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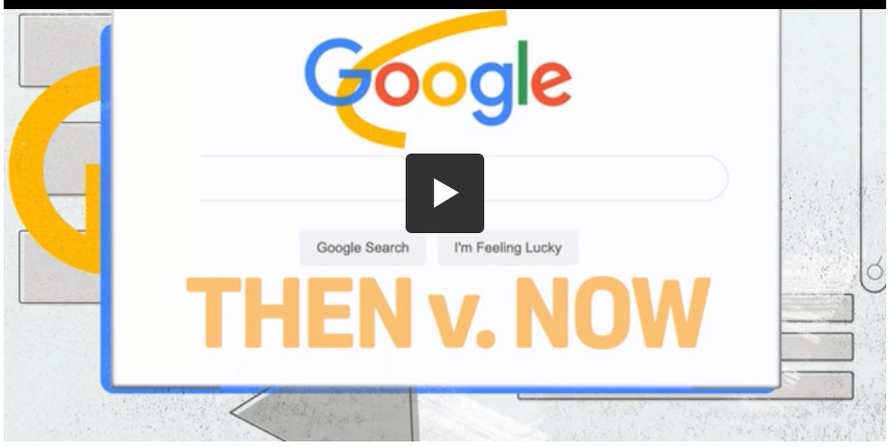
How does Google's monopoly hurt you? Try these searches.

Right under our noses, the Internet's most-used website has been getting worse

Google's search evolution from oracle to advertiser



Compare Google search engine results over nearly two decades and a trend emerges: Results are filled with advertising and non-Google results are lower down. (Brian Monroe, Jonathan Baran/The Washington Post)

By Geoffrey A. Fowler
Technology columnist

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Let's Google together. Open a Web browser and search for T-shirts. I'll wait.

Is the first thing you see a search result? I'm not talking about the stuff labeled Ads or Maps. On my screen, the actual result is not in the first, second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh or even eighth row of stuff. It's buried on row nine.

Googling didn't used to require so much … scrolling. On some searches, it's like Where's Waldo but for information.

Without us even realizing it, the Internet's most-used website has been getting worse. On too many queries, Google is more interested in making search lucrative than a better product for us.

There's one reason it gets away with this, according to a recent congressional investigation: Google is so darn big. An antitrust lawsuit from the U.S. Justice Department, filed Tuesday, makes a similar point.

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How does Google's alleged monopoly hurt you? Today, 88 percent of all searches happen on Google, in part because contracts make it the default on computers and phones. But whether Google is actually fetching you good information can be hard to see. First, Googling is easy and free, which blinds everyone a bit. Second, we don't have a great alternative for broad Web searches — Microsoft's

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rival Bing doesn't have enough data to compete well. (This is the problem of monopolies in the information age.)

[Help Desk: Ask our tech columnist a question]

Over the last two decades, Google has made changes in drips rather than big makeovers. To see how search results have changed, what you'd need is a time machine. Good news: We have one of those!

The Internet Archive's Wayback Machine stored some Google search results over the years. When we look back, a picture emerges of how Google increasingly fails us. There's more space dedicated to ads that look like search results. More results start with answer "snippets" — sometimes incorrect — ripped from other sites. And increasingly, results point you back to Google's own properties such as Maps and YouTube, where it can show more ads and gather more of your data.

AD

There are lots of times Google is still darn useful. I believe the company when it says it makes over 3,000 improvements every year, such as searching with your camera or just humming to find a song. But it's also true that Google can bury better results when doing so helps it make money or prioritize another Google service. It can act like a bad personal shopper who organizes your wardrobe by whatever T-shirts earn the highest commission.

Google disputes my review. "Comparing the experience you get with Google today to the quality of Google in 1999 is like comparing high speed WiFi to dial-up Internet," emailed spokeswoman Lara Levin. She said it's incorrect to define results as unpaid "blue links" to other websites. "What has changed is how we organize the information, in a way that's more modern and that hundreds of thousands of tests each year tell us that people find useful."

Members of Congress, regulators and legal experts will battle in the weeks ahead over the nuances of antitrust law. Fortunately, to see for yourself how Google puts profits over people, all you have to do is join me on three eye-opening searches.

Search 1: "T-shirts"

Google is, quite literally, a bad personal shopper. Here, side by side, are Google results for T-shirts from the Wayback Machine in 2000 and 2013 alongside what I see in 2020.

AD

We all know Google has ads. But back when Google first won us over, it had fewer ads, and they were generally marked with a colorful background. Today, my T-shirts result is buried under four ads, as well as nine shopping ad results over on the right side. There's also a giant map with links — we'll talk about the proliferation of this kind of stuff in a moment. (After I published this column, the results for this query began to no longer include text-based ads at the top. Google spokeswoman Suzanne Blackburn said the company didn't change anything, though "many factors beyond Google's control influence how many top ads users see.")

Relative to 2000, today you have to scroll six times as far down the page to get to the first real, unpaid link to an outside website.

T-shirts aren't the only search that requires excessive scrolling. Cognitive psychologist Pete Meyers, who analyzes Google results for marketing company Moz, studied 10,000 different searches to see how far down the page blue-link search results land. In 2013, the average real search result link began at 375 pixels down the page. In 2020, it had dropped down to 616 pixels because of ads and all the

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other info Google puts on top of its “organic” links to other sites.

AD

The reality is, whatever’s on top is most likely to be the business that thrives — and that business will have to pass along to us, its customers, the cost of the Google ads that put it on top.

It’s true that back in 2000, Google’s actual search results for T-shirts weren’t as good — CDNow and even Apple (the computer company) were among the sites that made it to the top five. But remember: Shopping-related searches were less common in 2000. And that doesn’t excuse Google making it so hard to get to its actual results today.

