Digital footprint

Digital footprint or digital shadow refers to one's unique set of traceable digital activities, actions, contributions and communications that are manifested on the Internet or on digital devices.

There are two main classifications for digital footprints: passive and active. A passive digital footprint is created when data is collected without the owner knowing, whereas active digital footprints are created when personal data is released deliberately by a user for the purpose of sharing information about oneself by means of websites or social media.

Patients are increasingly turning to online resources to inquire about individual physicians and to gather health information. However, little research exists studying the online presence of neurosurgeons across the country.

A study aimed to characterize these online profiles and assess the scope of neurosurgeons' digital identities.

Medicare-participating neurological surgeons from the United States and Puerto Rico were identified using the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) Physician Comparable Downloadable File. Each physician was characterized by his or her medical education, graduation year, city of practice, gender, and affiliation to an academic institution. Using a Google-based custom search tool, the top ten search results for each physician were extracted and categorized as one of the following: (1) physician, hospital, or healthcare system controlled, (2) third-party or government controlled, (3) social media based, (4) primary journal article, or (5) other.

Amongst the physicians within the CMS database, 4,751 self-identified as being neurosurgeons, yielding a total of 45,875 URL search results pertinent to these physicians. Of the 4,751 neurosurgeons, 2,317 (48.8%) and 2,434 (51.2%) were classified as academic and nonacademic neurosurgeons, respectively. At least one search result was obtained for every physician. Hospital, healthcare system, or physician-controlled websites (18,206; 39.7%) and third-party websites (17,122; 37.3%) were the two most commonly observed domain types. Websites belonging to social media platforms accounted for 4,843 (10.6%) search results, and websites belonging to peer-reviewed academic journals accounted for 1,888 (4.1%) search results. The frequency with which a third-party domain appeared as the first search result was higher for nonacademic neurosurgeons as compared to academic neurosurgeons. CONCLUSIONS:

In general, neurosurgeons lacked a controllable online presence within their first page of Google search results. Third-party physician rating websites constituted about half of the search results, and a relative lack of social media websites was apparent. Still numerous opportunities exist for neurosurgeons to address this disparity [1].

1)
Kim C, Gupta R, Shah A, Madill E, Prabhu AV, Agarwal N. Digital Footprint of Neurological Surgeons. World Neurosurg. 2018 Feb 7. pii: S1878-8750(18)30253-5. doi: 10.1016/j.wneu.2018.01.210. [Epub ahead of print] PubMed PMID: 29427816.