

FEATURES

The end of the Googeverse

For two decades, Google Search was the invisible force that determined the ebb and flow of online content. Now, for the first time, its cultural relevance is in question.

By Ryan Broderick

Illustrations by Michelle Rohn for The Verge

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The first thing ever searched on Google was the name Gerhard Casper, a former Stanford president. As the story goes, in 1998, Larry Page and Sergey Brin demoed Google for computer scientist John Hennessy. They searched Casper's name on both AltaVista and Google. The former pulled up results for Casper the Friendly Ghost; the latter pulled up information on Gerhard Casper the person.

What made Google's results different from AltaVista's was its algorithm, PageRank, which organized results based on the amount of links between pages. In fact, the site's original name, BackRub, was a reference to the backlinks it was

using to rank results. If your site was linked to by other authoritative sites, it would place higher in the list than some random blog that no one was citing. Google officially went online later in 1998. It quickly became so inseparable from both the way we use the internet and, eventually, culture itself, that we almost lack the language to describe what Google's impact over the last 25 years has actually been. It's like asking a fish to explain what the ocean is. And yet, all around us are signs that the era of "peak Google" is ending or, possibly, already over.

This year, *The Verge* is exploring how Google Search has reshaped the web into a place for robots – and how the emergence of AI threatens Google itself.

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There is a [growing chorus](#) of [complaints](#) that Google is not as accurate, as competent, as dedicated to search as it once was. The rise of massive closed algorithmic social networks like Meta's Facebook and Instagram began eating the web in the 2010s. More recently, there's been a shift to entertainment-based video feeds like TikTok — which is now being used as a primary search engine by a new generation of internet users.

For two decades, Google Search was the largely invisible force that determined the ebb and flow of online content. Now, for the first time since Google's launch, a world without it at the center actually seems possible. We're clearly at the end of one era and at the threshold of another. But to understand where we're headed, we have to look back at how it all started.

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f you're looking for the moment Google truly crossed over into the zeitgeist, it was likely around 2001. In February 2000, Jennifer Lopez

wore her iconic green Versace dress to the Grammys, which former Google CEO Eric Schmidt would later say searches for inspired how Google Image Search functioned when it launched in summer 2001. That year was also the moment when users began to realize that Google was important enough to hijack. The term “Google bombing” was first coined by Adam Mathes, now a product manager at Google, who first described the concept in April 2001 while writing for the site Uber.nu. Mathes successfully used the backlinks that fueled PageRank to make the search term “talentless hack” bring up his friend’s website. Mathes did not respond to a request for comment.

A humor site called Hudedisk.com, however, successfully pulled it off first in January 2001. A writer for the site, interviewed under the pseudonym Michael Hudedisk, told *Wired* in 2007 that their three-person team linked to a webpage selling pro-George W. Bush merchandise and was able to make it the top result on Google if you searched “dumb motherfucker.”

“One of the other guys who ran the site got a cease and desist letter from the bombed George Bush site’s lawyers. We chickened out and pulled down the link, but we got a lot of press,” Hudedisk recounted.

“It’s difficult to see which factors contribute to this result, though. It has to do with Google’s ranking algorithm,” a Google spokesperson said of the stunt at the time, calling the search results “an anomaly.”

But it wasn’t an anomaly. In fact, there’s a way of viewing the company’s 25-year history as an ongoing battle against users who want to manipulate what PageRank surfaces.

“[Google bombing] was a popular thing — get your political enemy and some curse words and then merge them in the top Google Image resolve and sometimes it works,” blogger Philipp Lensen told *The Verge*. “Mostly for the laughs or giggles.”

There’s a way of viewing the company’s 25-year history as an ongoing battle against users who want to manipulate what PageRank surfaces

Lenssen still remembers the first time he started to get a surge of page views from Google. He had been running a gaming site called Games for the Brain for around three years without much fanfare. “It was just not doing anything,” he told *The Verge*. “And then, suddenly, it was a super popular website.”

It can be hard to remember how mysterious these early run-ins with Google traffic were. It came as a genuine surprise to Lenssen when he figured out that “brain games” had become a huge search term on Google. (Even now, in 2023, Lenssen’s site is still the first non-sponsored Google result for “brain games.”)

“Google kept sending me people all day long from organic search results,” he said. “It became my main source of income.”

Rather than brain games, however, Lenssen is probably best known for a blog he ran from 2003 to 2011 called Google Blogoscoped. He was, for a long time, one of the main chroniclers of everything Google. And he remembers the switch from other search engines to Google in the late 1990s. It was passed around by word of mouth as a better alternative to AltaVista, which wasn’t the biggest search engine of the era but was considered the best one yet.

