

# An ant-colony based approach for real-time implicit collaborative information seeking

Alessio Malizia<sup>a,\*</sup>, Kai A. Olsen<sup>b,c</sup>, Tommaso Turchi<sup>a</sup>, Pierluigi Crescenzi<sup>d</sup>

<sup>a</sup>*Human Centred Design Institute, Brunel University London, London, UK*

<sup>b</sup>*Faculty of Logistics, Molde University College, Molde, Norway*

<sup>c</sup>*Department of Informatics, University of Bergen, Bergen, Norway*

<sup>d</sup>*Department of Information Engineering, University of Florence, Florence, Italy*

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## Abstract

We propose an approach based on Swarm Intelligence — more specifically on Ant Colony Optimization (ACO) — to improve search engines' performance and reduce information overload by exploiting collective users' behavior. We designed and developed three different algorithms that employ an ACO-inspired strategy to provide implicit collaborative-seeking features in real time to search engines. The three different algorithms — NaïveRank, RandomRank, and SessionRank — leverage on different principles of ACO in order to exploit users' interactions and provide them with more relevant results. We designed an evaluation experiment employing two widely used standard datasets of query-click logs issued to two major Web search engines. The results demonstrated how each algorithm is suitable to be employed in ranking results of different types of queries depending on users' intent.

*Keywords:* Ant Colony Optimization, Cooperative Systems, Evolutionary Computation, Information Filtering, Information Retrieval, Recommender Systems, World Wide Web

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\*Corresponding author

*Email addresses:* `alessio.malizia@brunel.ac.uk` (Alessio Malizia), `kai.olsen@himolde.no` (Kai A. Olsen), `tommaso.turchi@brunel.ac.uk` (Tommaso Turchi), `pierluigi.crescenzi@unifi.it` (Pierluigi Crescenzi)

## 1. Introduction

Traditionally text retrieval was based on keywords. However, not all documents had been adequately tagged, neither could the keywords describe all aspects of a document. With faster computers, it became possible to perform full-text searches. Then we got the problem of too many hits, i.e. the supplied keywords were found in too many documents. One tried to cope with this by determining relevance as the number of occurrences of each search term in the document, in relation to document size. The first search engines on the Web used this approach.

There were several disadvantages to this approach. Looking for information on a given car, using maker and model as keywords, the search engine did not direct you to any official site. Instead, one was overloaded with car for sale advertisements, as these had a good occurrence to size ratio of the keywords. It was also quite easy to fool the search engines, for example by adding long list of repeated keywords to a Web page, often using a small white font so that it did not clutter the page.

Google's PageRank algorithm saved the day. By letting relevance be determined by the number of links to a page, adding up the score if the links also came from pages that had many links to them, Google had captured a semantic understanding of the relevance concept. For example, many Web pages may say something about The White House, and there may be many white houses, but Google puts the official site on top, most probably the page that the user wants. And every time someone makes a link to this page, they increase its relevance.

The disadvantage of this approach is that it is static. Pages found important by the PageRank algorithm will probably get more important as they are found by the search engine. That is, important pages will get more important. New pages on similar topics will be hard to find, i.e. placed further down on the search engine result page, and will thus be considered less important. Over time, an algorithm used to determine relevance might be self-fulfilling.

Ideally, we would need a search algorithm that were more dynamic, but still gave a good idea of relevance. Our idea is to use data from the actual searches - what we call dynamic trail information. While PageRank uses static information as link structure, we want to collect data from the actual searches performed by other users. For example, you may be interested in renting a boat to go deep-sea fishing outside the Lofoten Islands in Northern

38 Norway. Your keywords may be rent, boat, fishing, Lofoten. The search  
39 engine will then return a standard list of relevant pages; however, in addition  
40 you will find a list that says: “other users found these pages”. That is, the  
41 system have collected data on what other users with similar query terms  
42 did. They may have started with the same keywords as you, but may also  
43 tried other searches, ending up with a few interesting pages. That is, the  
44 effort that other users have put in finding relevant pages can be important  
45 information to you.

46 The data needed to offer an “other users found these pages” list can be  
47 collected quite easily, but one will need access on the server level, i.e. to  
48 collect data from many users. One could strengthen the trail if the user  
49 performed some action at the end. This could either be implicit, such as  
50 noting that the users stayed on the site for some time, typed in data, printed  
51 from the page, bought or booked, etc. Alternatively, it could be explicit,  
52 where the users use a “like” button to tell that the page is interesting, e.g.  
53 the Google+1 service<sup>1</sup>.

54 Such an approach falls into the implicit collaborative information-seeking  
55 area in which developing new collaborative search interfaces is still needed,  
56 as recently suggested by Hearst [1].

57 According to Golovchinsky et al. [2], a collaborative information search  
58 system can be either implicit or explicit, meaning that users can explicitly  
59 collaborate on query formulations and review search results or can implicitly  
60 take advantage of other users’ search intents. Normally, implicit collaboration  
61 systems provide a recommendation and filter the results already explored by  
62 previous users, making them available to others with similar information  
63 needs.

64 The majority of studies in the implicit area are based on collaborative  
65 querying techniques that upgrade information systems with data on past  
66 query preferences related to other users. As recently demonstrated [3], such  
67 studies primarily tested implicit collaborative information-seeking systems  
68 using simulated query formulation instead of employing user analysis involv-  
69 ing human participants. In our research, we employed a classic approach by  
70 using two existing datasets to simulate queries to evaluate our system in a  
71 real setting.

72 Hence, we deal with the problem of improving search engines’ perfor-

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<sup>1</sup><https://developers.google.com/+web/+1button/>

73 mance by exploiting the actions performed by users. In fact, search engines  
74 are tools designed to help people solve their own informational needs and sig-  
75 nificant room exists for improvements. Queries submitted to search engines  
76 can be clustered into three main categories on the basis of users' aim [4]:

77 **Informational queries** are issued by users willing to acquire information  
78 that they assume is present on one or more Web pages;

79 **Navigational queries** are being used to get to a particular Web page be-  
80 longing to an organization or an individual; and,

81 **Transactional queries** are issued to perform activities using the Web, such  
82 as booking a trip or downloading a file.

83 Ranking results produced through navigational queries can be effectively  
84 addressed using existing Link Analysis Ranking (LAR) algorithms, such as  
85 PageRank, Hyperlink-Induced Topic Search (HITS), or Stochastic Approach  
86 for Link-Structure Analysis (SALSA): a higher number of hyperlinks point-  
87 ing toward one particular page results in a higher page relevance (in other  
88 words, algorithms assume that this page is the one that the user was look-  
89 ing for when she issued the query). Ranking results of informational and  
90 transactional queries is another matter: given the high frequency of Web  
91 pages' updates and the ever-increasing need to obtain answers in real time,  
92 the World Wide Web hyperlinks' configuration is no longer the only effective  
93 relevance measure that users assign to Web pages. Thus, devising new rele-  
94 vance indicators — to be placed alongside the existing ones (in other words,  
95 those based on Link Analysis Ranking) — with the goal of further improv-  
96 ing the ranking by considering other relevance measures valued by users is  
97 necessary [5].

98 In this paper, we propose to employ the concepts of Swarm Intelligence  
99 (SI) in relation to the Ant Colony Optimization (ACO) meta-heuristic to  
100 improve search engine performance and to reduce the information overload<sup>2</sup>  
101 by exploiting collective users' behavior in their usage of search engines.

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<sup>2</sup>The inability to make a decision because of the huge quantity of information obtained by the users.

## 102 **2. Related Work**

### 103 *2.1. Search Engines*

104 Different studies pointed out users' low degree of satisfaction with search  
105 engines. Fox et al. [6] devised a machine learning approach that employs  
106 users' actions (for example the time spent on a page, scrolling usage, and  
107 page visits) and concluded that users consider 28% of search sessions unsat-  
108 isfactory and 30% only partially satisfactory. Xu and Mease [7] measured  
109 the average duration of a search session and found that users typically quit  
110 a session — even without having satisfied their informational need — after  
111 three minutes.

112 The main purpose of search engines is to satisfy users' informational  
113 needs, thus they are being used as a starting point of users' Web browsing  
114 [8, 4, 9]; nevertheless, the search experience is far from perfect. In fact, a sub-  
115 stantial number of searches end up unsatisfied. Many researchers attempted  
116 to improve search engines results' relevance by exploiting query-click logs (in  
117 other words, logs of all the interactions users carry out with the search en-  
118 gine), usually in the form of click-through data. Joachims [10] was the first  
119 to exploit these logs as implicit relevance judgments about search engine re-  
120 sults and trained a meta-search engine to outperform many other famous  
121 ones. After the work of Joachims, using query-click logs to improve search  
122 engine performance became a widely popular technique [11].

### 123 *2.2. Information Foraging on the Web*

124 Many theories attempted to explain users' behavior when searching for  
125 information in complex systems (for example, the Web). For the scope of this  
126 paper, we refer to two approaches related to the proposed algorithms: the  
127 ScentTrails system [12], which continuously allows users to supply keywords  
128 and enriches hyperlinks to provide a path that achieves the goal described by  
129 them, and the method by Wu and Aberer [13], which operates within a single  
130 Website to enrich the information provided by hyperlinks with a technique  
131 inspired by ant-foraging behavior (in other words, heavily clicked links are  
132 recommended in favor of less visited links).

### 133 *2.3. Learning to Rank*

134 Learning to Rank aims at automatically learning the right ranking func-  
135 tion from a training set, typically a click-through dataset. Joachims [10]

136 outlined three major key points: (1) explicit feedback provided by users can-  
137 not be taken for granted and, as a matter of fact, is unnecessary because  
138 the information given by the query-click logs are enough; (2) in fact, they  
139 can be used as a measure of relevance (with a relative scale); and (3) a ma-  
140 chine learning method — Joachims used a Support Vector Machine (SVM)  
141 — can be used to obtain a new ranking function that improves search engine  
142 performance.

