

Bard, Bing and Baidu: How big tech's AI race will transform search—and all of computing

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Today, if you want to find a good moving company, you might ask your favorite search engine—Google, Bing, or DuckDuckGo perhaps—for some advice.

After wading past half a page of adverts, you get a load of links to articles on moving companies. You click on one of the links and finally read about how to pick a good 'un. But not for much longer.

In a major reveal this week, Google [announced plans](#) to add its latest AI chatbot, LaMDA, to the Google search engine. The chatbot has been called the "Bard."

I hope William Shakespeare's descendants sue. It's not the job of arguably the greatest writer of the English language to answer mundane questions about how to find a good moving company. But he will.

Ask the Bard how, and he will reply almost immediately with a logical eight-step plan: starting with reading reviews and getting quotes, and ending with taking up references.

No more wading through pages of links; the answer is immediate. To add Shakespearean insult to injury, you can even ask the Bard to respond in the form of a sonnet.

Welcome to the AI race!

Microsoft [responded swiftly to Google](#), saying it would incorporate the ChatGPT chatbot into its search engine, Bing.

It was only recently that [Microsoft announced](#) it would invest US\$10 billion in OpenAI, the company behind ChatGPT, on top of a previous investment of a billion or more in 2022.

ChatGPT has already been added to Microsoft's Teams software. You can expect it to turn up soon in Word, where it will write paragraphs for you. In Outlook it will compose entire emails, and in PowerPoint it will help you prepare slides for your next talk.

Not to be outdone, Chinese web giant Baidu has also [sprung into action](#). It [recently announced](#) its latest chatbot would be released in March. Baidu's chatbot is will be trained on 50% more parameters than ChatGPT, and will be bilingual. The company's share price jumped 15% in response.

AI-driven search

Google, along with the other [tech giants](#), has been using AI in search for many years already. AI algorithms, for example, order the search results Google returns.

The difference now is that instead of searching based on the words you type, these new search engines will try to "understand" your question. And instead of sending you links, they'll try to answer the questions, too.

But new chatbot technology is far from perfect. ChatGPT sometimes just makes stuff up. Chatbots can also be tricked into saying things that are inappropriate, offensive or illegal—although researchers are working hard to reduce this.

Existential risk

For Google, this has been described by the New York Times not just as an AI race, but a [race to survive](#).

When ChatGPT first came out late last year, alarm bells rang for the search giant. Google's founders, Larry Page and Sergey Brin, returned from their outside activities to oversee the response.

Advertising revenue from Google Search results contributes about three-quarters of the US\$283 billion [annual revenue](#) of Alphabet, Google's

parent company.

If people start using AI chatbots to answer their questions rather than Google Search, what will happen to that income?

Even if Google users stick with Google, but get their answers directly from the Bard, how will Google make money when no links are being clicked anymore?

Microsoft may see this as an opportunity for its search engine, Bing, to overtake Google. It's not out of the question that it will. In the 1990s, before Google came out, I was very happy with AltaVista—the best [search engine](#) of the day. But I quickly jumped ship as soon as a better search experience arrived.

Will the AI race lead to cutting corners?

Google had previously not made its LaMDA [chatbot](#) available to the public due to concerns about it being misused or misunderstood. Indeed, it famously fired one of its engineers, Blake Lemoine, after he [claimed LaMDA was sentient](#).

There are a host of risks associated with big tech's rush to cement the future of AI search.

For one, if tech companies won't make as much money from selling links, what new income streams will they create? Will they try to sell information gleaned from our interactions with search chatbots?

And what about people who will use these chatbots for base purposes? They may be perfect for writing personalized and persuasive messages to scam unsuspecting users—or to flood social media with conspiracy theories.

Not to mention we've already seen ChatGPT do a good job of answering most homework questions. For now, [public schools](#) in New South Wales, Queensland, Victoria, Western Australian and Tasmania have banned its use to prevent cheating—but it seems unlikely they could (or should) ban access to Google or Bing.

A new interface

When Microsoft launched Windows, it was the start of a revolution. Rather than typing cryptic instructions, we could just point and click on a screen. That revolution continued with the launch of Apple's iPhone—an interface that shrunk computers and the web into the palm of our hand.

Perhaps the biggest impact from AI-driven search tools will be on how we interact with the myriad ever-smarter devices in our lives. We will stop pointing, clicking and touching, and will instead start having entire conversations with our devices.

We can only speculate on what this might mean in the longer term. But, for better or worse, how we interact with computers is about to change.

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