

Google's personal-touch reach gets spotlight in DuckDuckGo study

December 6 2018, by Nancy Cohen

Google's Filter Bubble

87 people across the U.S. searched Google at the **same time**, **logged out**, and in **private browsing mode**. You might think they would get the same results. **They didn't.**

gun control

The image shows three search result panels for the query 'gun control'. Each panel is associated with a person icon wearing a mask, representing a different user. The results are categorized into NEWS and VIDEOS. The first panel (left) shows results from NRA-ILA, WOSU Radio, and CBS Denver. The second panel (middle) shows results from wikipedia.org, texastribune.org, justfacts.com, huffingtonpost.com, and chicagotribune.com. The third panel (right) shows results from NRA-ILA, WOSU Radio, and Chicago Tribune. The video results are from Bloomberg, New York Times, and CBS Denver.

Actual results from three people in the study.

Credit: DuckDuckGo

Google Chrome Help tells visitors that "When you browse privately, other people who use the device won't see your activity. Chrome doesn't save your browsing history or information entered in forms. Cookies and site data are remembered while you're browsing, but deleted when you exit Incognito [mode](#)." But then it says "Incognito mode stops Chrome from saving your browsing activity. Your activity might still be visible to: Websites you visit, including the ads and resources used on those sites Your employer, school, or whoever runs the network you're using. Your internet service provider."

Hnh? A new study says Google likes getting personal even when you are on the hush-hush Incognito page. Reading through the study findings, we cannot blame you if you conclude that you may as well be a superstar thinking big sunglasses will fool the paps from chasing you at the airport.

The [DuckDuckGo](#) study is titled "Measuring the "[Filter](#) Bubble": How Google is influencing what you click." Here, Natasha [Lomas](#) in *TechCrunch* looked at the study findings. "DDG reckons it's not possible even for logged out users of Google [search](#), who are also browsing in Incognito mode, to prevent their online activity from being used by Google to program—and thus shape—the results they see."

[Ben](#) Schoon in *9to5Google* said that "To summarize the results, every single test delivered mainly unique results with each keyword regardless of where it was searched."

"Most people saw results unique to them, even when logged out and in

private browsing mode," said one study finding.

Hold it right there? If I am browsing in Incognito mode, it does not prevent online activity from being used by Google to shape results? "[Private](#) browsing mode and being logged out of Google offered very little filter bubble protection. These tactics simply do not provide the anonymity most people expect. In fact, it's simply not possible to use Google search and avoid its filter bubble."

The study authors said their findings were based on a study of individuals "entering identical search terms at the same time." Most participants saw results unique to them, they found, and discrepancies could not be explained by changes in location, time, by being logged in to Google, or by Google testing algorithm changes to a small subset of users.

Wait, what is a filter bubble? DuckDuckGo described a "filter bubble" problem as "the manipulation of your search results based on your personal data."

[Links](#) are moved up or down or added to your Google search results, necessitating the filtering of other search results altogether, said DDG. Think "editorialized results" informed by the personal information Google has on you, e.g., search, browsing, purchase history, putting you "in a bubble based on what Google's algorithms think you're most likely to click on."

Ivan Mehta, *The Next Web*, quoted DuckDuckGo: "We often hear of confusion that private browsing [mode](#) enables anonymity on the web, but this finding demonstrates that Google tailors search results regardless of browsing mode. People should not be lulled into a false sense of security that so-called 'incognito' mode makes them anonymous."

On the other hand, people should also note that DuckDuckGo is interested in increasing awareness that it champions privacy.

DuckDuckGo is an [online](#) search engine platform. Its own brand image is as "an Internet search engine that emphasizes protecting searchers' privacy and avoiding the filter bubble of personalized search results," according to a description in Wikipedia.

DuckDuckGo distinguishes itself from other search engines by not profiling its users. DuckDuckGo traffic has been exploding and it's not a coincidence, said *Forbes* back in October, noting concern in general over surveillance and [privacy](#).

Ivan Mehta: "While DuckDuckGo's findings shed some light on some of the flaws in Google search results, we might want to take a competitor's conclusion with a pinch of salt."

To be sure, Google spoke about the study and, according to reports, why it was flawed. Google provided a statement to *9to5Google*. In short, Google saw the study as flawed citing time and location as factors that could have further affected the results.

"This study's methodology and conclusions are [flawed](#) since they are based on the assumption that any difference in search results are based on personalization. That is simply not true. In fact, there are a number of factors that can lead to slight differences, including time and location, which this study doesn't appear to have controlled for effectively."

More information: spreadprivacy.com/google-filter-bubble-study/

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