143 In addition to SVMs, other machine learning algorithms may be used,  
144 such as RankBoost [14], RankNet [15], QBRank [16], GBRank [17], AdaRank  
145 [18], and MCRank [19].

146 However, Learning to Rank approaches exhibit two drawbacks: (1) the  
147 training phase is computationally expensive and faster methods are being  
148 sought [20]; (2) because most of the outlined machine learning methods are  
149 offline, the system must be trained again each time new data become avail-  
150 able, which occurs quite frequently because we are dealing with click-through  
151 data; thus, online methods are also being investigated [21, 22, 23].

152 In conclusion, it is important to point out that Learning to Rank tech-  
153 niques are not the only ones employed in training ranking functions: other  
154 studies described alternative soft computing methods, such as genetic pro-  
155 gramming [24] and Swarm Intelligence (SI) [25].

### 156 **3. Ant Colony Ranking**

157 In the introduction, we described how information overload is a major  
158 problem affecting Internet users and outlined some useful approaches to ad-  
159 dress this issue: software agents, implicit feedback, collaborative filtering,  
160 and assisted browsing/searching [26].

161 Given the current wide usage of Web search engines, we focused on all the  
162 unsatisfactory searches with the goal of addressing the information overload  
163 problem. Some techniques aiming at improving their performance have been  
164 summarized (for example, Learning to Rank) to highlight a few key concepts:  
165 (1) the relationship between users seeking information and the optimal forag-  
166 ing theory; (2) the need for a search engine to adapt itself to users' behavior;  
167 and (3) the need to perform such adaptation in real time.

168 Almost none of the aforementioned approaches take into account all three  
169 of these aspects, as stated by Wu and Aberer [13] and Olston and Chi [12].  
170 Beyond a doubt, a Swarm-based approach can take into account all three key

171 factors and is, nonetheless, a much more elegant and simple method than all  
172 of the other “ad-hoc” alternatives.

173 For these reasons, in the next section we introduce a model able to de-  
174 scribe ranking algorithms inspired by Swarm Intelligence (SI) that can im-  
175 prove the performance of a search engine by adapting themselves to users’  
176 behavior.

#### 177 4. A Model for Ant Colony Ranking Algorithms

178 Each day ants leave the colony in search of food and building materials;  
179 they will exploit the surroundings in all directions in a somewhat random  
180 fashion. If an ant finds anything of interest, it will return to the colony  
181 depositing pheromone, a chemical substance that the other ants are able  
182 to detect. Thus they create trails to signal the path between the colony  
183 and the food. The quantity of pheromone deposited, which may depend  
184 on the quantity and quality of the food, will guide other ants to the food  
185 source. That is, the other ants in the colony may now use the pheromone  
186 as a trail marker to reach the food. This marker evaporates over time, so  
187 that uninteresting trails disappear. Shorter trails will get a higher level  
188 of pheromone, thus shorter trails will endure longer, providing a notion of  
189 optimization.

190 Normally, ants from different colonies exhibit aggression toward each  
191 other. However, some ants exhibit the phenomenon called unicoloniality.  
192 Here worker ants freely mix between different colonies. These species of ants  
193 live in populations known as supercolonies that may be used to characterize  
194 social behavior on the Web.

195 Let us assume that a set of users all start with the same query, for example  
196 “compact camera GPS”. That is, they are all interested in finding Web sites  
197 that can offer a good bargain for such a camera (“food”). Our group may  
198 start with a Google query, and click on links to explore the results. These  
199 click streams will define our “pheromone” or virtual trail. They may for  
200 example be implemented by adding score values to each link, or visualized  
201 by representing the links by large fonts, stronger color, etc.

202 However, on the Web we can optimize, leaving the trail metaphor and  
203 lead subsequent users directly to interesting pages. That is, we let our ants  
204 (users) explore the Web, but we let them deposit the pheromone on the  
205 most interesting pages. The rest of the colony (i.e. other users with similar  
206 interest) can then go directly to these sites.

207 Swarm Intelligence (SI) refers to the emergence of “intelligent” behavior  
208 from a group of simple and/or loosely organized agents. Ants are a typi-  
209 cal example of SI and their use of stigmergic processes<sup>3</sup> inspired the famous  
210 family of Ant Colony Optimization (ACO) algorithms [27, 28] and many  
211 variants, including Max-Min Ant System (MMAS) [29], Continuous Orthog-  
212 onal Ant Colony (COAC) [30], and Rank-based Ant System (ASrank) [31].  
213 These classes of algorithms are bio-inspired (Ant Colony) probabilistic meta-  
214 heuristics for solving computational problems related to searching for an  
215 optimal path in a graph; the probabilistic nature of such techniques — along  
216 with some basic rules driving agents towards appropriate solutions — allows  
217 for their convergence to an optimal solution, avoiding local optimums.

218 As we have previously stated, we will adapt the strategies employed in  
219 food searching by ant colonies in the building of ranking algorithms em-  
220 ploying users’ behavior; without a doubt, humans are more intelligent and  
221 organized than ants. However, some complex phenomena stems from Web  
222 surfing, since collective activities like Wikipedia, del.icio.us, or even the entire  
223 Web, are indeed stigmergic processes [32, 33].

224 Summarizing, users surfing the Web issue relevance judgments every time  
225 they submit a query and select a result among the ones provided by a search  
226 engine. Ultimately, a SI-based approach seems a valid idea to make such  
227 systems able to exploit users’ seeking behavior.

228 It’s pretty intuitive to find a parallelism between the way ants forage for  
229 food and the way users employ search engines to satisfy their informational  
230 needs; yet the latter, unlike ants, don’t leave any trace at all, so they can’t  
231 provide any clues to the next users with their same informational needs, and  
232 — since about 30–40% of queries issued to a search engine are already been  
233 submitted [34] — that’s a pretty common scenario.

234 So, by using a virtual form of pheromone — controlled in the same way as  
235 the one used by ants — it’s possible to define a ranking algorithm that ranks  
236 relevant results based on the pheromone left on each document: the more  
237 we’ll find on a document the higher its ranking will be, since that document  
238 was considered relevant by a large amount of users.

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<sup>3</sup>Pierre-Paul Grasse introduced the term in 1950s during his research on termites. It is defined as a method of communication based on individuals modifying their surrounding environment.



239 *4.1. Formalization*

240 Here we introduce a brief formalization of the model we just proposed.  
 241 We will assume that interactions between users and the search engine are  
 242 available in the form of query-sessions — briefly “sessions”: by the definition  
 243 of Wen and Zhang [35], a session is formed by the query a user submitted  
 244 to the search engine — i.e. the text describing what he/she is looking for  
 245 — together with the visited Web pages consequently to his/her request; an  
 246 example of a query session can be found in table A.2 in the Appendix.

247 Borrowing the notation of [35], let  $D(q)$  be the set of Web pages the  
 248 search engine presents to the user as results for the query  $q$ , selected by  
 249 filtering only the relevant ones for  $q$  through any available retrieval strategy  
 250 [36]. The page set a user clicked on for a query  $q$  may be seen as

$$DC(q) = \{d_{q1}, d_{q2}, \dots, d_{qi}\} \subseteq D(q),$$

251 where  $d_{qi}$  represents the  $i$ -th document the user clicked among the results  
 252 of the query  $q$  (i.e.  $d_{q1}$  being the first selected result — if any —  $d_{q2}$  the  
 253 second — if any — and so on); on the other end, we denote  $d_q^i$  the document  
 254 currently ranked in position  $i$  among the results of the query  $q$  by the ranking  
 255 algorithm in use.

256 The pheromone associated to a document  $d$  with respect to a query  $q$  is  
 257 denoted by  $\varphi_{dq}$  and is updated every time a user selects the document among  
 258  $D(q)$  or — carrying on the similarity with ACO — he/she covers the path  
 259  $q \rightarrow d$ ; the amount of pheromone deposited each time depends on the specific  
 260 user session  $DC(q)$  and will be detailed in the next section.

261 Considering each document  $d$  and any known query  $q$ , pheromone evapo-  
 262 ration follows an exponential decay based both on the current value  $\varphi_{dq}$  and  
 263 the elapsed time since its last update — denoted with  $\tau_{dq}$ . In mathematical  
 264 terms, denoting the new pheromone value by  $\varphi'_{dq}$ , the evaporation rule can  
 265 be expressed by the equation

$$\varphi'_{dq} = \varphi_{dq} e^{-\lambda \tau_{dq}},$$

266 where  $\lambda$  is the exponential decay constant; this rule can be transformed in a  
 267 much simpler version by defining a new constant

$$\delta = \frac{\ln(2)}{\lambda},$$

268 which represents the amount of time needed for the pheromone deposited on  
269 each document to half its value since its last update for any given query.

270 The evaporation rule becomes then

$$\varphi'_{dq} = \varphi_{dq} 2^{-\frac{\tau_{dq}}{\delta}}.$$

271 Pheromone evaporation is performed periodically and its frequency de-  
272 pends on how the relevance of documents changes over time: since evapora-  
273 tion is a mechanism that enables the system to forget registered behaviors,  
274 the more frequent it gets triggered the more newly registered behaviors will  
275 be considered important. To the best of our knowledge, the only similar  
276 approach is the one by Koychev and Schwab [37].

277 Finally, the set of documents  $D(q)$  — i.e. the results for any query  $q$  —  
278 are ranked by exploiting the amount of pheromone  $\varphi_{dq}$ , for each  $d \in D(q)$ .

279 The Ant Colony Ranking strategy can be viewed as an interplay of the  
280 three procedures just described, as summarized by Algorithm 1 [38]: the  
281 ranking computed using the pheromone deposited over each document  $d \in$   
282  $D(q)$  is prompted to the user issuing the query  $q$  (`ShowAntColonyRanking()`),  
283 user's clicks get processed and partake in the existing pheromone's configu-  
284 ration (`ManageUserActivity()`), and finally the pheromone evaporation is  
triggered (`EvaporatePheromone()`).