In 2023, search optimization is a matter of sheer self-interest, a necessity of life in a Google-dominated world. The URLs of new articles are loaded with keywords. YouTube video titles, too — not too many, of course, because an overly long title gets cut off. Shop listings by vendors sprawl into wordy repetition, like side sign spinners reimaged as content sludge. And it goes beyond just Google’s domain. Solid blocks of blue hashtags and account tags trail at the end of influencer Instagram posts. Even teenagers tag their TikToks with #fyp — a hashtag thought to make it more likely for videos to be gently bumped into the algorithmic feeds of strangers.

The word SEO “kind of sounds like spam when you say it today,” said Lenssen, in a slightly affected voice. “But that was not how it started.”

To use the language of today, Lensen and his cohort of bloggers were the earliest content creators. Their tastes and sensibilities would inflect much of digital media today, from *Wordle* to food Instagram. It might seem unfathomable now, but unlike the creators of 2023, the bloggers of the early 2000s weren't in a low-grade war with algorithms. By optimizing for PageRank, they were helping Google by making it better. And that was good for everyone because making Google better was good for the internet.

This attitude is easier to comprehend when you look back at Google's product launches in these early years — Google Groups, Google Calendar, Google News, Google Answers. The company also acquired Blogger in 2003.

“Everything was done really intelligently, very clean, very easy to use, and extremely sophisticated,” said technologist Andy Baio, who still blogs at Waxy.org. “And I think that Google Reader was probably the best, like one of the best, shining examples of that.”

“Everybody I knew was living off Google Reader,” recalled Scott Beale of Laughing Squid.

Google Reader was created by engineer Chris Wetherell in 2005. It allowed users to take the RSS feeds — an open protocol for organizing a website’s content and updates — and add those feeds into a singular reader. If Google Search was the spinal cord of 2000s internet culture, Google Reader was the central nervous system.

“They were encouraging people to write on the web,” said Baio. Bloggers like Lenssen, Baio, and Beale felt like everything Google was doing was in service of making the internet better. The tools it kept launching felt tied to a mission of collecting the world’s information and helping people add more content to the web.

Lenssen said he now sees SEO as more or less part of the same nefarious tradition as Google bombing

Many of these bloggers feel differently now. Lenssen said he now sees SEO as more or less part of the same nefarious tradition as Google bombing. “You want a certain opinion to be in the number one spot, not as a meme but to influence people,” he said. Most of the other bloggers expressed a similar change of heart in interviews for this piece.

“When Google came along, they were ad-free with actually relevant results in a minimalistic kind of design,” Lenssen said. “If we fast-forward to now, it’s kind of inverted now. The results are kind of spammy and keyword-built and SEO stuff. And so it might be hard to understand for people looking at Google now how useful it was back then.”

But there is one notable holdout among these early web pioneers: Danny Sullivan, who, during this period, became the world’s de facto expert on all things search. (Which, after the dawn of the millennium, increasingly just became Google Search.) Sullivan’s expertise gives his opinion some weight, though there is one teeny little wrinkle — since 2017, he’s been an employee of Google, working as the company’s official search liaison. Which means even if he doesn’t think they are, his opinions about search now have to be in line with Google’s opinions about search.

According to Sullivan, the pattern of optimizing for search predates Google — it wasn't the first search engine, after all. As early as 1997, people were creating “doorway pages” — pages full of keywords meant to trick web crawlers into overindexing a site.

More crucially, Sullivan sees Google Search not as a driver of virality but as a mere echo.

“I just can't think of something that I did as a Google search that caused everybody else to do the same Google search,” Sullivan said. “I can see that something's become a meme in some way. And sometimes, it could even be a meme on Google Search, like, you know, the Doodles we do. People will say, ‘Now you got to go search for this; you've got to go see it or whatever.’ But search itself doesn't tend to cause the virality.”

Those hundreds of millions of websites jockeying for placement on the first page of results don't influence how culture works, as Sullivan sees it. For him, Google Search activity does not create more search activity. Decades may have passed, but people are essentially still searching for “Jennifer Lopez dress.” Culture motivates what goes into the search box, and it's a one-way street.

But causality is both hard to prove and disprove. The same set of facts that leads Sullivan to discount the effect of Google on culture can just as readily point to the opposite conclusion.

