the Web browser and describes the page to a search engine.

For example, The Wall Street Journal's home page has a title tag that reads: "Business News, Finance News, World, Political & Sports News from The Wall Street Journal - WSJ.com." All those words help search engines categorize the content and are the exact words that appear in a Google search result.

Once my title tags and metadata were optimized, the site went live.

At Ms. Drysdale's recommendation, I used Twitter to "tweet" about the site, sending out a short text message. I also linked to my site from my Facebook and LinkedIn pages, as well as my "WSJ Community" profile.

For several days, I was greeted with a deafening silence. My SERP changed not at all as the site worked its way through the circuits at Google. Finally, 10 days later, my site appeared on the ninth page of my results and began slowly bubbling its way up to the top of my SERP.

And thus, I learned the final lesson of SEO: Patience is required.

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#### **Corrections & Amplifications**

I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby was indicted for making false statements, perjuring himself and obstructing justice by lying about how and when he learned the identity of CIA operative Valerie Plame. A previous version of this incorrectly stated he was indicted for revealing Ms. Plame's identity.

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