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**Algorithm 1** The Ant Colony Ranking strategy in pseudo-code.

---

```
procedure ANTCOLONYRANKING
  scheduledactivities
    ShowAntColonyRanking()
    ManageUserActivity()
    EvaporatePheromone()
  end scheduledactivities
end procedure
```

---

285 To summarize, we can now define different Ant Colony Ranking algo-  
286 rithms by specifying (1) how the amount of pheromone  $\varphi_{dq}$  is updated every  
287 time a user selects the document  $d \in D(q)$  for any query  $q$  (i.e. `ManageUserActivity()`),  
288 (2) an evaporation strategy (i.e. `EvaporatePheromone()`), and (3) how it  
289

290 exploits the amount of pheromone  $\varphi_{dq}$  to retain the position of a document  
 291  $d \in D(q)$  in the final ranking presented to the user (i.e. `ShowAntColonyRanking()`).

## 292 5. Three Ant Colony Ranking Algorithms

293 We focus on unsatisfactory search sessions (approximately 50% of all  
 294 search sessions, according to [39]) and attempt to improve the entire search  
 295 users' experience. To do that, we proposed a framework for the definition  
 296 of ranking algorithms that exploit users' interactions with search engines on  
 297 the basis of the Ant Colony Optimization (ACO) meta-heuristic by defin-  
 298 ing a pheromone's update rule, how it evaporates over time and the ranking  
 299 strategy for the set of pages  $D(q)$  presented as results for each query  $q$ .

300 In this section, we present three algorithms. The first algorithm is a  
 301 simple application of the ACO principles to Web pages' ranking, the second  
 302 algorithm attempts to reinstate the probabilistic nature typical of the ACO  
 303 meta-heuristic, and the third algorithm is our attempt to leverage on the  
 304 complete users' search sessions and not just on their single interactions with  
 305 the search engine.

306 *NaïveRank.* The first algorithm is the simplest and most direct implemen-  
 307 tation of the principles described so far, and is inspired by the stochastic  
 308 ranking algorithm by Gayo-Avello and Brenes [40]. We employ the simplest  
 309 incrementing function, namely the successor; thus, given any user search ses-  
 310 sion  $DC(q) = \{d_{q1}, d_{q2}, \dots, d_{qi}\}$ , the pheromone deposited on each document  
 311  $d_{qi} \in DC(q)$  will be updated with the rule

$$\varphi'_{d_{qi}} = \varphi_{d_{qi}} + 1,$$

312 where  $\varphi'_{d_{qi}}$  indicated the new value after the update.  $D(q)$  is ranked decre-  
 313 mentally based on the amount of pheromone deposited on each document  
 314  $d \in D(q)$ , thus for any given query  $q$  and two documents  $d_q^i, d_q^j \in D(q)$  with  
 315  $i < j$  (recall that  $d_q^i$  stands for the document ranked in position  $i$  among the  
 316 results of the query  $q$ ) we have

$$\varphi_{d_q^i} \geq \varphi_{d_q^j}.$$

317 Despite the resemblance to the algorithm described in [41], NaïveRank runs  
 318 in real time and, more importantly, naturally takes into account the shifts in  
 319 users' interests by using the evaporation process.

320 *RandomRank.* The second algorithm uses an alternative approach taken from  
321 the basic principles of ACO [28], through which we considered search engines’  
322 users as agents of a Swarm Intelligence (SI) system. Given our previous  
323 algorithm, the probabilistic nature of the original model — which represents  
324 one of the ACO strengths — fades out: this phenomenon causes neglecting  
325 new paths’ discovery once the system reaches convergence. Going back to  
326 Web searching, a gradual empowering of the most popular pages’ pheromone  
327 occurs at the expense of the less popular ones. This effect, known as self-  
328 reinforcement, is typical in many techniques of Web ranking [42].

329 Therefore, we want to encourage the discovery of new pages — in other  
330 words, new paths to be explored — by reinstating the probabilistic nature of  
331 ACO algorithms into the ranking mechanism, and keeping the update rule  
332 the same employed by NaïveRank. Thus, we randomly rank each result in  
333  $D(q)$  for any query  $q$  with the probabilistic procedure described in Algorithm  
334 2, using a probability distribution based on the quantity of pheromone of each  
335 one of them. This way, highly visited pages yield a higher ranking — through  
336 a higher probability of selecting one of them in one of the first positions —  
337 but less relevant documents still have the opportunity of becoming popular  
338 (thanks to the probabilistic nature of the algorithm).

339 Each cycle in the loop is responsible for the ranking of a document in the  
340 set of results: it builds the set  $\bar{D}(q)$  of pages that still need to be ranked  
341 and randomly picks a document based on its pheromone configuration. This  
342 random selection is performed every time a user issues a query  $q$ , yielding in  
343 a renewed opportunity of discovering new and relevant documents in  $D(q)$   
344 and let them gain positions in the ranking.

345 *SessionRank.* The last algorithm employs yet another mechanism of the ACO  
346 approach. Indeed, hitherto the increment function has always used a fixed  
347 amount of pheromones regardless of the click’s position among the user’s  
348 search session. Within the ACO meta-heuristic, in order to achieve conver-  
349 gence quicker, the pheromone’s quantity is set to decline on the basis of the  
350 quality of the solution found.

351 On the Web though, users cannot provide a solution to the ranking prob-  
352 lem but can assist by providing their own view of relevance. In fact, the first  
353 document that a user selects among the results in a given search session is  
354 the one that, based on the available clues, is perceived as the most relevant  
355 to the user [44]. The most relevant document according to a user is the  
356 one that should be in a highly relevant position in the optimal solution to

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**Algorithm 2** Procedure ranking  $D(q)$  used by RandomRank based on [43].

---

```

procedure SHOWANTCOLONYRANKING
  for  $i \leftarrow 1, \#D(q)$  do                                ▷ Rank one result at a time
     $\bar{D}(q) \equiv \{d : d \in D(q) \wedge d \neq d_q^j, 1 \leq j < i\}$     ▷ Not yet ranked

    Select  $d \in \bar{D}_q$  with probability  $\frac{\varphi_{dq}}{\sum_{\bar{d} \in \bar{D}(q)} \varphi_{\bar{d}q}}$  and rank it in position
     $i$ 

  end for
end procedure

```

---

357 the ranking problem for that given query. The next document, selected in  
 358 the same session, is considered less relevant since it was selected after the  
 359 previous document.

360 The SessionRank algorithm employs the relative order of clicks performed  
 361 by each user during a session and increments the pheromone's quantity ac-  
 362 cordingly. Therefore, choosing an exponential decay, the update rule be-  
 363 comes:

$$\varphi'_{dq} = \varphi_{dq} + 2^i,$$

364 where  $d \equiv d_{qi}$  and  $d_{qi} \in DC(q)$  for any user search session  $DC(q)$  yielding  
 365  $D(q)$ .

366 To summarize, the model proposed in the previous section to define rank-  
 367 ing algorithms on the basis of ACO employs pheromone traces on each doc-  
 368 ument in relation to any query issued to the search engine; the pheromone  
 369 increases each time a user selects a page among the results of a query and  
 370 vaporizes over time taking into account users' gradual loss of interest. There-  
 371 fore, once a user performs a query already performed by others, the search  
 372 engine is able to present a new ranking based on the behavior shown by users  
 373 with the same informational need, de-facto exploiting pheromone traces.

374 We described three different algorithms that, by exploiting the afore-  
 375 mentioned model, use different ACO-inspired mechanisms to improve the  
 376 proposed ranking. Thus, since establishing whether improving search engine  
 377 performance is truly possible by employing this new approach is important,  
 378 we devised an evaluation of the different algorithms using real query-click

379 logs. In the following section, we present details on measures, setups, and  
380 results.

## 381 **6. Evaluation**

### 382 *6.1. Search Engine Evaluation*

383 In an ideal situation, an Information Retrieval (IR) system (for example,  
384 a search engine) should only provide relevant results for the issued queries.  
385 The tendency is to accept that such systems provide the widest set of relevant  
386 documents, along with some less relevant results. Normally, evaluating an  
387 IR system requires experimental sets containing queries, documents, and  
388 relevance judgments; however, building such collections requires a significant  
389 amount of work (in other words, data on queries and judgments). Thus, in  
390 many recent studies [45, 46, 40, 47, 5], click-through data were employed to  
391 evaluate search engines' performance. The concept is simple: employ clicks  
392 as relevance judgments, assuming that a user evaluates a result as relevant  
393 if it is chosen among the search results related to a query.

394 Consequently, in the following experiments, we employed query-click log  
395 datasets provided by two famous search engines — AOL [48] and Yahoo! —  
396 to carry out experiments on the proposed algorithms (further details on these  
397 datasets can be found in the Appendix); we have validated the new ranking  
398 produced by each algorithm using the very same datasets clustered by each  
399 user's search session, applying a simple temporal threshold (30 minutes, as  
400 suggested by several previous studies [6, 49]) to decide whether two actions  
401 performed by a single user belong to the same search session.

402 Hence, we considered two interactions as belonging to the same search  
403 session when they were both (1) issued by the same user, (2) contained the  
404 same query, and (3) performed within 30 minutes.

405 After selecting the two datasets, we needed a performance measure to  
406 evaluate all the different algorithms we propose.

407 Sakai [50] compared different performance measures that take into ac-  
408 count the documents' positions and recommended the so-called Normalized  
409 Discounted Cumulative Gain (NDCG) for its simplicity and robustness [51].

410 The NDCG consists of a parameter and two functions: 1.  $k \in \mathbb{N}_0$  is a  
411 cut-off parameter defining the number of elements in the results list to be  
412 considered; 2. the gain function measures the benefit earned by the user (if  
413 a document is only relevant or irrelevant, then the gain is binary), whereas

414 3. the discount function weighs the documents' relevance on the basis of the  
415 position in the results list.