That same month, what is largely considered to be the first real internet meme, “All Your Base Are Belong To Us,” was launched into the mainstream

In February 2001, right after Hudedisk's Google bomb, Google launched Google Groups, a discussion platform that integrated with the internet's first real social network, Usenet. And that same month, what is largely considered to be the first real internet meme, “All Your Base Are Belong To Us,” was launched into the mainstream after years of bouncing around as a message board inside joke. It became one of the largest search trends on Google, and an archived [Google](#)

Zeitgeist report even lists the infamous mistranslated video game cutscene as one of the top searches in February 2001.

Per Sullivan's logic, Google Groups added better discovery to both Usenet and the myriad other message boards and online communities creating proto-meme culture at the time. And that discoverability created word-of-mouth interest, which led to search interest. The uptick in searches merely reflected what was happening outside of Google.

But you can just as easily conclude that Google — in the form of Search and Groups — drove the virality of “All Your Base Are Belong To Us.”

“All Your Base Are Belong To Us” had been floating around message boards as an animated GIF as early as 1998. But after Google went live, it began mutating the way modern memes do. A fan project launched to redub the game, the meme got a page on Newgrounds, and most importantly, the first Photoshops of the meme showed up in a Something Awful thread. (Consider how much harder it would have been, pre-Google, to find the assets for “All Your Base Are Belong To Us” in order to remix them.)

That back and forth between social and search would create pathways for, and then supercharge, an online network of independent publishers that we now call the blogosphere. Google's backlink algorithm gave a new level of influence to online curation. The spread of “All Your Base Are Belong To Us” — from message boards, to search, to aggregators and blogs — set the stage for, well, how everything has worked ever since.

SEO experts like Sullivan might rankle at the idea that Google's PageRank is a social algorithm, but it's not *not* a social mechanism.

We tend to think of “search” and “social” as competing ideas. The history of the internet between the 2000s and the 2010s is often painted as a shift from search engines to social networks. But PageRank does measure online discussion, in a sense — and it also influences how discussion flows. And just like the algorithms that would eventually dominate platforms like Facebook years later, PageRank has a profound effect on how people create content.

Alex Turvy, a sociologist specializing in digital culture, said it's hard to map our current understanding of virality and platform optimization to the earliest days of Google, but there are definitely similarities.

"I think that the celebrity gossip world is a good example," he said. "Folks that understood backlinks and keywords earlier than others and were able to get low-quality content pretty high on search results pages."

He cited examples such as Perez Hilton and the blogs Crazy Days and Nights and Oh No They Didn't! Over the next few years, the web began to fill with aggregators like eBaum's World, Digg, and CollegeHumor.

But even the creators of original high-quality content were not immune to the pressures of Google Search.

Deb Perelman is considered one of the earliest food bloggers and is certainly one of the few who's still at it. She started blogging about food in 2003. Her site, Smitten Kitchen, was launched in 2006 and has since spawned three books. In the beginning, she says, she didn't really think much about search. But eventually, she, like the other eminent bloggers of the period, took notice.

"It was definitely something you were aware of — your page ranking — just because it affected whether people could find your stuff through Google," she said.

It's hard to find another sector more thoroughly molded by the pressures of SEO than recipe sites

It's hard to find another sector more thoroughly molded by the pressures of SEO than recipe sites, which, these days, take a near-uniform shape as an extremely long anecdote (often interspersed with ads), culminating in a recipe card that is remarkably terse in comparison. The formatting and style of food bloggers has generated endless discourse for years.

The reason why food blogs look like that, according to Perelman, is pretty straightforward: the bloggers want to be read on Google.

That said, she's adamant that most of the backlash against food bloggers attaching long personal essays to the top of their posts is obnoxious and sexist. People can just not read it if they don't want to. But she also acknowledged writers are caving to formatting pressures. (There are countless guides instructing that writers use a specific amount of sentences per paragraph and a specific amount of paragraphs per post to rank better on Google.)

"Rather than writing because there was maybe a story to tell, there was this idea that it was good for SEO," she said. "And I think that that's a less quality experience. And yeah, you could directly say I guess that Google has sort of created that in a way."

Sullivan says PageRank's algorithm is a lot simpler than most people assume it is. At the beginning, most of the tips and tricks people were sharing were largely pointless for SEO. The subject of SEO is still rife with superstition. There are a lot of different ideas that people have about exactly how to get a prominent spot on Google's results, Sullivan acknowledges. But most of the stuff you'll find by, well, googling "SEO tricks" isn't very accurate.

