

Does Google's monopoly impact search results? Tech titan faces reckoning

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The founders of internet search and digital advertising giant Google wrote in a 1998 paper that goals for online advertising "do not always correspond" to useful internet search results.

Now, after Google was found to hold an illegal search monopoly, critics suggest the company that became synonymous with [internet search](#) has, as Sergey Brin and Larry Page feared, shifted "away from the needs of the consumers."

Google, high-profile technology-industry critic Ed Zitron said in an interview, "got greedy."

These days, those who put a search term into Google often find relevant information but also get a page topped with ads, frequently followed by links to websites with content built for turning views and clicks into cash. Lately, search results prominently feature e-commerce websites like Amazon and crowd-sourced sites like Reddit and Google's own YouTube, recent research shows.

Google did not respond to questions about its search product and the monopoly finding in federal court. In a blog post this year, the company said it has used "advanced spam-fighting systems" for decades, and in 2022 started adjusting its website ranking systems to "reduce unhelpful, unoriginal content and keep it at very low levels," while "algorithmic enhancements" would help "surface the most helpful information."

Last month's blockbuster monopoly finding by Judge Amit P. Mehta, in the Department of Justice lawsuit against Google, has spotlighted the Mountain View, California, company's wildly popular search engine. Mehta, in the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia, said Google's conclusion in a 2020 study that it would not lose search revenue if it slashed search quality is proof of illegal monopoly power.

On Sept. 6, Mehta kicks off the next phase of the DOJ case against Google—which he said controls at least 90% of the U.S. internet search market—to strip its monopoly over search. The judge, in his 277-page ruling, zeroed in on the company's payments to companies like Apple

and Samsung to make Google the default search engine, saying "most devices in the United States come preloaded exclusively with Google."

Critics argue that the company's freedom from competition allows it to shirk quality while the money—\$238 billion in advertising revenue last year—rolls in.

Zitron, CEO of San Francisco public relations firm EZPR and host of the iHeart podcast "Better Offline," said internal Google emails revealed in the court case suggest a high-level management shift led to less user-friendly changes to search results.

Five years ago, top Google executives declared a "Code Yellow" emergency over falling growth in search queries and the hefty ad revenue they generate, the emails show. As Google bean counters sought fixes, search executives fretted over the conflict identified by founders Brin and Page. Search chief Ben Gomes complained his department was being pushed "too close to the money" and becoming "too involved with ads for the good of the product and company."

A little more than a year later, Google lumped search and advertising into one unit under advertising head Prabhakar Raghavan. Gomes, after two decades building search, was exiled to education initiatives.

Google started prioritizing the number of searches over the quality of results, "so they can show you as many ads as possible," Zitron contended.

The company's search-results page has in recent years grown top-heavy with ads labeled "sponsored" that may not help the user but are lucrative for Google. Spammers and marketers use keywords and content trickery to push certain websites higher in results, forcing Google to play catch-up while users pay in wasted time and frustration.

"I've never experienced as many people complaining or citing issues with Google's results as I have in the last year," said Lily Ray, a vice president at marketing agency Amsive, which researches Google search trends.

"I'm seeing a ton of spam in Google search results. It's never been this visible to me."

Mehta said "some evidence" shows Google's search spending has declined, and in the rare instances that competition arose, the company quickly invested in improvements. But the judge said innovation can boost already dominant market share, and described Google as tech's "highest quality search engine."

However, Christopher Hockett, an adjunct professor at UC Berkeley's law school, said "the backdrop of all this is that if you had more competition, then you would have higher quality."

Research by Illinois-based Amsive shows Google's updates in recent years made certain kinds of websites less visible, including those using stock images or photos grabbed from social media, or presenting AI-generated content, or lacking expertise, or containing intrusive ads or many cash-for-clicks links. But for product searches, many high-ranking product-comparison websites make money when a user clicks through to a brand's site for a purchase, or, Ray noted, are "pay-to-play" operations that charge brands to be included on their site.

Changes Google made this year appear to have down-ranked product-review sites, while e-commerce stores, especially Amazon, appear up high, often along with YouTube, Amsive said. The New York Times' popular Wirecutter website, with product reviews based on extensive testing, now frequently falls below internet forum sites Reddit and Quora in best-product results, Ray said.

Reddit's visibility leaped more than 1,000% this year over 2023, Amsive

found. In July 2023, the Google search, "how to potty train a boy" generated only pregnancy and medical sites—plus YouTube—in the top 10 results, with the Mayo Clinic at No. 1. By July of this year, a five-year-old post from Reddit moved from 50th to 2nd position, higher than "authoritative sites like the Mayo Clinic," Amsive reported.

Google could have developed technology to seek out the most helpful answers to questions, but appears to have decided to "just put Reddit on there," Zitron said.

Thousands of layoffs at Google in recent years have eroded institutional knowledge in search, Zitron said, and "they may have fired so many people that the thing doesn't work anymore."

Google's race to compete in the generative AI frenzy kicked off by the release of ChatGPT in 2022 "might explain why some things have been left by the wayside" on search, Ray said. Also, she added, "They're a monopoly. They're the default search engine. Their stock is going up and up. What incentive do they have to fix it?"

Barry Schwartz, CEO of New York software company RustyBrick and an editor at blogs Search Engine Land and Search Engine Roundtable, said Google is constantly innovating and experimenting in search. "I probably see five to 10 new things a day as far as testing," Schwartz said. "Probably one of their top things that they focus on is making sure the content in the [search results](#) is useful."

Still, Schwartz said, "If Google was under competitive fire and they had to do more, I think they would."

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