Ethics and Professional Intimacy Within the Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) Industry

Sophie Iredale, Aleksej Heinze

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Sophie Iredale[1], Dr. Aleksej Heinze[1]

[1]Salford Business School, Salford, Greater Manchester, United Kingdom

`{s.iredale@edu, a.heinze@}salford.ac.uk`

Abstract. Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is the process of increasing a digital profile's visibility within a search engine for relevant search engine results pages. SEO is playing a critical role within the digital marketing and communication strategies of many organizations globally. Particularly in the UK, digital marketing budgets have continued to rise in the last decade, despite the economic uncertainties.

With the increase of spending in SEO related activities, a number of businesses focusing on SEO services have emerged, offering SEO services with unfounded promises. The SEO services are not regulated and do not have recognized ethical standards.

Key influences such as a lack of professional intimacy and the velocity of market change are considered, as well as the possibility that the SEO community is becoming divided in its own understanding of what it fundamentally is. Dilution of industry specialism, through a continual attempt at self-preservation and cannibalization of other methods of online communication, is leaving not only SEO practitioners vulnerable, but also the very clients and consumers they are hired to serve. This raises a clear ethical issue that requires further exploration.

Keywords: Search Engine Optimization, SEO, Ethics, Professional Intimacy

1 Introduction

This paper identifies a need for ethics and professional intimacy within the Search Engine Optimization (SEO) industry. To date, Marketing, Business and IT research publications have covered a wide range of material on practical guidance for the SEO practitioner, however, detailed discussion into the significance of ethical SEO conduct is yet to be explored. This paper aims to determine if there is a need for transformation of the SEO industries current practice and processes in order to safeguard the future of the industry and defend its reputation.

This is a position paper underpinned with accounts from scholarly literature as well as practitioner opinions from industry related blogs and reports. It will commence

with an analysis of the current condition of the SEO industry and its stance on ethical SEO. The paper will finish with a discussion of ethics and professional intimacy in the SEO industry, as well as justification for further relevant research into the unique area of SEO.

2 The State of Digital

Consumer behavior has changed considerably over the last decade with the evolution of multi-device and multi-channel buying patterns and behaviors, forever influencing how organizations communicate with their consumers [25]. This has placed pressure on the organization to become multidisciplinary with their marketing approach [3]. As a result, organizations have been presented with too many complex strategic choices regarding how best to remain competitive and cut through the variety and multiplicity of information on the web [16].

Whilst some align new technology with innovation, others see change as disruption [7]. Convergence of new technology and data available to organizations has rapidly become overwhelming, with many organizations failing to meet the growing demands of their markets relative to internal capacity [10]. As such, a current perspective held by academics and practitioners is that there is a 'digital skills gap', specifically within the marketing industry [38].

Following a report released by Lloyds Bank in association with the Government's cross-sector partnership and digital initiative 'Go On UK' [30], findings showed 75% of 1,988 organizations surveyed were not investing in developing and improving digital skills (defined namely as internet, ecommerce, digital marketing and IT literacy skills). Of the 25% seeking to improve their organizations' digital proficiency, the primary option was to pursue professional consultancy and advice from Tech, IT or digital marketing practitioners, taking a dominant 35% share of all support options.

Whilst the Government has gone so far as to commission a survey of organizations digital literacy, the inquiry stops there. What then becomes of those organizations that go on to obtain professional digital support and how is it ascertained that they are actually getting a quality digital service needed to 'fill the gap'?

2.1 A Digital Marketing Skills Gap?

A recent study undertaken by Adobe Systems Limited revealed that only 9% of 1000 digital marketers strongly agreed they had the optimal skills to deliver a successful digital marketing campaign [1], however such skills were not clearly defined. There is also little scholarly literature that explores where specific competency issues

rest due to the emerging nature of the skills gap. As such, no research has gone so far as to explore how this should be managed.

There has, however, been online discussion of a skills deficit resting with a particular sub-sector within the digital marketing industry, with one scholar, Dr. Aleksej Heinze, suggesting the area worst affected is that of Search Engine Marketing and the specific practice of Search Engine Optimization or 'SEO' [17]. Heinze advocates that this is potentially down to two areas:

> "ignorance, where people just don't know they're not getting it right; or incompetence, where they know about it but just assume because they know they're doing something in that area, they must have it covered."