416 Moreover, to obtain an absolute measure — in the real interval  $[0,1]$  —  
417 we normalized it with respect to the maximum obtainable gain.

418 More formally, let  $\vec{y} \in \mathbb{R}^n$  be an array containing relevance values belong-  
419 ing to a sequence of  $n$  elements (for example, the results of a query) and let  
420  $\vec{\pi} \in \mathbb{R}^n$  be a permutation of the same sequence (for example, the ranking  
421 produced by an algorithm). Let  $\vec{\pi}(q)$  be the index of the  $q$ -th element in  
422  $\vec{\pi}$  and let  $\vec{y}_{\vec{\pi}(q)}$  be the value of its relevance. The Discounted Cumulative  
423 Gain (DCG) of the permutation  $\vec{\pi}$  is defined as:

$$\text{DCG}@k(\vec{y}, \vec{\pi}) = \sum_{q=1}^k \frac{2^{\vec{y}_{\vec{\pi}(q)}} - 1}{\log_2(2 + q)}.$$

424 In this case, the gain function is a power of 2, whereas the discount function  
425 has logarithmic decay over the permutation length. Thus, the NDCG is  
426 defined as:

$$\text{NDCG}@k(\vec{y}, \vec{\pi}) = \frac{\text{DCG}@k(\vec{y}, \vec{\pi})}{\text{DCG}@k(\vec{y}, \vec{\pi}_{\vec{y}}^*)},$$

427 where  $\vec{\pi}_{\vec{y}}^*$  is the permutation corresponding to a perfect ranking w.r.t. the  
428 relevance judgments in  $\vec{y}$  or, in other words:

$$\vec{\pi}_{\vec{y}}^* = \operatorname{argmax}_{\vec{\pi}} \text{DCG}@k(\vec{y}, \vec{\pi}).$$

429 Few publicly available datasets already provide explicit relevance judgements  
430 for each document they refer: the Yahoo! dataset is one of them, but the  
431 AOL one does not; as we state before though, user clicks can be used as a  
432 relative measure of the perceived relevance by each user. In this case, we  
433 then build the array  $\vec{y}$  by assigning 1 to each document selected by the user  
434 in the search session we are currently trying to compute the NDCG for, 0 for  
435 the ones that were not selected.

436 To summarise, computing NDCG scores for each search session contained  
437 in the datasets is possible using the available relevance judgments for Yahoo!  
438 and by assuming that the visited results are the relevant ones for AOL.  
439 Effectively, by doing so we are actually evaluating the current performance  
440 of the two search engines, which will be the baseline we are comparing our  
441 algorithms against.

442 *6.2. Evaluation of Ant Colony Ranking Algorithms*

443 We described hitherto how search engine performance are evaluated by  
444 employing the query-click log containing users' interactions. As we previously  
445 stated, the proposed algorithms require queries, clicks, and search sessions to  
446 adjust the pheromone deposited on each document in relation to any query  
447 submitted to the search engine. The chosen query-click logs contain all this  
448 information and, thus, can be employed to simulate our algorithms in a real  
449 world scenario.

450 The validation strategy is dictated by the constraints over our context:  
451 since we are using these datasets to simulate real users' interactions, we have  
452 to obey to time constraints; our test set will then always be consequent to  
453 the training set, since the system can only be trained using past interactions,  
454 forbidding any kind of cross-validation. According to the most common  
455 strategy, we chose then to split our data and use the first two thirds for  
456 training and the remaining for testing: moreover, using one third of the  
457 available interactions provides a significant amount of data to thoroughly  
458 test our algorithms.

459 Therefore, we prepared two partitions for each available query-click log:  
460 the AOL partition includes the set of the almost 20 million clicks performed  
461 from March to April 2006 and was used for training, whereas the remaining  
462 set of approximately 10 million clicks performed in May 2006 was used for  
463 the evaluation. The Yahoo! training set contained almost 40 million clicks  
464 performed during the first 20 days of July 2010 (excluded), whereas the  
465 evaluation set contained the remaining 26 million clicks issued until the end  
466 of the same month.

467 After the training phase, we compared the search sessions contained in  
468 the test sets with the ranking given by each algorithm and devised a se-  
469 quence of potential clicks; this procedure is ruled by a simple and reasonable  
470 assumption [40]: during a search session, if a user chooses a result for a given  
471 query, we safely assume that the same user in the same search session would  
472 have chosen that same result even if it was found in a higher position in the  
473 results' list. Finally, we computed the mean of NDCG for each session.

474 Furthermore, because we sought to evaluate how the algorithms param-  
475 eters affect performance, we tested three different values of  $\delta$  and of the  
476 evaporation time (one hour, one day, and one week), and three session dura-  
477 tion values for the SessionRank training (one, five, and 25 minutes, namely  
478 very brief, average — according to [7] — and long-duration search sessions);  
479 besides, since RandomRank is a probabilistic algorithm, each experiment



480 were repeated 5 times using different seeds of the random number gener-  
481 ator.. Thus, the evaluation involved 162 different experiments. We carried  
482 them out using a t2.small Amazon EC2 instance running Amazon Linux AMI  
483 and the DEX library to manipulate both datasets [52]; each run took about  
484 3 hours to complete.

485 To summarize, our evaluation’s aim was to measure and compare the  
486 proposed ranking algorithms’ performance using data provided by two fa-  
487 mous search engines. Because our methods are based on users’ interactions  
488 to discover the most promising results, the datasets were partitioned into  
489 a training set and a test set. In the next sections, we provide the results  
490 obtained from using this evaluation method.

### 491 *6.3. Results*

492 As previously stated, we defined a framework for the evaluation of the  
493 three proposed algorithms performance using the interactions from the two  
494 different query-click logs. We described (1) the way we selected the training  
495 and test sets, (2) how we used the former to simulate real users’ behavior, and  
496 (3) from the latter we yielded the potential clicks combining new rankings  
497 with the original click-through data.

498 In the following, we analyze the results of the performed experiments,  
499 reporting NDCG scores for three different cutoff values: 1, 3 and 10 results  
500 (NDCG@1, NDCG@3, NDCG@10). We recall that NDCG is a measure in  
501 the interval [0,1] where 1 is the ideal ranking. We chose to test our algorithms  
502 on three different cutoff values meaning respectively: the result ranked first  
503 with NDCG measure representing the ratio between our algorithm result and  
504 the first best ranked from the training set; the three highest ranked results  
505 and the ten highest results. We can imagine comparing the results within a  
506 search engine result page in which only first result is returned, or the first  
507 three or the first ten. We evaluated those results for all three proposed al-  
508 gorithms. Graphs showed in the following figures are organized as follows:  
509 on the x-axis the ( $\delta$ ) factor is shown representing the timeframe set for halv-  
510 ing the pheromone (representing evaporation); the wider the timeframe the  
511 longer will take to half the pheromone and thus results appearing in the  
512 ranking will be more persistent: it, basically, represents the magnitude of  
513 the evaporation set to 0.5 (delta factor in section 4.1). On the y-axis on the  
514 left we show the NDCG values [0,1] related to the corresponding pheromone  
515 upgrading timeframe (upgrades are run hourly, daily and weekly) showed on

516 the right (y-axis), while on the top (x-axis on top) the different NDCG cut-  
 517 offs are shown. Finally, the black segments represent our benchmark, that is  
 518 the NDCG values computed respectively on the Yahoo! and AOL datasets  
 519 by maintaining the default search engine’s ranking.

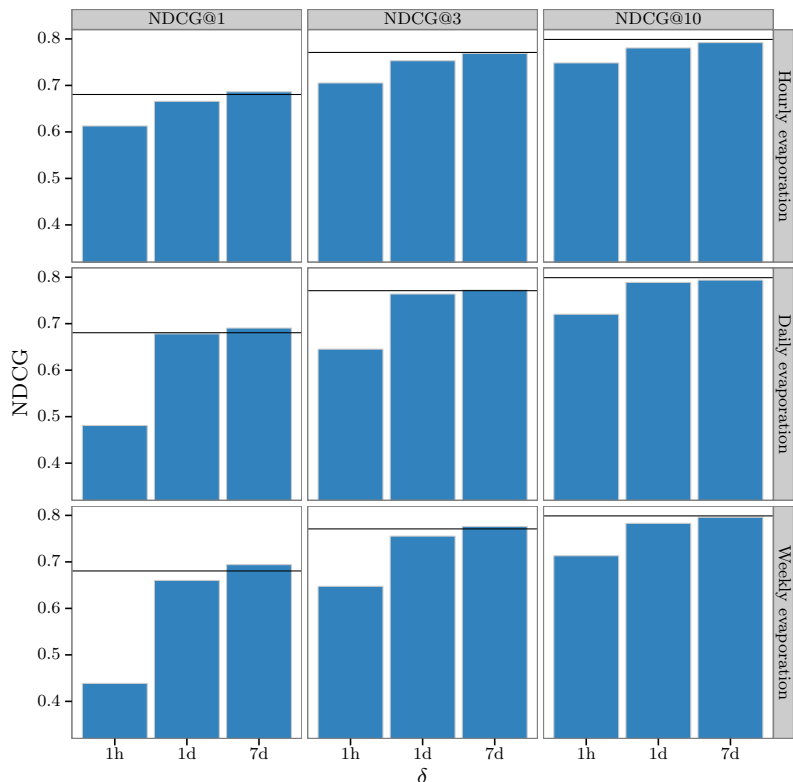


Figure 1: NaïveRank results related to the AOL Dataset. The x-axis represents the timeframe set for halving the pheromone, the left y-axis the NDCG values related to the corresponding pheromone upgrading timeframe on the right y-axis, while on the top x-axis the different NDCG cutoffs are shown. The black segment indicates the benchmark, namely the result given by the default AOL’s ranking.