And here is where you get into the circular nature of his argument against Google's influence. Thousands of food bloggers are searching for advice on how to optimize their blogs for Google. The advice that sits at the top of Google is bad, but they're using it anyway, and now, their blogs all look the same. Isn't that, in a sense, Google shaping how content is made?

“**A**ll Your Base Are Belong To Us” existed pre-Google but suddenly rose in prominence as the search engine flickered on. Other forms of content began following the same virality curve, rocketing to the top of Google and then into greater pop culture.

Perelman said that one of the first viral recipes she remembers from that era was a 2006 *New York Times* tutorial on how to make no-knead bread by Sullivan Street Bakery’s Jim Lahey. “That was a really big moment,” she said.

True to form, Sullivan doubts that it was search, itself, that made it go viral. “It almost certainly wasn’t hot because search made it hot. Something else made it hot and then everybody went to search for it,” he said.

(Which may be true. But the video tutorial was also published on YouTube one month after the site was purchased by Google.)

The viral no-knead bread recipe is a perfect example of how hard it can be to separate the discoverability Google brought to the internet from the influence of

that discoverability. And it was even harder 20 years ago, long before we had concepts like “viral” or “influencer.”

Alice Marwick, a communications professor and author of *The Private Is Political: Networked Privacy and Social Media*, told *The Verge* that it wasn't until Myspace launched in 2003 that we started to even develop the idea of internet fame.

“There wasn't like a pipeline for virality in the way that it is,” she said. “Now, there is a template of, like, weird people doing weird stuff on the internet.”

“Google has gotten shittier and shittier.”

Marwick said that within the internet landscape of the 2000s, Google was the thing that sat on top of everything else. There was a sense that as anarchic and chaotic as the early social web was out in the digital wilderness, what Google surfaced denoted a certain level of quality.

But if that last 25 years of Google's history could be boiled down to a battle against the Google bomb, it is now starting to feel that the search engine is finally losing pace with the hijackers. Or as Marwick put it, “Google has gotten shittier and shittier.”

“To me, it just continues the transformation of the internet into this shitty mall,” Marwick said. “A dead mall that's just filled with the shady sort of stores you don't want to go to.”

The question, of course, is when did it all go wrong? How did a site that captured the imagination of the internet and fundamentally changed the way we communicate turn into a burned-out Walmart at the edge of town?



ell, if you ask Anil Dash, it was all the way back in 2003 — when the company turned on its AdSense program.

“Prior to 2003–2004, you could have an open comment box on the internet. And nobody would pretty much type in it unless they wanted to leave a comment. No authentication. Nothing. And the reason why was because who the fuck cares what you comment on there. And then instantly, overnight, what happened?” Dash said. “Every single comment thread on the internet was instantly spammed. And it happened overnight.”

Dash is one of the web’s earliest bloggers. In 2004, he won a competition Google held to google-bomb itself with the made-up term “nigritude ultramarine.” Since then, Dash has written extensively over the years on the impact platform optimization has had on the way the internet works. As he sees it, Google’s advertising tools gave links a monetary value, killing anything organic on the platform. From that moment forward, Google cared more about the health of its own network than the health of the wider internet.

“At that point it was really clear where the next 20 years were going to go,” he said.

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Google Answers closed in 2006. Google Reader shut down in 2013, taking with it the last vestiges of the blogosphere. Search inside of Google Groups has repeatedly broken over the years. Blogger still works, but without Google Reader as a hub for aggregating it, most publishers started making native content on platforms like Facebook and Instagram and, more recently, TikTok.


Discoverability of the open web has suffered. Pinterest has been accused of eating Google Image Search results. And the recent protests over third-party API access at Reddit revealed how popular Google has become as a search engine not for Google’s results but for Reddit content. Google’s place in the hierarchy of Big Tech is slipping enough that some are even admitting that Apple Maps is worth giving another chance, something unthinkable even a few years ago.

On top of it all, OpenAI’s massively successful ChatGPT has dragged Google into a race against Microsoft to build a completely different kind of search, one that

uses a chatbot interface supported by generative AI.

Twenty-five years ago, at the dawn of a different internet age, another search engine began to struggle with similar issues. It was considered the top of the heap, praised for its sophisticated technology, and then suddenly faced an existential threat. A young company created a new way of finding content.

Instead of trying to make its core product better, fixing the issues its users had, the company, instead, became more of a portal, weighted down by bloated services that worked less and less well. The company's CEO admitted in 2002 that it "tried to become a portal too late in the game, and lost focus" and told *Wired* at the time that it was going to try and double back and focus on search again. But it never regained the lead.

That company was AltaVista. 

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