Summer, 1993: The internet was young and wild. In retrospect the name World Wide “Web” seems to connote something more organized than the roiling sea of data that had begun to accumulate, though at the time it was limited enough that hand-made catalogues organized much of its content. A web: something woven together, a constellation of linked points. I imagine the unsearchable internet like the night sky before we knew what stars and planets were made of, before we untangled astronomy from astrology, back when we sent all our questions to the skies because only the gods had the answers. A vast and murky soup, teeming with possibilities, if only we could map it out, if only we could begin to search.

For as long as humans have been able to write, our writing attests to our constant asking of questions: about the past, present, and future, seeking knowledge and advice. The ancient Greeks brought their questions to oracles: portals to the gods. The word “oracle” derives from the Latin for “to speak,” and can refer to the priest or priestess who channels the information, the place where the speaking is done, or the utterance itself.

The oracle I recall learning about in school, the one that appeared in the Greek mythology I was taught, was the oracle at Delphi. But the earliest known oracle was the oracle of Zeus at Dodona. In Plato’s Phaedrus, Dodona comes up in the middle of a rant in which Socrates condemns the written word (it can, he argues, too easily be read and then spouted as truth by one who doesn’t understand it). “They used to say, my friend,” Socrates tells Phaedrus, “that the words of the oak in the holy place of Zeus at Dodona were the first prophetic utterances. The people of that time, not being so wise as you young folks, were content in their simplicity to hear an oak or a rock, provided only it spoke the truth.”

The recording of oracles was one of the earliest uses of writing in Greece. About 4,000 lead tablets have been found, dating from the sixth to the second century B.C., inscribed with records from the oracle at Dodona. I envision tablets as bulky blocks, but these were long, thin sheets of metal, with the writing running along their length. Since lead is soft and pliable, the tablets were generally rolled or folded, their contents concealed inside. Some were palimpsests: queries written and overwritten, Etch-a-sketch style, upon the malleable lead.

Some of the tablets contain answers, but most contain only questions. From the small amount that have been analyzed—only 200 or so of the inscriptions have been published and studied since their excavation—the questions seem mainly to concern individuals’ desires to learn their futures or resolve personal issues. Unlike the oracle at Delphi,
which was often consulted regarding significant political matters, Dodona dealt mainly with smaller, more private wonderings:

*Shall I be a fisherman?*

*Kleotas asks Zeus and Dione whether it is better and profitable for him to keep sheep. Lysanias asks Zeus and Dione whether the child with which Annyla is pregnant is his.*

I imagine these tablets as the earliest search histories.

* The first internet search tool was called Archie: “archive” minus a letter. Archie collected file names on File Transfer Protocol (FTP) sites and put them into a searchable database. Archie was followed by the Gopher index systems of file names, then Veronica and Jughead (though Archie was not originally intended to reference the comic book character), which searched them. In September of 1993 came W3Catalog, the earliest rudimentary search engine. More soon followed—Aliweb, JumpStation, Webcrawler, Lycos, Altavista, Yahoo!—and then many more. The 1997 creation of Ask Jeeves, the human-powered query search engine that later became Ask.com, is worth mentioning: Unlike other search engines that used keywords and Boolean operators and the rest of the fixings of a regular database, Ask Jeeves tapped into our propensity to begin our searches—especially personal ones—with questions. It’s easy to forget now that search terms and questions were not always the same.

In 1998, computer scientists Sergey Brin and Lawrence Page published a paper called “The Anatomy of a Large-Scale Hypertextual Web Search Engine.” In it, they presented a prototype of their search engine, which was “designed to crawl and index the Web efficiently and produce much more satisfying search results than existing systems.” The paper addressed such issues as how to scale up a search engine to handle the rapidly growing web and “how to effectively deal with uncontrolled hypertext collections where anyone can publish anything they want.” The paper reported that, as of November 1997, “only one of the top four commercial search engines finds itself (returns its own search page in response to its name in the top ten results).” Brin and Page named their system Google “because it is a common spelling of googol, or $10^{100}$ and fits well with our goal of building very large-scale search engines.”

Among Brin and Page’s innovations was PageRank, the “probability that a random surfer visits a page.” It operates on the idea that “[i]ntuitively, pages that are well cited from many places around the web are worth looking at.” This is both a reasonable idea and possibly the digital equivalent of a self-fulfilling prophecy.