520 Figures 1 and 2 show respectively the performance given by the NaïveRank  
 521 algorithm by using AOL and Yahoo! dataset. As expected, our algorithm  
 522 performs better on the larger dataset (i.e. Yahoo! in figure 2); this seems rea-  
 523 sonable, since it follows from the Ant Colony Optimization (ACO) approach:  
 524 the more data is recorded about users’ behavior the better the algorithm  
 525 will perform. More surprising are the differences obtained using different

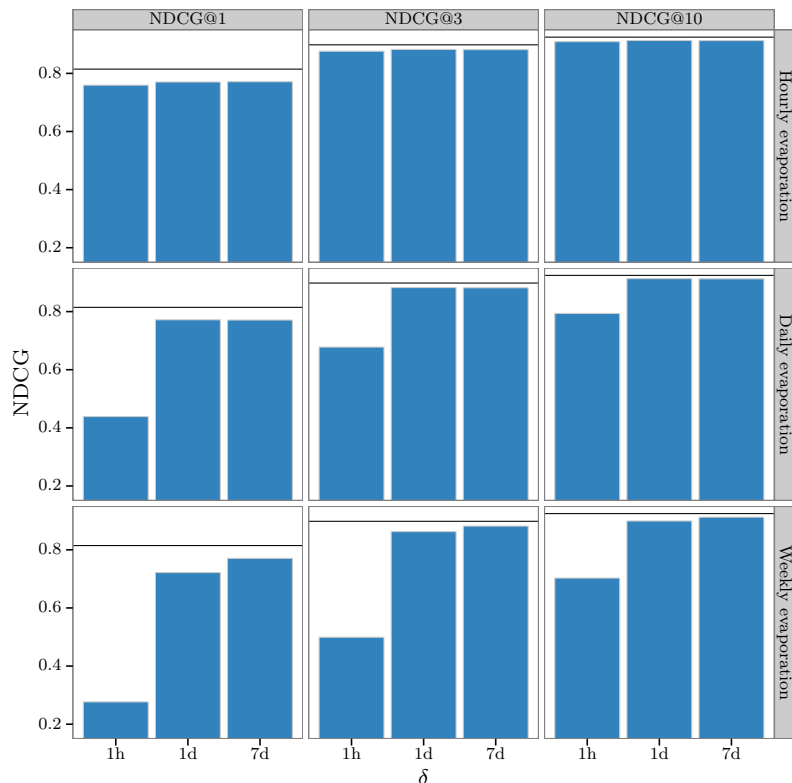


Figure 2: NaïveRank results related to the Yahoo! Dataset. The x-axis represents the timeframe set for halving the pheromone, the left y-axis the NDCG values related to the corresponding pheromone upgrading timeframe on the right y-axis, while on the top x-axis the different NDCG cutoffs are shown. The black segment indicates the benchmark, namely the result given by the default Yahoo!’s ranking.

526 pheromone evaporation intervals and by halving ( $\delta$ ) times. Normally, one  
 527 would expect that depending on the halving delta factor timeframe the al-  
 528 gorithm would perform better in adapting to users’ behavioral changes: in  
 529 fact, no matter which dataset we used, we obtained the best performance by  
 530 setting  $\delta = 7d$  (a week timeframe); this confirms what implied by Liu et al.  
 531 [53] about the weekly cycle of the majority of queries which states that users  
 532 will perceive search engine results as relevant and up to date generally only  
 533 during one week after which they would expect the results to be updated.

534 Regarding the evaporation time, we noted an interesting effect: although  
 535 using non-optimal  $\delta$ s (as stated above, we found out that seven days was

536 the optimum) doesn't affect the performance, choosing an optimal  $\delta$  makes  
537 slightly no difference at all.

538 Thus, when implementing the NaïveRank we can safely act on  $\delta$  to reduce  
539 the evaporation frequency, in order to reduce the amount of computations  
540 needed. This implies that the algorithm will be more computationally effi-  
541 cient in real time. Effectively, increasing the evaporation frequency will affect  
542 the computational cost of the algorithm since the upgrade denoted by the  
543 evaporation rule in section 4 has to be computed less frequently.

544 Consequently, just by observing the first results we can argue that the  
545 data size required to get good performances from the algorithm is substantial.  
546 While the evaporation time is important to achieve good performance, using  
547 a  $\delta$  set to the weekly cycle of queries allowed us to arbitrarily choose the  
548 evaporation time, significantly reducing the computational costs.

549 Considering figures 3 and 4 which report on the RandomRank perfor-  
550 mance, it is interesting to notice how it differentiates from NaïveRank: the  
551 variations take place mostly for NDCG@1 (i.e. the score related only to the  
552 first displayed result), while for NDCG@3 and NDCG@10 results are almost  
553 identical to NaïveRank. This is due to the probabilistic nature of the random  
554 ranking; indeed, probability has on average an higher effect when smaller set  
555 of documents are considered due to probability of selecting more than one  
556 element of the set for NDCG@3 and NDCG@10.

557 A slightly more interesting result comes from analyzing how such vari-  
558 ations actually occur: when tested against the AOL dataset — the smaller  
559 one — RandomRank underperforms NaïveRank by about 10%. For Yahoo!  
560 Dataset, performances are almost the same for both the algorithms. The  
561 exception is the configuration; with  $\delta = 1h$  (i.e. the halving factor) and a  
562 weekly evaporation cycle. Then RandomRank doubles the score obtained  
563 with the same configuration by NaïveRank. This could confirm once more  
564 what we stated previously when discussing NaïveRank's results about the  
565 weekly cycle of search queries, as introduced by Liu et al. [53]: the introduc-  
566 tion of probability helps users discovering new interesting documents among  
567 results. In this particular case the pheromone updates on weekly basis ac-  
568 cording to users' perception of documents relevance.

569 Finally, figures 5 and 6 show the results related of the SessionRank al-  
570 gorithm; these graphs — apart from the evaporation frequency on the right  
571 y-axis, the halving factor in the x-axis and the segments representing the  
572 benchmarks as for the previous graphs — show the different timeframes used  
573 by the algorithm to identify a user's search session in its training phase. We

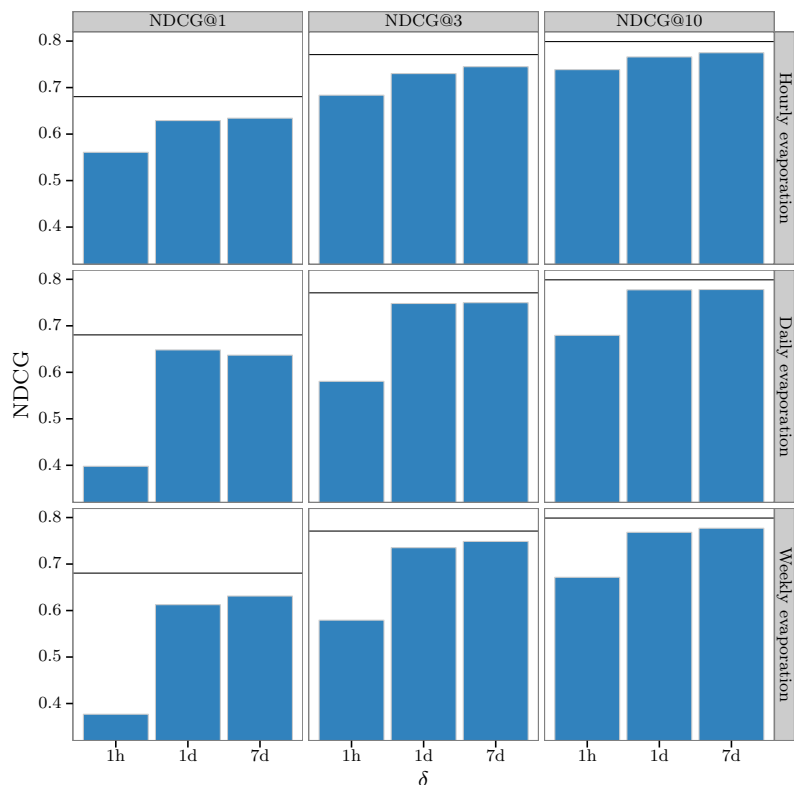


Figure 3: RandomRank results related to the AOL Dataset. The x-axis represents the timeframe set for halving the pheromone, the left y-axis the NDCG values related to the corresponding pheromone upgrading timeframe on the right y-axis, while on the top x-axis the different NDCG cutoffs are shown. The black segment indicates the benchmark, namely the result given by the default AOL's ranking.

574 recall that based on the session's duration, the algorithm distributes differ-  
575 ently the quantity of pheromone to be deposited on a document once; by  
576 performing multiple experiments, each time with a different session's dura-  
577 tion, the algorithm will consider a sequence of interactions performed by  
578 the same user as a single session if they were all done within the allowed  
579 timeframe, otherwise it will split them into multiple sessions. We chose to  
580 test three configurations for the sessions duration used by the algorithm (as  
581 reported in different colors in the figures) namely 1 minute, 5 minutes and  
582 25 minutes. We selected these three configurations in order to evaluate the  
583 different performance of our algorithms with very brief search sessions, i.e.