Such behaviors of SEO practitioners explored by Heinze are detrimental to the SEO industries reputation and the SEO clients in need of quality SEO services, particularly as it is happening at a time where changes in digital technology and marketing techniques are occurring at a rapid rate [29]. This places more pressure on SEO practitioners to 'keep-up' as well as putting participating businesses involved at threat of maltreatment and exclusion.

2.2   SEO – A Brief History

SEO is the culmination of long term optimization techniques, tactics and strategies to help a web presence (namely websites, social profiles, videos and apps) achieve sustainable rankings in search engine results pages for related search queries [12]. The aim of SEO is to drive traffic back to a web presence to generate brand awareness and engagement as well as leads and conversions.

Whilst advances in technology push for greater cohesion of digital marketing practices, SEO is very much impacted by search engine processes and the opacity of their algorithms, a factor which makes SEO unique from other digital marketing disciplines [46].

Search engines are "special websites that have indexed billions of pages - and make it easy for [users] to find a website or page in an instant" [4]. Popular search engines include Google, Bing and Yahoo however, popularity of search engines vary from country to country. A search engine algorithm is a computational process that determines what content should be served in its search engine for any given query [40]. It is compounded of 200 website signals such as region, on page technical elements, content and backlink profiles [33].

Each year search engines roll out 500-600 changes to its algorithm without forewarning or indication of what the algorithmic changes will be [36]. This means the SEO industry is based solely upon an ever changing and undisclosed algorithm that lacks transparency and can be difficult to predict [47].

However, search engines such as Google do offer some guidance to webmasters and SEOs about recommended routes to optimizing a website through their "Quality Guidelines" [13]. The guidelines can be described as a compendium of best practice standards, SEO practitioners can either choose to comply with or not. Not complying with best practice guidelines runs the risk of being excluded from Google's search results index [50]. A number of papers have been published focusing on identifying the key variables of the search engine ranking algorithm [48], [43], [15], however full transparency on all algorithmic processes and search engine ranking factors will likely never be achieved [49].

Further to this, though an SEO practitioner may follow all best practice guidelines specified by a search engine, results are not guaranteed or take a considerably long time to manifest in search engine results pages (SERPs) [44]. In response, some SEO practitioners choose to adopt other less virtuous manipulation tactics to unnaturally and, in most cases, temporarily boost a digital profile up search engine rankings [5]. Knowingly or unknowingly utilizing such SEO practices is harmful to most organization's digital profiles and webpages.

With such exploitative techniques still occurring, this raises the question of whether an intensified focus on the concept of ethical practice is needed to protect clients and consumers against inadequate or negligent SEO services.

It is important to note that this paper does not aim to demonize an entire industry, which like any other occupation has both moral and immoral actors operating under a shared occupation [14]. That being said, the actions of a less honorable subset of SEO practitioners have tarnished perceptions of the SEO industry [52], with the use of unnatural manipulation tactics posing just one explanation for the stigma surrounding SEO. Concepts such as the velocity of change, industry fragmentation and professional intimacy are explored later in this paper to further enhance understanding of unethical behavior.

2.3   A Fractured Industry

One subset of SEOs willingly engaging in foul play does not define and ethically shape an entire generation of SEOs, rather, an analysis of available literature and opinions of key industry speakers has been analyzed to determine if there is a more obtrusive barrier to ethical practice occurring. Research shows that velocity of change in the industry is inextricably linked to a practitioners' ability to adapt to new skills, resulting in dilution of technical and strategic understanding as well as a destabilized professional identity [51].

Since the launch and continual revision of two of Google's biggest algorithm updates ('Panda' and 'Penguin'), traditional SEO changed drastically, shifting its focus

from paid practices (considered 'spam') to 'earned' methods, as with more traditional marketing processes [35]. It gained mainstream attention and did not do much to help the reputation of an already abstruse industry. Whilst the algorithms helped to improve quality of output, SEO has needed to adopt new verticals such as content marketing, public relations and social media marketing [31] as a form of self-preservation and to remain competitive.

