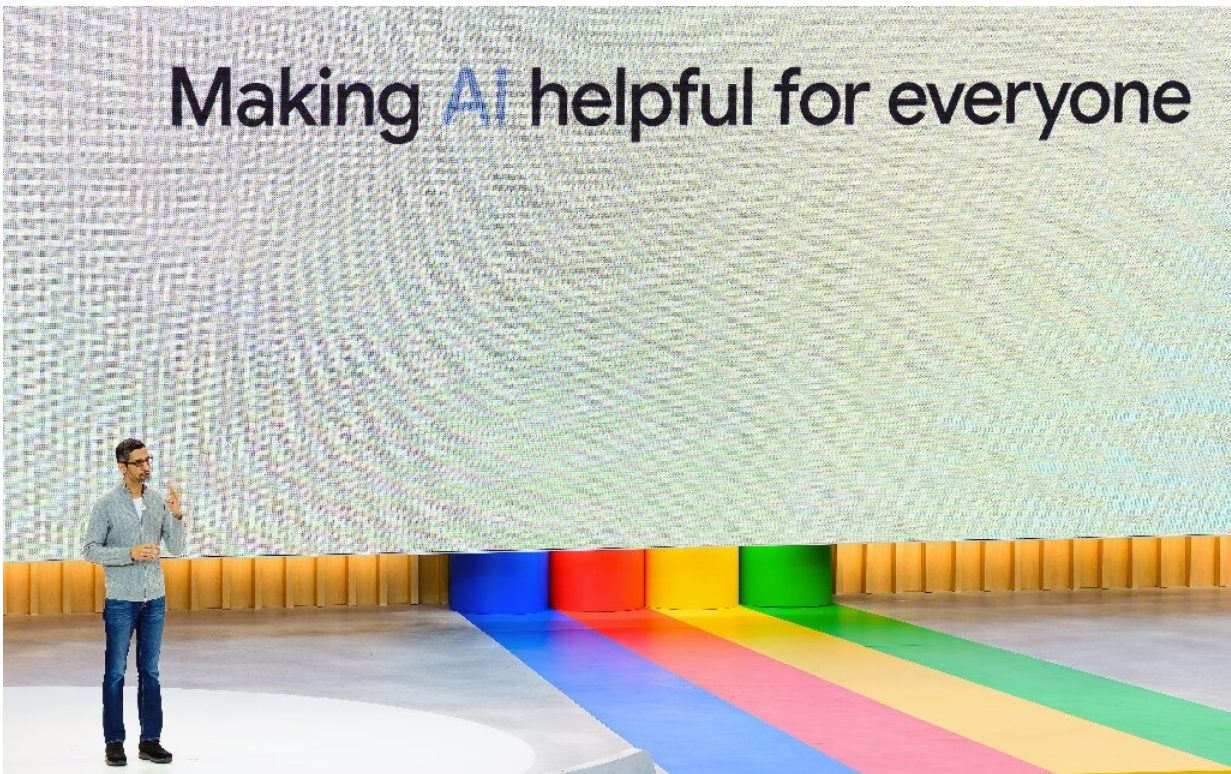


Online search to make up lost time with AI

May 16 2023, by Julie JAMMOT



Google CEO Sundar Pichai describes his group's latest AI advances at an annual developers event in May 2023.

Online search, dominated by Google for 25 years, has become as banal as making a phone call, but it could finally be getting a profound reset thanks to artificial intelligence.

The classic search and click made ubiquitous by the Google behemoth is

getting a major AI makeover as bots ChatGPT, Bard or Bing see hundreds of millions of web surfers seek answers to life's questions in a new way.

"People are realizing how many times they use Google search, not to find a webpage, but to answer a question," said Stefan Sigg, Chief Product Officer at Germany-based Software AG.

Microsoft, long considered big tech's boring uncle, has jumped fearlessly and some say blindly into generative AI search with an update to Bing, the long struggling also-ran to Google.

Bing's bot, which was released worldwide after three months of testing, responds directly to a query instead of throwing out a pageful of links for the search user to wade and click through.

With a prompt, Bing will compare two products, brainstorm vacation plans or reassuringly help prepare a job interview, for example.

'Heavy lifting'

"Now, search does the heavy lifting for you," said Cathy Edwards, VP Engineering at Google, during the company's annual I/O [developers conference](#) in California.

The user no longer has to "sift through the information and then piece things together," she said.

At the conference, matching Bing, Google presented the latest iteration of its web search juggernaut, but instead of the constellation of links that confronts you today, a chatbot offered a few paragraphs to answer what you were looking for.

Google's AI amped search engine will slowly be released in the United States as a start, the company said.

"What we're trying to do is make it more natural and intuitive, as easy as asking a friend and getting information from someone who's really knowledgeable for any question you have in the world," Elizabeth Reid, Vice President of Search, told AFP.

Beyond search, Google and Microsoft have deployed generative AI tools to other products, from cloud to [word processing](#), presenting bots as helpful "co-pilots," to use the term hammered home by the Windows-maker.

Personal 'genie'

"I think search is going to be fractured into a million pieces, and integrated into all sorts of interfaces, and not just one monolithic centralized place, which is what Google has become," said John Battelle, author and media entrepreneur.



Visitors test Google's new products at an annual developers conference in May 2023.

But if every website acts like a faithful friend, it will become ever more difficult to distinguish good information from bad, he warned.

"Would you trust an AI travel agent to give you the right deal? No," Battelle said.

"I want my own 'genie', my 'agent' to negotiate with the website. If it's just me against an AI, I'm gonna lose. I want one on my side."

Battelle's "genie" would digest a user's information from the smartphone, computer, TV or car to help answer and act for the user in life online.

The bot, powered by personal data, would buy the best vacuum cleaner according to your tastes, habits and current promotions, sparing a long and tedious search

The AI personal assistant would have to come for a fee, ensuring that personal data wasn't harvested and sold to the highest bidder for advertising or online tracking, as it is on social media.

Startups such as Replika, Anima and others are already moving into the companion AI space.

'Vital role'

For the time being, Google isn't going to disappear, said Jim Lecinski, professor of marketing at the Kellogg School of Management.

"We could have had this same conversation about four years ago with the advent of voice assistants like Alexa or Siri,"

"Oh wow, search is going away because people are just going to speak their query to their car and device on their kitchen counter. Well, here we are," he said.

The disruption of generative AI could, however, challenge the internet's business model, as it can allow users to find the product they want "without having to click on an ad," Lecinski said.

But he has no doubt that the giants, ad-based Google and Meta first among them, will find solutions.

In the new version of Google [search](#) presented on Wednesday, the ads still appear, either up at the top of the page or lower in the results, depending on the question asked.

"I don't think we can predict what the future will have, but we do think ads will continue to play a vital role," said Google's Reid.

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