

Google plan to run your life could break the internet

The tech giant's new AI summary feature threatens to disrupt industries reliant on search traffic

James Warrington Media and Telecoms Editor. James Titcomb Technology Editor

Many people regret appearing in Playboy in their youth. Google's two co-founders might be an unlikely addition to this group.

In 2004, Larry Page and Sergey Brin gave an extensive interview to the magazine that threatened to derail the search engine's Nasdaq initial public offering, disrupting a pre-flotation "quiet period" in which executives are meant to stay silent.

Ultimately, the storm passed. But Page's comments during the interview have since hung over the company.

"We want to get you out of Google and to the right place as fast as possible," Page said.

At the time, Google was known for its "10 blue links". The company prided itself on a slick, uncluttered interface that produced better search results than its myriad rivals, which at the time were attempting to stuff search results with their own services.

Larry Page (left), pictured with Sergey Brin, the co-founders of Google, expressed a different intention for the tech giant in a 2004 interview Credit: James Leynse/Corbis Historical

“Most portals show their own content above content elsewhere on the web,” Page said. “We feel that’s a conflict of interest, analogous to taking money for search results.”

Today, critics say this philosophy has been dropped. No Google search only features 10 blue links, and Google’s own services, from shopping to YouTube videos, feature prominently at the top of its results.

Increasingly, the company’s “AI overviews” and more detailed “AI mode”, both generated by artificial intelligence, answer questions without the user needing to leave the page.



The company took the latest step down this path last week. Google will allow users to ask follow-up questions of its AI overviews, which may

further reduce the incentive to click through to websites. Search results will also allow people to build mini-apps and “agents” that can scour the web on your behalf, booking restaurants or hotel rooms on your behalf.

“We’re entering the era of search agents,” Elizabeth Reid, the head of Google search, said.

Critics believe we are approaching “Google Zero”: a future in which Google stops sending users to external websites and instead keeps them on its site indefinitely.

The features have been popular. Sundar Pichai, the chief executive of Google, said 2.5 billion people are seeing AI overviews, and a billion are using AI mode.

These features allow Google to maintain its grip on consumers’ attention and keep them away from rival AI systems such as ChatGPT and Claude from Anthropic.

“Google is leveraging its captive audience for search to keep them engaged with AI [features] to keep them on their platform longer rather than have them move over to ChatGPT or Claude,” says Gadjo Sevilla, an analyst at eMarketer. “It is pushing to be the default consumer AI through Google Search’s dominance.”

Niamh Burns, of Enders Analysis, says the latest changes mean “consumers can offload more and more of their cognitive effort, and their website visits, to AI”.

Yet there is a downside. For websites that have spent years relying on Google traffic, the changes represent a heavy blow.

In a report published earlier this year, the Reuters Institute found that traffic to news websites from Google’s search engine plunged by a third in 5. Industry bosses said they expected traffic to fall a further 43pc in the next three years.

Johannes Beus, of search engine optimisation company Sistrix, says that appearing first in Google search results typically means users will click the link 27pc of the time. But when those results feature AI overviews, this drops to 11pc.

Beus predicts this percentage will continue to fall as more efficient software makes it less computationally intensive to deliver AI answers. “Zero-click searches will continue to expand,” he says.

·Devastating’ effect on traffic

Reach, the owner of the Mirror, Express and dozens of regional titles whose unrelenting hunt for digital attention has triggered repeated accusations of clickbait, is among the biggest victims. In March, the company slumped to its largest loss in a decade, warning of a sharp decline in referrals from Google.

All About Berlin, an English-language online guide to the German capital, said the launch of Google’s AI overviews had had a “devastating” effect on traffic.

“It’s hard to fund my work with 70pc fewer visitors,” Nicolas Bouliane, the website’s owner, wrote on X. “In another year, it will be impossible. Instead of writing new guides, I spend my days preparing for that future.”

Theo Bamber, the chief executive of the News Media Association (NMA), which represents titles including The Telegraph, The Guardian and The Times, describes Google’s latest changes as a “significant and worrying acceleration of the integration of AI into traditional search”.

“By burying links to trusted sources of information beneath synthetic AI summaries, major platforms risk severing the vital connection between news publishers and their audiences, meaning trusted sources of information become harder to find,” he adds.

Claims of copyright

The row is not just about a decline in traffic. Web publishers accuse Google and other tech giants of using vast swathes of copyrighted material to train their models without permission.

Google has defended this, saying in legal filings: “Using publicly available information to learn is not stealing.”

Google has already locked horns with the news industry regarding its AI updates, branding publishers “free riders” as they sought to opt out of AI summaries.

This triggered a furious response from the News Media Association, which argued that Google had been free-riding by repurposing articles for AI without compensation or consent.

Google announced major AI features in its developer conference Credit: Manuel Orbegozo/Reuters

The industry body is now pushing the regulator to crack down on Google and “correct this imbalance”.

The Competition and Markets Authority has set out proposals that would allow publishers to choose whether or not they want to appear in AI search summaries.

The crackdown, which could come into force next year, would also ban the tech giant from “manipulating” search results by favouring big advertisers or punishing companies that have criticised it. Google denies engaging in such practices.

News is a small part of the web. But this row may only be an early sign of cracks in the symbiotic relationship between Google and the websites that feed it.

Threat of a disruptive new feature

The company's latest features, unveiled last week, do more than just summarise information. Google's "search agents", a feature that will be available only to paying subscribers at first, will be able to repeatedly search the web on your behalf, for example, monitoring property websites for flats to rent or checking online shops for new trainers.

"You could be asleep, and it's still helping you," Robby Stein, a Google executive, told Wired.

This threatens to disrupt whole industries that rely on Google. If agents, not humans, are now going to be the ones that browse the web, anything that relies on attracting eyeballs is in trouble.

"[It] brings the broader internet's inconvenient truth even more to the forefront than it's already been," wrote Brad Erickson, an analyst at RBC.

Google's agents threaten to "transition value" away from online marketplaces such as Airbnb, Booking.com and Uber. The day after Google's announcement, shares in Reddit – the online mega-forum that gets a large portion of traffic from the search engine – fell by 5pc.

Google has said everyone can benefit from what it sees as a growing pie. It says the number of searches is at a record high and that it is sending more "quality clicks" to websites. But web publishers are unhappy.

According to internet company Cloudflare, 8pc are choosing to block Google completely, sacrificing their appearance in search results rather than have the company's bots scrape their sites.

If this snowballs, it could be as painful for Google as it is for the websites that rely on it.

“There needs to be a functioning economic grounding here if the open web isn’t going to wither,” says Burns. “Google does rely on this ecosystem, so this is Google’s problem to solve too.”

RECOMMENDED

Cut-throat Google has corrupted the web

[Read more](#)