* A Google search for “oracle” mostly returns results for Oracle Corporation, a tech company. Though Oracle probably pays for its prominence in search results, I imagine that PageRank is also partially responsible: that places more frequently cite, and users more frequently visit, pages concerning a powerful corporation than those devoted to an
ancient mode of prophecy. Oracle Corporation took its name from its flagship product, Oracle Database, which took its name from the codename for a project that the company’s founder, Larry Ellison, worked on to develop a vast, all-knowing database for the CIA. The original Oracle operation ultimately failed, but Oracle Database undeniably has its roots in our government’s surveillance technology.

Ancient Greece’s oracles came to an end when all pagan practices were banned throughout the Roman Empire at the end of the fourth century A.D. by Christian emperor Theodosius, and most kinds of divination and fortune-telling have long since been debunked. Geologists recently identified the intersection of two major faults beneath the Delphi temple that may have emitted hallucinatory gases, so the priestesses really may have had visions of a sort, which is to say that they may have been high on ethylene. (Geology has yet to explain Dodona.) And the scientific revolution reduced astrology from science to pseudoscience. But falling from scholarly grace did not wipe out astrology’s popularity, and there are all sorts of reasons that otherwise reasonable people (including, occasionally, me) still sometimes take its guidance to heart: it offers a way to mark and punctuate time, a planet to blame when communication goes haywire, and an opportunity to look closely at ourselves and our choices—not to mention sheer entertainment value.

Science may have debunked astrology, but new media has, in a way, revived it. The popularity of newspaper horoscopes beginning in the 1930s provided a new way for astrology to reach people. Though it’s difficult to say whether accessible mass-media horoscopes increased the popularity of astrology or simply tapped into an interest that was already there, there is clearly a market for online fortune-telling of all kinds. There are online psychic readings, online astrological chart-makers, online voodoo spells. There is software based on Hellenic astrology called “Delphic Oracle.”

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When a question is tugging at me, I like to indulge in free online tarot card readings. At first glance, there is little to recommend them. They are inherently random, removing even the traces of will present in a real-life tarot reading: touching the cards, shuffling, cutting the deck. But the digital cards give me a quick and dirty way of addressing questions whose answers lie beyond my control (What will the next year of my life be like? Is he going to text me back?), questions that the internet’s usual mode of searching can’t answer for me.

I do, nevertheless, ask the internet plenty of questions that would probably be best channeled elsewhere. I ask about my body and my apartment and my computer and my heart and I understand why a desperate person might Google where are my keys. We say the internet puts answers “at our fingertips” and by this we mean that it is almost a part of us, its knowledge an extension of our own. It seems natural that it should have all of the answers we seek. After all, it knows us pretty well. The more we ask questions about ourselves (and buy things for ourselves), the more our search histories become a kind of
personal history. As we cast out hopes, anxieties, fears, and shopping lists into the
algorithmic void, the void is amassing an aggregation of data so thorough that it seems
conceivable that eventually I could ask Google what I want—about anything—and it
would know. Or maybe it already does. Search engines and social networking sites
cleverly mine our desires and feed back to us bits of ourselves—the eerily apt banner ad,
the presumptuous autocomplete—in small, unsettling sips. At its creepiest and most
effective, the internet knows us the way a good psychic does and performs the same
sleight-of-hand: it capitalizes on every hint we’ve offered, every gesture, so subtly that
we forget we are the ones who provided it.

I try to imagine what the full picture would look like: the body of information that is my
search history, a collected shadow-body of me. If I could see the whole shape at once,
what would I know? It doesn’t seem that unreasonable to envision a link between data
and fortune, to assume that the methodical gathering of information, on a broad enough
scale, should be able to tell us something about ourselves, our futures. It seems possible
that over enough time, all of my questions might arrange themselves into a kind of
answer. This perhaps is not what people worry about when they worry about the sinister
side of data collection, but it does make me feel vulnerable to imagine that something out
there—which can’t think or feel but can crawl, index, and search—has enabled the
creation of such a body, a data-me that I’ve built myself but can’t see or touch.

Maybe the appeal of pulling meaning from a virtual deck of cards lies in the very
randomness of it. There is no person or engine behind the cards that knows anything
about me. The reading starts from a clean slate. Though built of code like every other
website, online tarot readings let me believe in, or entertain the idea of believing in,
something more mysterious than algorithms, even if that mysterious something is nothing
more than my own brain linking up little synchronicities until they make a kind of
magical sense. There is no algorithm for coincidence.

It’s both silly and liberating to reserve some small bit of trust for going by feel, for the
part of ourselves that does not show up in our search histories. The part of our psyches
that protects us just a little from the knowing gaze of viral advertising and the deep
probes of security questions, like our own personal set of protective CAPTCHAs that a
web robot cannot solve. Randomness reminds us that technology has limits, that it
doesn’t know everything, and that no search engine can be the oracle we imagine.

About the author:
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