For practitioners who attempt to adapt to new digital communications practices, formulating an SEO strategy becomes a minefield of its own as each new vertical has its own best practice guidelines, as well as advertising standards, that must be expertly abided by to avoid any legal and ethical pitfalls [28].

Sourcing succinct and direct information on new marketing disciplines becomes increasingly difficult with the amount of disinformation perforating the SEO community [18]. As the SEO industry splinters into its own esoteric factions of routes to best practice [54], SEO's are challenged with making the most accurate and ethical decision. This is typically undertaken through consultation of peer reviews, effectively relying upon other people's intuition, which can be "well-meaning but misguided"[1]. This can mean the route to mastering a practice becomes convoluted as the SEO practitioner is required to continually seek answers and regain familiarity with an ever changing algorithm and required strategic responses [24]. As a result, this increases subsequent risk of "slow learning and the tendency to revert to previous approaches"[2].

Therefore, can practitioners say they have truly grasped the complexities of present day SEO and deem themselves an expert, or have required changes to procedure and skillsets tempered this development? For this very reason, when looking at SEO as a whole, it is becoming more difficult than ever to define exactly what the industry is [55] and ultimately, harder to implement a unified code of ethics.

3   Towards a Code of Ethics?

As defined by Cornell [9], a 'Code of Ethics' can be typically segmented into distinct elements "1) an introduction or preamble, 2) a statement of purposes and values, 3) specific rules of conduct which may be subdivided in various ways, and 4) implementation of the code, which will define administrative processes, reporting, and sanctions".

Whilst it is believed that some SEO companies have developed their own code of ethics [27] this is not true for the SEO industry in its entirety. Individual SEO freelancers, SEO departments and SEO companies may have unique ethical codes relevant to their own SEO service but the industry is without a unifying and sanctioned

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[1]   [26] p. 8
[2]   [39] p. 116

ethical code or rational process for its implementation. This situation has been described by one online publisher as a gesture without "teeth" [8].

Despite an increasing awareness of a need for a unified ethical code of conduct [45] within the SEO industry, the process is made more complex as SEO practices and processes transcend various industries, devices and countries. Therefore, with so many factions to consider, it raises the question of who would, or could, take ownership of managing and enforcing such a code of ethics [37]?

3.1 Existing Regulatory Guidelines

Although there is a "Consumer Protection from Unfair Trading Regulations" act, with an intent to protect consumers from unfair, misleading or aggressive online marketing practices [20], this is only in the context of the following breach of law: 'spam' ('unsolicited solicitations by telephone'), 'unclear advertorials', 'targeting of children' and casual use of the word 'free'. Such areas are not relevant to the practice of SEO.

The Internet Advertising Bureau [21] has begun to recognize the apparent need to regulate the Search industry, with the introduction of a 'CAP code' for non-broadcast marketing and advertising [6]. However, search regulation appears to focus exclusively on paid search techniques such as pay-per-click (PPC) with no concrete guidance on organic SEO. Instead, the SEO practitioner is offered the following information:

> "For policies related to Search Engine Optimization (SEO) – see the individual policies of Search Engines" [22].

Whilst search engines release their own best practice policies there is no sanction that states it must be followed explicitly.

3.2 Search Engine Marketing Trade Association (SEMTA)

In October 2014 the SEMTA (semta.eu) was founded – a trade association representing search engine marketing business in the UK and Europe. At the time of writing this paper, the association is still in beta and as such, the association is yet to gain traction within the Search Marketing and SEO community. Whilst this is most definitely a positive step towards delivering a unified ethical message of progress, in keeping with marketing demands for the SEO industry, this alliance has a long way to go to help elevate the confidence in and reputation of the Search industry [42].

