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Yandex Caught Up in Yakunin Flap

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Russia's leading Internet search engine, Yandex, has come under fire for unwittingly endorsing false reports that Russian Railways chief Vladimir Yakunin had been dismissed.

Yandex automatically indexed false media reports of Yakunin's dismissal and linking them to the Cabinet's official website, government.ru, making it look like the dismissal notice was actually posted on the government website.

Internet users who typed in the search words "Dmitry Medvedev Alexander Misharin" in the two days after the false announcement surfaced Wednesday saw a snippet of information about the dismissal from a news website and a link to the government.ru website as a related site.

The snippet of information remained cached in the search results even after the news website removed the article from its website.

Facing mounting pressure for an explanation, Yandex released a statement Friday

to Vedomosti, which was among the first to report the development. "What we have here is not a saved copy of the website but the website's annotation in the results snippet," the statement said. In this particular case, the search engine used what is called a "fresh search algorithm," where information about the website is collected not from the website itself but from other sites linking to it.

Because the news of Yakunin's dismissal was announced by many media services at once, Yandex automatically assumed that they were true and "helped" Internet users by supplying a link to government.ru, where they could supposedly find more information.

An unknown prankster released an official-looking statement from an e-mail account that resembled a government account on Wednesday that said Prime Minister Medvedev had replaced the head of Russian Railways with Alexander Misharin. It was later determined that the IP address, a unique number given to every computer connected to the Internet, did not match the government's e-mail server, RIA Novosti reported.

Medvedev's spokeswoman, Natalya Timakova, said an investigation was under way into who had released the statement. "The Internet provider, the computer's IP address and its location have been determined. The server is located in Moscow," she said in comment published in Kommersant on Friday.

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