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The State of Internet Search

By Mark Costlow

As soon as the internet became useful and began its journey to become the storehouse of all human knowledge, people recognized the the first big problem: search. We are pretty sure the answer we want is in there, but how to find it? Should it be indexed like a library card catalog? Sorted alphabetically like an encyclopedia? How do you search for an image or video or song? Who should do this organization? What if I don't agree with the way they decide to organize things? What if I have different politics and they don't think the things I want to research are important enough to mention in the catalog? Who will pay for the system that makes sense of all human knowledge? Is it even possible? If it can be done now, can it keep up with the increasing pace of new additions?

Pass me a Kleenex®

In the 1930s, Kimberly-Clark re-positioned their existing cold-cream remover, **Kleenex®**, as a "disposable handkerchief", perfect for blowing noses. It took until the 1960s for the brand name Kleenex® to become so ubiquitous that it was used to refer to any facial tissue of any brand.

This phenomenon, where a product is so tightly associated with its functional purpose that its proper name is used to refer to the generic item description, is called **genericization**. In some cases, the original product maker may lose control of the name, as in linoleum, bubble wrap, and thermos. When that happens, it's called **genericide**. But if the the original trademark holder is careful, they can hold on to the name, as Kimberly-Clark has for Kleenex® and Google has for their search engine.

Many search engines were introduced in the mid 1990s, all trying a different approach to the problem of finding things on the Internet. It's likely that even if you are old enough to have used the early search engines, you've probably forgotten all but a couple of them.

In 1994, **WebCrawler**, from the University of Washington, was the first to index the full content of web pages. Lycos, from Carnegie Melon, was introduced the same year. The next year saw the in-

roductions of Excite, Yahoo!, and AltaVista. Yahoo! started a little differently, as a human-indexed list of sites. But it was clear after a few years that machine-aided searching of machine-indexed databases gave results at least as good as Yahoo!'s curated results, and was more scalable for the rapidly-expanding internet.

In 1996 Stanford students Larry Page and Sergey Brin launched "**Backrub**", so-called **because their algorithm analyzed "back links"**, the connections between web pages. At this time, the existing search engines were already being bogged down by spam and poor search results. Page and Brin's approach considered other factors than just each page's contents, such as the number of other sites which linked to it (presumed to be an indication of quality and desirability of the information there). **In 1998 they re-branded the search engine to "Google"**.

Google's search **results were so much better** than the others that it only took a couple of years for "google" to become a verb, and thus genericized. Happily for Google, they were savvy enough to hold on to their trademark like Kleenex® did, so they didn't suffer genericide. Lucky for us, they had changed their name away from "Backrub" before they were genericized.

Evolution of Search

Google became the most popular search engine in the early 2000's and has **held that title in the US and Europe by a large margin** since then. Baidu and Yandex dominate in Russia and China respectively, but there hasn't been a serious threat to Google's search dominance until very recently.

Microsoft has tried several times to steal the search crown, with MSN Search, then Live Search, and now with Bing. Bing was introduced in 2009 and has doggedly kept at it, increasing market share bit by bit. They **surpassed 10% at the end of 2023** and are continuing to make small gains, likely due to new AI integrations. A few percentage points may not seem like much, but it's estimated 1% of the search market is worth \$2 Billion annually.

DuckDuckGo is a privacy-focused search engine. It does not track its users and offers some protection against other 3rd-party web tracking. **Depending on whose numbers are considered**, it maintains a 1-2% share of desktop search.

Some Google Tips

We may be on the cusp of a sea change in Internet search, with AI search displacing traditional search engines entirely. Will that topple Google's unprecedented long-term dominance in the field? Or will Google adapt and lead with AI search? It is too soon to tell how that will shake out. In the mean time we will provide some tips to make the most out of the current de facto search engine.

Google Search Tips

The Basics:

- Every word in your search query matters. If it doesn't find many results which have all of your terms, it will show you some with all but one and tell you which one is missing. From there you can insist that it only include results with all the terms, or explore other results missing that term.
- Synonyms for your terms are also counted, but sometimes you are only interested in the exact word. Enclose the term in quotes, as in "money" or "air conditioner" to only see results that include the exact word or phrase.
- If your terms are ambiguous, use the minus sign to exclude words that relate to areas you don't care about. For example, if you want info about new windows for your house, searching for **windows** gives you a lot of results about Microsoft Windows. **windows -microsoft** will give you more relevant answers.
- Be as specific as possible. Building on the last example, searching for **house windows** gives much more focused results.
- Use the on-screen search tools. On the search results screen there is a row of tabs at the top to limit the results to certain categories, like images, news, shopping. Telling Google whether you're looking to buy a refrigerator (shopping) or fix one (forums) makes a great difference.
- To the right of the category tabs is "Tools", which reveals another row of options. Click "Any Time" to limit results to the past day, week, month, or year. This knob is very effective when looking for current events or technology-related issues. For example, if you have a problem with the Mac Mail program in the latest update, a one-month window will exclude all the chatter about similar (but likely not relevant) issues in the past 20 years. You can also specify a custom range. Someone researching **Enola Gay** for a school research project in March, 2025 is inundated by articles about the new US administration scrubbing data from government computers, "1984"-style. Setting a custom date range of **Jan 1, 2000 to Jan 1, 2025**, thereby excluding items created in 2025, will limit results to mostly historical information about the plane that dropped the first atomic bomb.
- To the right of Tools is Advanced Search which lets you get very specific about what you want to find. It is more involved than you would want to get for everyday quick searches, but if you are having trouble find-

ing what you need, this will help narrow in to your target.

- 99% of people only ever look at the first page of search results. We get impatient and think if the answer we want isn't on the first page, we need to adjust our search terms and try again. Often that is true, but it can pay to click through to pages 2, 3, 4 and beyond. If the terms are popular in different communities, you may discover pages more in tune with what you are looking for. In particular, you may discover words specific to a topic which you can add to your search.
- Be aware of AI results. Most Google search results include a section at the top labeled as "**Search Labs AI Overview**". This will contain an AI summary of the search results. It's important to note that this is an interpretation of the results, not the results themselves. As such they are subject to faulty interpretation by the AI. Sometimes it is a useful summary with a shortcut to the answer to your real question, but other times it will give a confidently incorrect answer. The feature is still flagged as being experimental, so just be aware of which section you are reading.
- Focus on local: if you are looking for anything related to a business, service, or restaurant in a specific town, do your search through <https://maps.google.com> instead. While on the map of the Albuquerque area, a search for "windows" turns up window glass businesses of all kinds, with Microsoft nowhere to be found.
- **Google the error message.** If you get an error message on your phone or computer, paste it verbatim into Google. This will often get you an explanation of the error and a solution to the issue, either in the vendor's documentation or a forum post.

What is the Future of Search?

Predicting the future is a fool's game. But, it appears likely that AI will take over Internet search. You can see early signs of this in Google's and Bing's existing search results, but it will take other forms as well. Microsoft, Apple, and Google are all racing to integrate AI in their consumer operating systems. Whether that's a good or bad thing remains to be seen. Next month we'll look at some of the more innovative approaches to search being enabled by AI.

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