In search of the flu

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Collective intelligence might be the most unreliable and elusive resource on the planet. But when someone does manage to tap it, it can be powerful.

Just think of Wikipedia, which has proven to be a broad, flexible and surprisingly accurate source of information, because anyone can edit it.

One of the most exciting new experiments in collective intelligence comes from Google. (Where else?) It's called Google Flu Trends. It monitors how often users in various parts of the United States enter certain phrases into its search engine: "flu symptoms", for example, or "chills."

Over time, the graph of flu-related searches is strikingly similar to the graph of documented flu outbreaks. If there's a spike in flu cases in late November in Maine, it will show up in Google searches as well as doctor's offices.

But the really exciting thing is that Google might know about the spike a week or two before public health authorities do, because people tend to search the Internet before they call their doctors. This means that by monitoring search engines, governments can predict outbreaks earlier. Google suggests the tool might even help governments mount an early response to a pandemic.

It's worth remembering that the effectiveness of a tool like Google Flu Trends depends on the computer literacy and access to technology of a given population. It might also be skewed by fears and misperceptions.

It's also worth asking what uses authoritarian governments might find for search-engine monitoring. But while any tool can be misused or misinterpreted, that doesn't mean it shouldn't be used at all.

Besides, when it comes down to it, Google's latest toy is really cool. That in itself could inspire more innovative collaborations between public-health agencies and technogeeks.

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