With a time machine, we can also see how Google keeps making ads harder to spot. Ginny Marvin, editor of the trade publication Search Engine Land, has been keeping tabs for years over what she calls the “blurring of ads and organic listings.” According to her archive, first ads had color backgrounds and a labels, then they shifted to white with color labels. Google did remove text-based ads on the right side of results in 2016. But today, Google places up to four ads on top of desktop Web searches, using a small black “Ad” label that disappears in the context of a busy page.

“Squint or you’ll click it,” is how Silicon Valley publication TechCrunch described Google’s latest labeling shift, earlier this year, which removed a green box around the word Ad and shifted it up.

AD

Levin said Google changed the design “to avoid clutter” and that in its own studies, people were better able to distinguish ads and results with the new design.

Believe it or not, Google also thinks we don’t mind the ads — and that they’re actually useful. Said Levin: “We have an incentive to only show ads when it’s valuable to people.” She didn’t answer when I asked what percent of queries now have ads, and what percent of the search results they take up.

Good luck if you just wanted to search for the most popular T-shirts. Google is working harder to make sure it gets paid for whatever T-shirt you might eventually buy.

Search 2: “question one nevada”

This search result, you won’t actually find now, because it was so egregious Google fixed it in September.

Question One is an initiative on the November ballot that would change how Nevada manages higher education. A few weeks ago Elliot Anderson, a former state lawmaker who helped get Question One on the ballot, noticed that Googling “question one Nevada” generated a box at the top of the results that began: “Vote ‘no’ on Question 1.”

AD

How on earth did Google results end up telling people how to vote?

Google has been shifting away from what co-founder Larry Page said was its mission back when it went public in 2004: "to get you out of Google and to the right place as fast as possible." Now, instead of providing ten blue links to sources of information, Google wants to give what it calls direct answers, which it says are more convenient.

This information often comes in the form of "featured snippets," which are chosen by its software and borrowed from sources it thinks are authoritative.

Sometimes when you search, you do just want an answer — especially when you're using a smart speaker. But who died and made Google the ultimate arbiter of knowledge? Google doesn't always snip correctly, like with Question One. "The information was accurate and came from an official website, but the snippeted portion of the page only represented one side of a civic topic, so we took action under our relevant policy to remove that snippet," said Levin.

AD

(Anderson, for one, said he flagged the error repeatedly using the "feedback" link on the page, and heard nothing. Google fixed it after it was flagged to a Google employee on Twitter.)

[Goodbye, Chrome: Google's Web browser has become spy software]

It's not hard to find other examples where Google snips strangely or borrows from not-so-authoritative sources. Search for "How do I check my Krispy Kreme Gift Card balance," and you get information from a site selling gift cards, rather than Krispy Kreme's own site, which has the real answer and a useful link.

Other direct answers that just point you back to Google are also pushing the normal blue-link results down the page. These days, search results can also start with YouTube videos, other suggested searches — or, in cases like our earlier T-shirts search, a big Google Map.

A recent study by investigative nonprofit The Markup found that of 15,000 recent popular queries, Google devoted 41 percent of the first page of mobile search results to Google itself, including its own sites and direct answers. (Levin told The Markup that its study was built on a "nonrepresentative sample of searches.")

There are times I find a Google Map or YouTube video at the top of a search to be helpful. The problem is, Google also has a financial motivation to keep us from clicking away to other sources. As The Markup pointed out, Google makes five times as much revenue from ads on its own properties as it does on ads it places elsewhere.

Search 3: "pediatricians arlington va"

Google's conflict of interest can lead us to make bad choices. When you search for pediatricians, Google tops the results with a big Google Map.

AD

On my map, Google calls out three doctors' offices. Are these the best, or most popular ones in the area? Look closer: Two of them get a sub-4-star rating and have fewer than 20 reviews.

If I scroll down the Google results page and click on reviews site Zocdoc, I find listings for a lot more pediatricians, some of whom have more than 200 reviews — and much higher ratings. Online reviews on any site can sometimes be fake, but why is Google always putting its own first?

Searching for a doctor is a higher-stakes version of a problem that afflicts Google searches for flights, translations, restaurants and other local information. Even our T-shirts search popped up a Google Map with listings for local stores (where I couldn't actually buy T-shirts online) ahead of links to other websites.

The technical term for this is search "preferencing." How well would Google's mediocre doctor reviews do in search results where Google doesn't have its thumb on the scale?

Google says people make more than 20 million contributions per day to its Maps reviews. I left one last year after my dentist's office begged me to do so, in the hopes it would finally show up in Google search.

[It's the middle of the night. Do you know who your iPhone is talking to?]

Levin said Google results are "designed to return the most relevant and helpful results for a given query across many dimensions. Assuming that a site with more reviews or listings is automatically better is a flawed premise."

Congress said Google's practice is dangerous, writing on page 188 of its report that it has "the effect of privileging Google's own inferior services while demoting competitors' offerings."

Google's ability to push its own products has quietly reshaped swaths of the economy. As my colleague Rachel Lerman recently wrote, since launching Google Flights and Google Hotels nearly a decade ago, Google has come to command the online travel market. Never mind that Google's travel search, like its listings for pediatricians, isn't considered tops: It didn't even make Frommer's 2020 list of the best airfare search sites.

That's how monopolies extract their price. Google is playing fast and loose with the whole idea of search engine, making sure the simplest and easiest-to-access results are either paid ads or information that keeps you on Google. Either way, Google wins — and, more often than we realize, we lose.

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