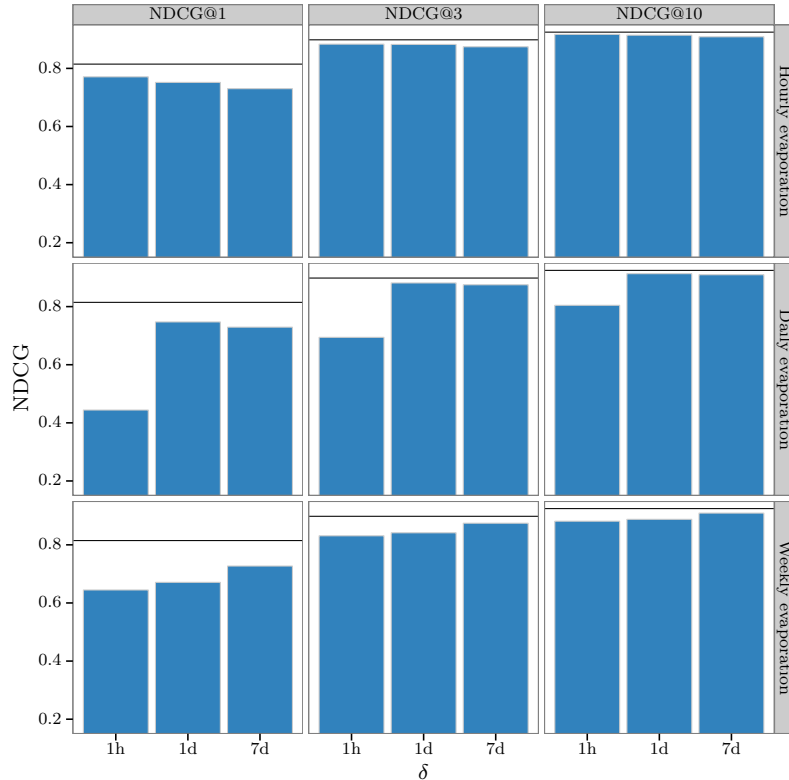


Figure 4: RandomRank results related to the Yahoo! Dataset. The x-axis represents the timeframe set for halving the pheromone, the left y-axis the NDCG values related to the corresponding pheromone upgrading timeframe on the right y-axis, while on the top x-axis the different NDCG cutoffs are shown. The black segment indicates the benchmark, namely the result given by the default Yahoo!’s ranking.

584 1 minute which is shorter than the average search session — 3 minutes ac-  
 585 cording to [7]; we also tested our algorithms with 5 minutes sessions that can  
 586 be considered as of average duration and finally we chose to also include 25  
 587 minutes sessions to sample longer durations.

588 One can notice straightaway that the training sessions duration is mostly  
 589 irrelevant; this may be caused by the average short length of search sessions,  
 590 as demonstrated in [54], since users tend to perform brief sessions, performing  
 591 different queries; thus search sessions will have only few clicks performed in  
 592 a short time span and the amount of pheromone to be deposited by the  
 593 algorithm will be rather fixed, causing no effect.

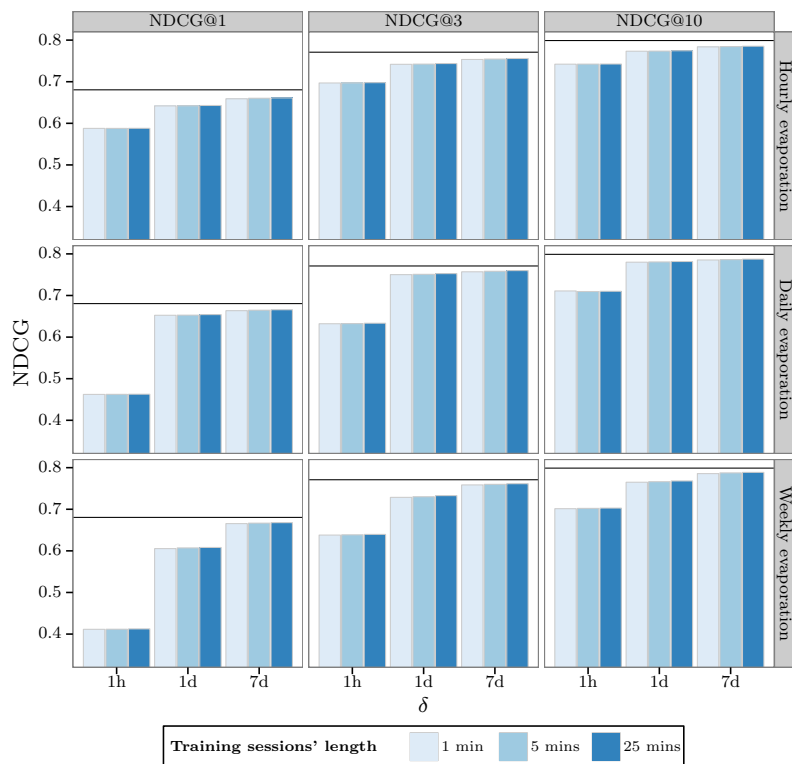


Figure 5: SessionRank results related to the AOL Dataset. The x-axis represents the timeframe set for halving the pheromone, the left y-axis the NDCG values related to the corresponding pheromone upgrading timeframe on the right y-axis, while on the top x-axis the different NDCG cutoffs are shown; the different colors represent the timeframes used to identify a user’s search session in the training phase. The black segment indicates the benchmark, namely the result given by the default AOL’s ranking.

594 Also, the algorithm performs worse than NaïveRank using the first dataset,  
 595 while outperforming it with the second one; this is still due to the variation in  
 596 training set size: a greater number of search sessions used in training causes  
 597 an improvement due to the greater quantity of pheromone available to be  
 598 deposited by each user; thus, the pheromone’s modulation — inspired by the  
 599 ACO metaheuristic — improves the algorithm performance proportionally  
 600 to the number of interactions recorded during the training phase.

601 Figure 7 recaps our results: the two plots represent only the *best* perfor-  
 602 mance obtained by the different configurations of our algorithms — showed  
 603 on the x-axis — with the two datasets used; on the y-axis we show the dif-

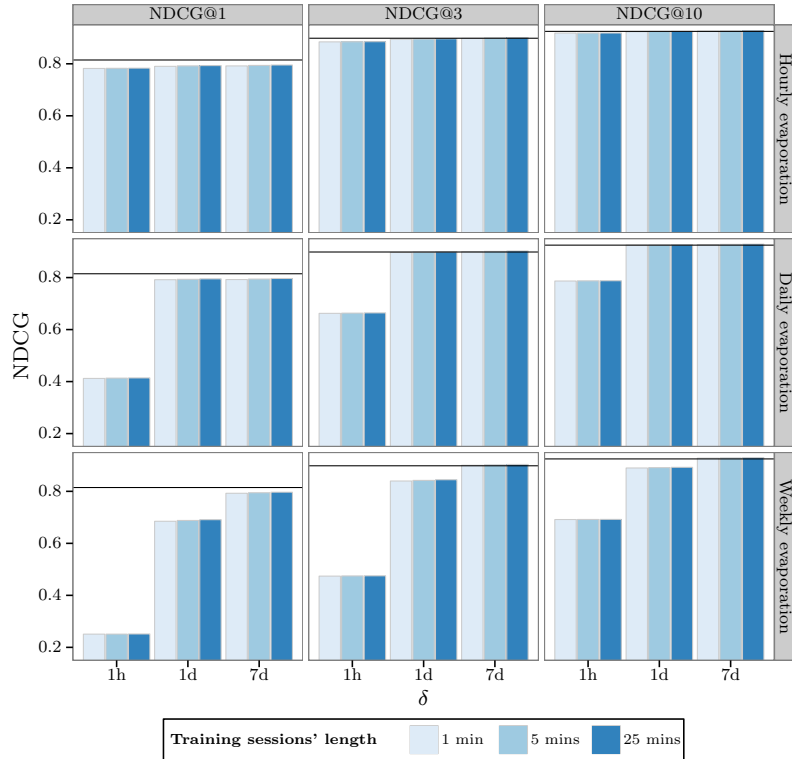


Figure 6: SessionRank results related to the Yahoo! Dataset. The x-axis represents the timeframe set for halving the pheromone, the left y-axis the NDCG values related to the corresponding pheromone upgrading timeframe on the right y-axis, while on the top x-axis the different NDCG cutoffs are shown; the different colors represent the timeframes used to identify a user’s search session in the training phase. The black segment indicates the benchmark, namely the result given by the default Yahoo!’s ranking.

604 ferent cutoff points used to compute the related NDCG measure, and the  
 605 size of the points show the actual NDCG value we obtained, bigger for large  
 606 values. Finally, the green color is used to show a NDCG measure which im-  
 607 proves over the baseline ranking algorithm applied by the search engine, red  
 608 if otherwise.

609 Summarizing these findings, we argue that our first two proposed algo-  
 610 rithms could be employed in improving results ranking produced by two  
 611 particular sets of queries: being a simple application of the ACO technique  
 612 to Web pages ranking, NaïveRank works well for embedding a plain concept  
 613 of popularity into the ranking measure. Thus it could be very effective in



