



Have We Hit Peak Google?

Whenever I consider replacing my dear old Prius, I think about the predictions of the imminent approach of peak oil—that moment in time when oil production peaks, after which it will decline until we have exhausted all known oil deposits. As ubiquitous as petroleum products are today, in the not-too-distant future, we will undoubtedly have to adjust to a post-oil world.

While experts don't agree about when peak oil will hit, or if it already has, I am fairly certain that we have passed the point of peak Google, at least in terms of finding resources on the web. I came to this realization while preparing for my Super Searcher Secrets session for Computers in Libraries 2020. As always, I started by looking through the folder into which I throw news items about Google, notes from a particular challenging search that I finally cracked, and new search strategies for getting the most from the world's most-used search engine. My heart sank as I realized that all my notes were about the things that no longer work, the new ways that searches fail, and the deviations from Google's unofficial motto, Don't Be Evil. Let's look at a few of the ways in which Google has moved from being the best overall search engine to one that may be past its prime.

For starters, regardless of how many results Google reports at the top of the results page, it never displays more than about 400 results. While that may be an undetectable limit to the average searcher who only scans the first four or five results, this has a big impact on searchers who are looking for an obscure piece of information or need to expand their query as broadly as possible. I was particularly miffed by Google's dismissal of professional searchers' concerns; its help file on this issue (support.google.com/websearch/answer/9603785) comments, "That's hundreds of results and usually enough for deep research needs. You can enter a related query to refine your search and learn more." Um, no, Google, that's not how it works.

Adding to my concern about what I am missing in Google results, *The Wall Street Journal* published an extensive review on Nov. 15, 2019, about the various ways Google manually modifies search results, tweaks autocomplete suggestions, blacklists websites, and responds to national governments' requests to remove links to specific sites ("How Google Interferes With Its Search Algorithms and Changes Your Results"; [wsj.com/articles/how-google-interferes-with-its-search-algorithms-and-changes-your-results-11573823753](https://www.wsj.com/articles/how-google-interferes-with-its-search-algorithms-and-changes-your-results-11573823753)).

Google's efforts to provide "zero-click" results with its Knowledge Panel, Featured Snippets, and other rich results have ac-

customed us to seeing the answer in an easy-to-read box without needing to click through any of the results. As more of our queries are spoken rather than typed—by asking our smartphone or our smart speaker—we are relying on Google to select the one "best" answer to our question, since we're not able to scroll through a list of results. Many of these zero-click results are fine; if you ask Google for the population of Poughkeepsie, N.Y., you'll get a figure from the 2017 U.S. Census Bureau data (30,614 to be exact). However, try asking Google about a quote often misattributed to Abraham Lincoln. When I searched for `who said If you want to test a man's character, give him power`, the zero-click result repeated the erroneous attribution, even though the first organic search result is to a Snopes.com article which explains that the quote was actually said *about* Lincoln by writer and orator Robert Ingersoll almost 2 decades after Lincoln's death. Had I asked Google about this quote on a device that does not display the first result, I would have relied on popular, but incorrect, information.

And finally, Google Maps is a tool that, for someone who has a zero sense of direction, has been a lifesaver for me. New city? No problem! I just whip out my phone and I can navigate like a pro. Unfortunately, an artist in Berlin recent demonstrated how easy it was to trick Google Maps into interpreting a little red wagon full of smartphones being pulled down the street as a traffic jam of epic proportions (simonweckert.com/google-mapshacks.html). More alarming was a report in *The Washington Post* that found Google changes the location of disputed borders based on the IP address of the query (tinyurl.com/qp9rwof). For example, the borders of Crimea are marked as "disputed" in most versions of Google Maps, but when viewed from a Russian IP address, the border is displayed as a solid line, legitimizing the Russian annexation of the peninsula in 2014, despite Crimea being internationally recognized as part of Ukraine.

I haven't settled on a suitable replacement for Google yet, but I am preparing for post-Google searching, and it may not be pretty.

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