3.3 Lessons from SEMPO

Taking key learning's from the SEO industry within the United States of America, a not for profit trade organization that represents the search and digital marketing industry, called SEMPO (sempo.org), was formed out of a desire for Search Marketers to work towards a more centralized understanding of Search Marketing best prac-

tice. A code of ethics was defined for SEO practitioners to follow and each year an annual industry survey, in association with Econsultancy, is released to give some insight into the "State of Search". Whilst this offers a much needed insight into search standards within the US, SEMPO has defined itself as the following:

> "SEMPO is not a standards body or a policing organization. Membership in or involvement with SEMPO is not a guarantee of a particular firm's capabilities, nor does it signify industry approval or disapproval of their practices" [41].

The contentious issue of whether the SEO industry needs a centralized association that works to lobby on behalf of the disadvantaged SEO practitioner and misinformed client, is still open to debate. However, it does raise the question of whether the SEO industry needs, not only a self-regulated legislative framework that defines broad principles for best practice, but also a route to actively enforcing industries commitment to said principals. Much like Google can penalize a website for violating best practice guidelines and even go so far as to 'de-index' a site from its search engine, if an SEO practitioner cannot deliver on best practice, should they have their ability to practice revoked?

Conversely, would this be unfair punishment when SEO activity is founded upon an ambiguous algorithm that is infamously hard to predict no matter how much integrity the SEO practitioner has?

Whether the SEO industry should adopt a transcendent, practicable and potentially enforceable code of ethics is an important topic yet to be discussed in detail by scholars and practitioners. However, in order to obtain and secure professional autonomy, it is imperative the SEO open a dialogue to discuss the possibility of ethical regulation soon, as "if an industry cannot regulate itself a body will step and it will regulate that industry, whether they wish it or not" [28].

4   Ethics and Professional Intimacy in SEO

Many concepts form the foundation of ethics in the practice of SEO. As explored in the previous sections, they can be circumstantial, knowledge or competency driven [19]. This section of the paper explores whether ethical practice is intrinsically linked with the concept of professional intimacy, that which is between the SEO client and SEO practitioner.

Professional intimacy is described as the openness between that of a client and practitioner [2]. It is a philosophy that frames the importance of company-client relationship management with an aim to improve customer satisfaction [32].

Typically addressed in 'service management literature [2], [11], the concept of professional intimacy contextualized in a digital marketing setting is yet to be documented.

The implications of professional intimacy in the context of SEO, suggests the SEO practitioner should have an implicit understanding of their client, their needs and overall objectives [34]. This can be difficult to achieve due to common stresses in a marketing agency setting such as "overburden, overwork, corrosive stress, and unrelenting time pressures"[3]. This, in conjunction with a rapidly evolving industry, can diminish intimacy over time if not controlled.

As aforementioned within previous sections of this paper, a subset of SEO practitioners have become notorious with exploiting SEO clients lack of understanding of a search algorithm [5]. Doing so takes advantage of the trust intimacy conjures, and has the potential to undermine the practitioner-client relationship [23]. As a result, a lack of intimacy can breakdown the positive regard the client holds for the SEO practitioner, negatively impacting SEO practitioner and industry reputation [2].

In response, Hollyoake [19] suggests it is valuable for SEO practitioners to challenge existing cultures and systems within a company to understand what part of the practitioner-client experience is destroying perceived value and leaving clients vulnerable. As such, further research is required to determine where tensions are encountered throughout the practitioner-client experience to determine how a more meaningful and profitable relationship can be achieved. Such insight into intimate relationships could inform a motion to improve industry reputation and ethical conduct.

Whilst assessing the practitioner-client relationship is vital to becoming a critically reflective SEO practitioner, it is important to consider whether true professional intimacy is obtainable within the constraints of the SEO industry? As search engine algorithms are ambiguous, it can be argued that full disclosure on SEO processes and their outcomes can never be attained, as practitioners may not be able to "explain why any particular outcome was produced" [27]. This raises the fundamental question, can genuine professional intimacy ever be achieved if search engine algorithms cannot be known intimately?

5   Conclusion

The paper focused on the topics of industry fragmentation, exploitative SEO practice and a lack of professional intimacy between the client and company as possible reasons for a breakdown in ethical conduct within the SEO industry. Conceptualizations of such themes in the context of SEO have been arbitrary and relatively underexplored to date. As such the position paper advocates the value of further research into this area.

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[3]   [53] p. 19

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