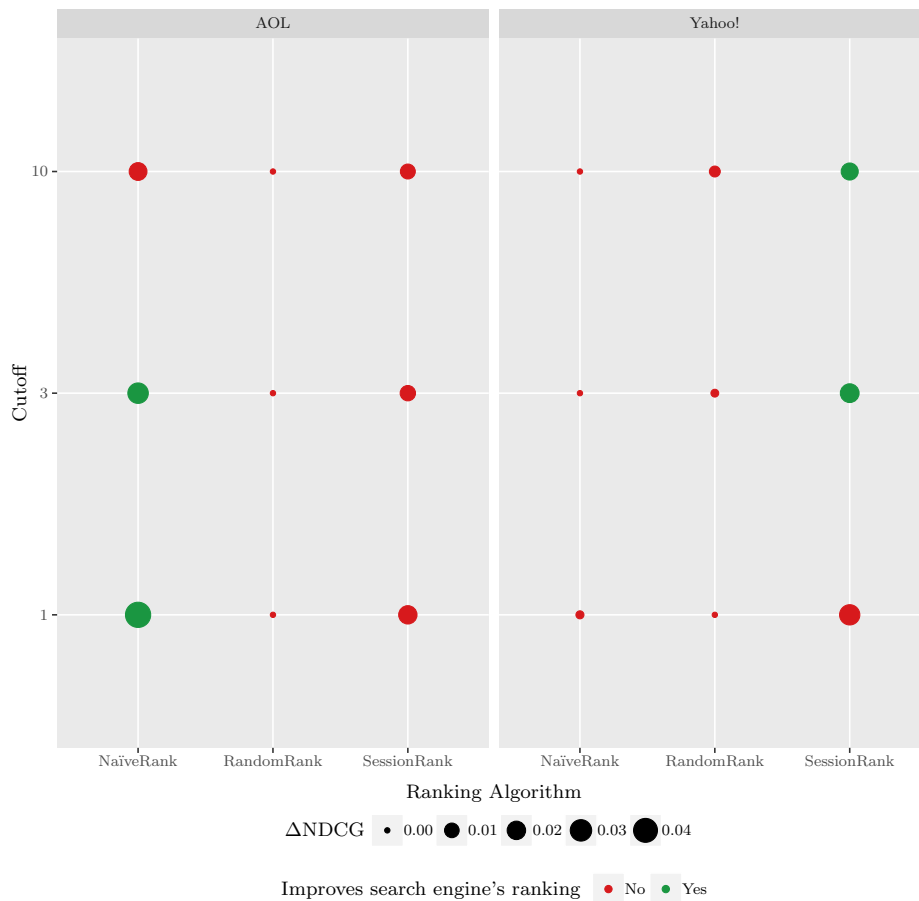


Figure 7: Summary of the three algorithms' best performance: the x-axis shows the algorithm performance related to each dataset we used (on the top x-axis), while the y-axis shows the cutoff point for the corresponding NDCG measure; the size of the points represents the related NDCG's goodness, while the colors indicates whether we achieved an improvements over the default ranking operated by the search engines.

614 ranking results related to transactional or informative queries whose results  
 615 do not become obsolete frequently (i.e. it is rare to see a new document con-  
 616 taining updated information suddenly appear, making the already popular  
 617 ones out-of-date, e.g. encyclopedia definitions or catalog's products).

618 By reinstating the probabilistic nature typical of the ACO metaheuristic,  
 619 RandomRank allows new and bleeding-edge documents to be discovered by  
 620 users, thus it could be very effective in ranking results related to breaking

621 news and current events.

622 Finally, SessionRank shifts on a whole new dimension in terms of the  
623 kind of information it exploits and — thus — the search settings that could  
624 benefit from its introduction in the ranking mechanism. Albeit the majority  
625 of search sessions are brief, composed by just one query and focused only  
626 on the first results page, there are some particular sessions that might be  
627 longer and could be very frustrating for users. We noticed three types of  
628 such problematic sessions in our datasets:

629 **atypical Web search sessions** [55] are being produced by users with atyp-  
630 ical information needs, i.e. those outside their regular areas of expertise  
631 (often triggered by external events, such as pending medical treatments,  
632 financial deadlines or upcoming vacations);

633 **exploring sessions** [56] are those where users are engaged in an open-ended  
634 and multi-faceted information-seeking task to foster learning and dis-  
635 covery;

636 **struggling sessions** [56] are those where users are experiencing difficulty  
637 locating the required information.

638 Examples of both exploring and struggling sessions can be found in figure  
639 8.

640 Given that SessionRank exploits not just single interactions with the  
641 search engine but whole search sessions, it seems reasonable to argue that  
642 the ranking of results related to the aforementioned search sessions could  
643 benefit from the introduction of our last ACO-inspired algorithm. Thus it  
644 could be useful to test our algorithm against a different dataset containing  
645 long-lasting search sessions of this type. Alternatively, one could use some  
646 query-similarity measure with the same datasets we employed, in order to  
647 cluster similar queries belonging to the same session.

648 Our findings are summarized in figure 9: it shows both dimensions that  
649 our algorithms operate on: search sessions' length on the x-axis and docu-  
650 ments update frequency on the y-axis. The horizontal stripes represent the  
651 aforementioned examples of documents sets to be ranked, such as break-  
652 ing news, encyclopedia definitions and catalog's products, while the vertical  
653 ones are the three kinds of search sessions outlined in the previous paragraph  
654 [55, 56]. The dashed blocks indicate which algorithm we think could be the  
655 most effective in ranking results generated for each case. For example — as

**Query** can you use h & r block software for more than one year  
**Query** how do I file 2012 taxes on hr block  
 { **Click** <http://www.hrblock.com>  
**Query** can you only use h & r block one year  
 { **Click** [http://www.www.consumeaffairs.com/finance/hr\\_block\\_free.html](http://www.www.consumeaffairs.com/finance/hr_block_free.html)  
 { **Click** <http://financialsoft.about.com/od/taxcut/gr/HR-Block-At-Home-...>  
**Query** do I have to buy new tax software every year  
 { **Click** [http://financialsoft.about.com/od/simpletips/f/upgrade\\_yearly.htm...](http://financialsoft.about.com/od/simpletips/f/upgrade_yearly.htm...)  
 { **Click** <http://askville.amazon.com/buy-version-Tax-Software-year/Answer...>  
**END OF SESSION**

(a) A *struggling* session.

**Query** career development advice  
 { **Click** <http://www.sooperarticles.com/business-articles/career-devel...>  
**Query** employment issues articles  
 { **Click** <http://jobseekeradvice.com/category/employment-issues/...>  
**Query** professional career advice  
 { **Click** <http://ezinearticles.com/?Career-Advice-and-Professional-Ment...>  
 { **Click** <http://askville.amazon.com/buy-version-Tax-Software-year/Answer...>  
**Query** what is a resume  
 { **Click** <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/R%C3%A9sum%C3%A9...>  
**END OF SESSION**

(b) An *exploring* session.

Figure 8: Examples of struggling and exploring sessions taken from [56].

656 we stated previously — RandomRank could be beneficial in ranking results  
 657 among frequently updated documents and does not really take into account  
 658 any information about the whole search sessions (focusing only on single in-  
 659 teractions), thus it won’t work for longer sessions, such as atypical, struggling  
 660 or exploring ones for which SessionRank could be more suitable. Ranking  
 661 more static collections of documents, such as products inside a catalog for  
 662 example (e.g. Amazon or Google Shopping) or encyclopedia entries doesn’t  
 663 require a very refined collaborative filtering mechanism — due to the low  
 664 frequency of updates — thus NaïveRank could fit well with these situations.  
 665 Indeed, catalogs can be dynamic but vary less frequently than news.

## 666 7. Conclusion and Future Work

667 We presented an approach to developing real time implicit collaborative  
 668 information-seeking algorithms. Providing implicit collaboration is becom-  
 669 ing increasingly relevant in search engine research and application areas. Re-  
 670 cently, Google introduced their Social Search service, declaring that, “with  
 671 these changes, we want to help you find the most relevant information from

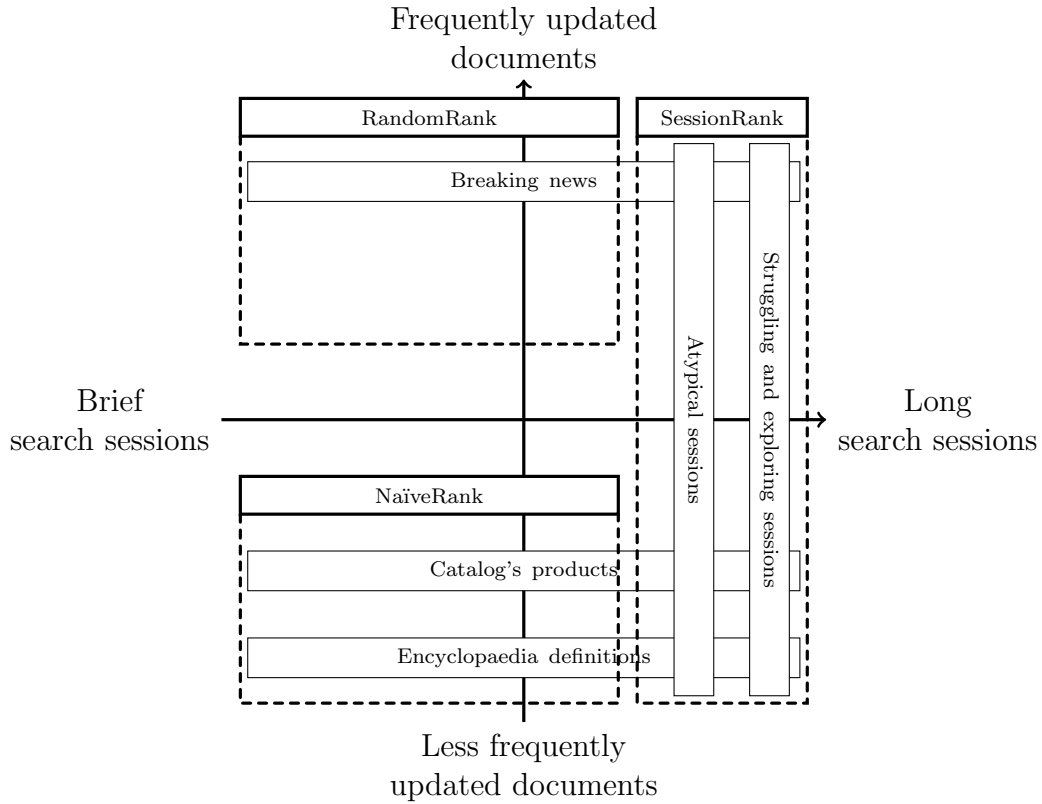


Figure 9: A plot of our findings: on the x-axis we have the search sessions' length, while on y-axis the documents update frequency; vertical and horizontal stripes represent examples of both those settings, while colored blocks indicate the most suitable algorithm to rank results generated by the revealed search setting.

672 the people who matter to you". In a way, that statement represents our  
673 definition of a colony. The mechanism is the Google+1 button, which al-  
674 lows users to share interesting pages with their contacts — a way to release  
675 pheromones. Bing, Microsoft's new search engine, employs Facebook's social  
676 graph for each user to rank search results and to present search history. That  
677 is, they define the colony as our own Facebook contacts. Again, we deposit  
678 pheromones through a click on the "like" button. This method is viewed as  
679 a way to implement pheromone evaporation. However, these stylish inter-  
680 actions can be modelled by ants. As ants, we leave "pheromones" to allow  
681 others to follow our trails. Additionally, as ants, we use this information to

682 enhance searching.

