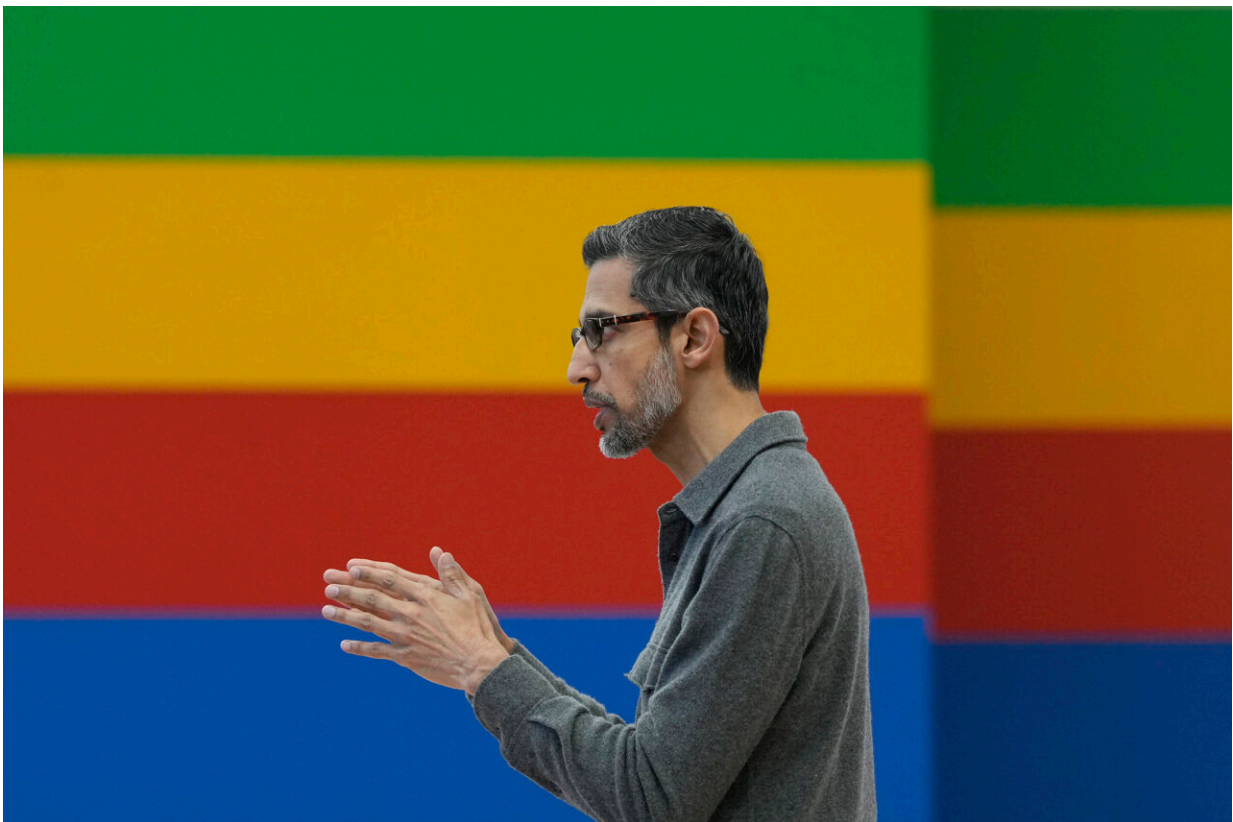


Google unleashes AI in search, raising hopes for better results and fears about less web traffic

May 14 2024, by Michael Liedtke



Alphabet CEO Sundar Pichai speaks at a Google I/O event in Mountain View, Calif., Tuesday, May 14, 2024. Credit: AP Photo/Jeff Chiu

Google on Tuesday rolled out a retooled search engine that will

frequently favor responses crafted by artificial intelligence over website links, a shift promising to quicken the quest for information while also potentially disrupting the flow of money-making internet traffic.

The makeover announced at Google's annual developers conference will begin this week in the U.S. when hundreds of millions of people will start to periodically see conversational summaries generated by the company's AI technology at the top of the search engine's results page.

The AI overviews are supposed to only crop up when Google's technology determines they will be the quickest and most effective way to satisfy a user's curiosity—a solution mostly likely to happen with complex subjects or when people are brainstorming, or planning. People will likely still see Google's traditional website links and ads for simple searches for things like a store recommendation or weather forecasts.

Google began testing AI overviews with a small subset of selected users a year ago, but the company is now making it one of the staples in its search results in the U.S. before introducing the feature in other parts of the world. By the end of the year, Google expects the recurring AI overviews to be part of its search results for about 1 billion people.

Besides infusing more AI into its dominant search engine, Google also used the packed conference held at a Mountain View, California, amphitheater near its headquarters to showcase advances in a technology that is reshaping business and society.