683 We designed three different algorithms employing an Ant Colony Opti-  
684 mization (ACO) strategy to provide implicit collaborative-seeking features  
685 in real time to search engines. The three different algorithms — NaïveRank,  
686 RandomRank, and SessionRank — all proved to be effective in real time  
687 depending on the nature of the queries submitted by users. Real time per-  
688 formance is crucial for search engines, particularly when using ACO-inspired  
689 algorithms for which a large graph of queries and documents might be cre-  
690 ated.

691 The NaïveRank seems particularly interesting for informational queries  
692 that seek to retrieve results on relatively static information on the Web,  
693 such as looking for products in a catalog or encyclopedia entries. Random-  
694 Rank proved effective for the inverse situation, such as breaking news or  
695 a sports event. The SessionRank algorithm was suited for struggling and  
696 explorative sessions (in other words, open-ended information-seeking tasks  
697 fostering users’ learning) or atypical query sessions (generated by external  
698 events such as specific treatments, deadlines, or upcoming holidays).

699 We evaluated the three algorithms by designing an evaluation, where we  
700 compared the performance of the three proposed ranking algorithms with  
701 the data provided by two famous search engines: Yahoo! and AOL. Because  
702 our methods are based on users’ interactions to discover the most promising  
703 results, the datasets were partitioned into a training set and a test set.

704 We plan to run an online experiment with a wide sample of participants  
705 and test the three algorithms in a real time scenario with users in the future.  
706 We hope to prove that in an online environment, real time relevant results  
707 can also be obtained by users employing an implicit collaborative approach  
708 for information seeking and by selecting the right algorithm depending on  
709 the types of queries. We also plan on further investigate how blend some  
710 concepts explored by existing ACO extensions in our model, such as limiting  
711 the amount of deposited pheromone to avoid deposited as in Max-Min Ant  
712 System (MMAS) [29].

## 713 **Acknowledgment**

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## 721 **Appendix A. AOL query-click log**

722 This archive, released in August 2006, contains more than 30 million  
 723 clicks issued by 650000 users, recorded in a timespan going from March to  
 724 May 2006; each record (table A.1, from left to right) is made up by the user  
 725 ID, the query, the timestamp, the document’s position among the results,  
 726 and the URL. The position 0 illustrates that the user issued the query but  
 727 didn’t click on any result at all.

728 We didn’t employ the whole log in our evaluation, instead we only consid-  
 729 ered the subset of queries issued on average once a day during the observed  
 730 period (i.e. March to May 2006): this process allowed us to only employ  
 731 “significant” interactions with the search engine, ignoring the ones issued  
 732 less frequently without biasing our later evaluation. By doing so, we ob-  
 733 tained about 5 million different clicks related to 22000 different queries.

285103	ants	2006-04-01	19:45:23	1	<a href="http://www.dna.affrc.go.jp">http://www.dna.affrc.go.jp</a>
285103	ants	2006-04-01	19:45:23	3	<a href="http://www.uky.edu">http://www.uky.edu</a>
285103	ants	2006-04-01	19:50:59	13	<a href="http://ohioline.osu.edu">http://ohioline.osu.edu</a>
285103	ants	2006-04-01	19:50:59	14	<a href="http://ohioline.osu.edu">http://ohioline.osu.edu</a>
285103	ants	2006-04-11	21:44:45	7	<a href="http://ohioline.osu.edu">http://ohioline.osu.edu</a>
889138	ants	2006-03-05	13:22:31	4	<a href="http://www.ants.com">http://www.ants.com</a>
889138	ants	2006-03-05	13:22:31	8	<a href="http://ohioline.osu.edu">http://ohioline.osu.edu</a>
889138	ants	2006-03-05	13:26:14	11	<a href="http://www.infowest.com">http://www.infowest.com</a>
889138	ants	2006-03-05	13:26:14	19	<a href="http://www.greensmiths.com">http://www.greensmiths.com</a>
3519280	ants	2006-03-30	17:14:14	0	
3519280	ants	2006-03-30	17:15:53	1	<a href="http://ant.edb.miyakyo-u.ac.jp">http://ant.edb.miyakyo-u.ac.jp</a>
3519280	ants	2006-03-30	17:15:53	3	<a href="http://www.uky.edu">http://www.uky.edu</a>
3519280	ants	2006-03-30	17:15:53	10	<a href="http://en.wikipedia.org">http://en.wikipedia.org</a>
3519280	ants	2006-03-30	17:27:46	0	
3519280	ants	2006-04-01	13:55:03	2	<a href="http://www.lingolex.com">http://www.lingolex.com</a>
3519280	ants	2006-04-01	13:55:03	3	<a href="http://www.uky.edu">http://www.uky.edu</a>
3519280	ants	2006-04-01	14:20:53	0	

Table A.1: AOL Query-click log fragment for the query ‘ants’. Horizontal lines separate users by “user ID”.

734 After selecting the database to be used in our experiments, we detected  
 735 the actions’ sequence (i.e. clicks) performed by each user during each search

736 session. Therefore, we applied a simple temporal threshold: if two actions  
 737 were performed within a 30 minutes' timespan then they would belong to  
 738 the same session.

739 In tables A.1 and A.2 we can observe the sessions' detection process in  
 740 the original query-click log.

741 After a controversial discussion about the users' privacy following the  
 742 initial public release, AOL chose to remove the log from its servers and doesn't  
 743 offer the download anymore, although it's still available to researchers.

285103	ants	2006-04-01	19:45:23	1	<a href="http://www.dna.affrc.go.jp">http://www.dna.affrc.go.jp</a>
285103	ants	2006-04-01	19:45:23	3	<a href="http://www.uky.edu">http://www.uky.edu</a>
285103	ants	2006-04-01	19:50:59	13	<a href="http://ohioline.osu.edu">http://ohioline.osu.edu</a>
285103	ants	2006-04-01	19:50:59	14	<a href="http://ohioline.osu.edu">http://ohioline.osu.edu</a>
285103	ants	2006-04-11	21:44:45	7	<a href="http://ohioline.osu.edu">http://ohioline.osu.edu</a>
889138	ants	2006-03-05	13:22:31	4	<a href="http://www.ants.com">http://www.ants.com</a>
889138	ants	2006-03-05	13:22:31	8	<a href="http://ohioline.osu.edu">http://ohioline.osu.edu</a>
889138	ants	2006-03-05	13:26:14	11	<a href="http://www.infowest.com">http://www.infowest.com</a>
889138	ants	2006-03-05	13:26:14	19	<a href="http://www.greensmiths.com">http://www.greensmiths.com</a>
3519280	ants	2006-03-30	17:14:14	0	
3519280	ants	2006-03-30	17:15:53	1	<a href="http://ant.edb.miyakyo-u.ac.jp">http://ant.edb.miyakyo-u.ac.jp</a>
3519280	ants	2006-03-30	17:15:53	3	<a href="http://www.uky.edu">http://www.uky.edu</a>
3519280	ants	2006-03-30	17:15:53	10	<a href="http://en.wikipedia.org">http://en.wikipedia.org</a>
3519280	ants	2006-03-30	17:27:46	0	
3519280	ants	2006-04-01	13:55:03	2	<a href="http://www.lingolex.com">http://www.lingolex.com</a>
3519280	ants	2006-04-01	13:55:03	3	<a href="http://www.uky.edu">http://www.uky.edu</a>
3519280	ants	2006-04-01	14:20:53	0	

Table A.2: The interactions depicted in table A.1 grouped in 30-minutes long sessions.

## 744 Appendix B. Yahoo! query-click log

745 Yahoo!'s dataset contains only anonymous information due to the same  
 746 privacy issues experienced by AOL. It includes 66 million clicks recorded in  
 747 July 2010 and relevance judgments of 650 thousand Web pages issued by  
 748 experts between 2009 and 2010 related to some of the logged queries are  
 749 also available. Each record, contains the interactions related to a single page  
 750 results of each user, and is made up by `query cookie timestamp url_1`  
 751 `...url_10 nc et_1 pos_1 ...et_nc pos_nc`, where

752 `query` is the anonymized version of the query,

753 `cookie` is the anonymized version of the user’s cookie,  
754 `timestamp` is Unix time (the amount of seconds passed since 1 January 1970)  
755 of the issued query,  
756 `url` is the anonymized version of the URL,  
757 `nc` is the number of clicks performed during the entire session,  
758 `et` is the time passed between each click and the beginning of the session,  
759 `pos` is the position of each click, which could be:

- 760 1 . . . 10 one of the 10 results,
- 761 0 above the first result (spelling corrections, header advert, etc.),
- 762 11 below the last result (next page, footer advert, etc.),
- 763 `s` new query,
- 764 `o` other clicks.

765 As for the previous dataset, we employed in our experiments the subset  
766 of records related to the queries performed on average once a day during  
767 the reference timespan and for which we have the relevance judgments. This  
768 way, we obtained about 65 million different clicks related to almost 44500  
769 queries, then grouped in 30 minutes long sessions, as the AOL query log; in  
770 table B.3 there is a fragment of the log.

00002efd	1deac14e	1279486689	2722a07f	24f6d649	1b2b5a1c	9ca4edf1				
23045132	84c0d8b5	de33d1de	9f5855b2	477aabf6	e1468bbf	3	10	1	175	
o	215	0								
00002efd	3fef0ac3	12799559361	2722a07f	8f59fce1	de33d1de	a2c8d464				
57a7dd83	a11dbd14	08b5c87e	44a77e61	c21b6dbe	6b0a7915	1	2	0		

Table B.3: Yahoo! query-click log.

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