Demis Hassabis, CEO of DeepMind Technologies, left, shakes hands with Alphabet CEO Sundar Pichai at a Google I/O event in Mountain View, Calif., Tuesday, May 14, 2024. Credit: AP Photo/Jeff Chiu

The next AI steps included more sophisticated analysis powered by Gemini—[a technology unveiled](#) five months ago—and smarter assistants, or "agents," including a still-nascent version dubbed "Astra" that will be able to understand, explain and remember things it is shown through a smartphone's camera lens. Google underscored its commitment to AI by bringing in Demis Hassabis, the executive who oversees the technology, to appear on stage at its marquee conference for the first time.

The injection of more AI into Google's search engine marks one of the

most dramatic changes that the company has made in its foundation since its inception in the late 1990s. It's a move that opens the door for more growth and innovation but also threatens to trigger a sea change in web surfing habits.

"This bold and responsible approach is fundamental to delivering on our mission and making AI more helpful for everyone," Google CEO Sundar Pichai told a group of reporters.

Well aware of how much attention is centered on the technology, Pichai ended a nearly two-hour succession of presentations by asking Google's Gemini model how many times AI had been mentioned. The count: 120, and then the tally edged up by one more when Pichai said, "AI," yet again.

The increased AI emphasis will bring new risks to an internet ecosystem that depends heavily on digital advertising as its financial lifeblood.



Demis Hassabis, CEO of DeepMind Technologies, speaks at a Google I/O event in Mountain View, Calif., Tuesday, May 14, 2024. Credit: AP Photo/Jeff Chiu

Google stands to suffer if the AI overviews undercuts ads tied to its search engine—a business that reeled in \$175 billion in revenue last year alone. And website publishers—ranging from major media outlets to entrepreneurs and startups that focus on more narrow subjects—will be hurt if the AI overviews are so informative that they result in fewer clicks on the website links that will still appear lower on the results page.

Based on habits that emerged during the past year's testing phase of Google's AI overviews, about 25% of the traffic could be negatively affected by the de-emphasis on website links, said Marc McCollum, chief innovation officer at Raptive, which helps about 5,000 website

publishers make money from their content.

A decline in traffic of that magnitude could translate into billions of dollars in lost ad revenue, a devastating blow that would be delivered by a form of AI technology that culls information plucked from many of the websites that stand to lose revenue.

"The relationship between Google and publishers has been pretty symbiotic, but enter AI, and what has essentially happened is the Big Tech companies have taken this creative content and used it to train their AI models," McCollum said. "We are now seeing that being used for their own commercial purposes in what is effectively a transfer of wealth from small, independent businesses to Big Tech."

But Google found the AI overviews resulted in people in conducting even more searches during the technology's testing "because they suddenly can ask questions that were too hard before," said Liz Reid, who oversees the company's search operations, told The Associated Press during an interview. She declined to provide any specific numbers about link-clicking volume during the tests of AI overviews.



Alphabet CEO Sundar Pichai speaks at a Google I/O event in Mountain View, Calif., Tuesday, May 14, 2024. Credit: AP Photo/Jeff Chiu

"In reality, people do want to click to the web, even when they have an AI overview," Reid said. "They start with the AI overview and then they want to dig in deeper. We will continue to innovate on the AI overview and also on how do we send the most useful traffic to the web."

The increasing use of AI technology to summarize information in chatbots such as Google's Gemini and OpenAI's ChatGPT during the past 18 months already has been raising legal questions about whether the companies behind the services are illegally pulling from copyrighted material to advance their services. It's an allegation at the heart of a high-profile lawsuit that The New York Times filed late last year against

OpenAI and its biggest backer, Microsoft.

Google's AI overviews could provoke lawsuits too, especially if they siphon away traffic and ad sales from websites that believe the company is unfairly profiting from their content. But it's a risk that the company had to take as the technology advances and is used in rival services such as ChatGPT and upstart search engines such as [Perplexity](#), said Jim Yu, executive chairman of BrightEdge, which helps websites rank higher in Google's search results.

"This is definitely the next chapter in search," Yu said. "It's almost like they are tuning three major variables at once: the search quality, the flow of traffic in the ecosystem and then the monetization of that traffic. There hasn't been a moment in search that is bigger than this for a long time."

Outside of the amphitheater, several dozen protesters chained themselves to each other and blocked one of the entrances to the conference. Demonstrators targeted a \$1.2 billion deal known as Project Nimbus that provides artificial intelligence technology to the Israeli government. They contend the system is being lethally deployed in the Gaza war—an allegation Google refutes. The demonstration didn't seem to affect the conference attendance or the enthusiasm of the crowd inside the venue.

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