

# The future of Google is not about search

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Google's recent and seemingly innocent announcement that it is spring cleaning time for [Blogger](#) generated alarm amongst many of its users, including myself. The move is intended, we are told, to simplify the platform and "*to enhance the blogging experience for all of our users.*" This could be the beginning of the end for the blogging service. We've seen it all before.

Look at Google News, now a shadow of its former self: no more advanced search, useless and irrelevant personalisation options, and don't even think about trying to set up sensible alerts. Alerts have never worked that well at the best of times but have not improved one iota since News was revamped. Google Finance has gone the same way: no more portfolios for monitoring stocks, no more historical data for viewing and download, no more news annotations on the price charts, and the comparison option only works for two stocks at a time. If you are interested in monitoring the stock markets or researching individual companies for free get thee hence to [Yahoo! Finance](#). There was some doubt over the future of Yahoo! Finance when Yahoo! was acquired by Verizon and became part of Oath but, charting oddities aside, there does seem to be some development going on. The new "Sustainability" tab, for example, shows environment, social and governance (ESG) ratings from [Sustainalytics](#).

One of the main drivers of change for Google and other search engines is Mobile-First. Google is very much at the forefront of prioritising mobile access to information and is bent on pushing what it thinks you need to know for your daily routine: routes to work, location of road works, train times, do you need an umbrella today? (Forget Facebook, Google hoards even more of your personal data - see [BGR](#).) It is Mobile-First that is responsible for the loss of easy access to country versions of Google.

Google's search results are now based on your current location. What's new, you may ask? Google has always looked at location, even down to city/town level, and changed search results accordingly. That's fine if I am travelling and want, for example, to find the nearest Thai restaurant via my phone. Presenting me with a list of eateries in my hometown of Reading is no good if I'm working in Manchester and getting very hungry. The problems start if you are researching a person, company or industry based in a country other than your own - let's use Norway as an example - or just want the latest news from that country. The trick used to be to go to the relevant country version of Google, in this case <http://www.google.no>, run your search and Google would give preference to Norwegian content. It was, and still is, a great way to get alternative viewpoints on a

topic and more relevant local information. Now, regardless of which version of Google you go to, you will only see results tailored to your current physical location.

In a [blog posting](#) - “Making search results more local and relevant” - Google says:

*“Today, we’ve updated the way we label country services on the mobile web, the Google app for iOS, and desktop Search and Maps. Now the choice of country service will no longer be indicated by domain. Instead, by default, you’ll be served the country service that corresponds to your location. So if you live in Australia, you’ll automatically receive the country service for Australia, but when you travel to New Zealand, your results will switch automatically to the country service for New Zealand. Upon return to Australia, you will seamlessly revert back to the Australian country service.”*

It confirms what many of us had long suspected: that mobile search is what Google is concentrating on. It is, after all, where most of Google’s revenue comes from. There is a way around it but it is rather long-winded. You need to go to Google’s Settings using either the link in the bottom right hand corner of the Google home page, or the one near the top of a search results page, and then click on Advanced Search. On the Advanced Search screen scroll down to “Then narrow your results by...” and use the pull down menu in the region box to select the country. You may additionally need to change the language.

Alternatively, you could use a VPN or the [Tor browser](#) to make it look as though you are in another country or include the “site:” command in your search. If we were looking for Norwegian based sources we could use “site: no” but that would, of course, miss Norwegian sites registered as .com or with other international domains. Phil Bradley has carried out a useful comparison of the various options in his posting “Google improves search; [makes it much harder](#).”

Google says:

*“We’re confident this change will improve your Search experience, automatically providing you with the most useful information based on your search query and other context, including location.”*

No, Google. You have just made things a lot more difficult for those of us who conduct serious, in-depth research.

There are search engines other than Google, and specialist tools and portals for specific types of information and subject areas. As Google’s search services are continually degraded and functionality removed, ensuring that you have back up search strategies in place and becoming aware of resources that can take you directly to information in your subject area are becoming increasingly important. I recently facilitated a workshop where we were exploring not just Google but also alternative search tools and different

approaches to tackling search, including deep web and even the dark web. On the same day Google delivered a two-hour keynote presentation at its annual developer conference, in which Artificial Intelligence (AI) technologies were the focus and search was barely mentioned. (Google Assistant takes centre stage at I/O, [search takes a back seat.](#))

The company's efforts seem to be concentrated on developing Google Assistant and introducing new features such as Duplex, which is an AI driven system for making "voice" telephone bookings and scheduling meetings. ([Google Duplex: An AI System for Accomplishing Real-World Tasks Over the Phone.](#))

*"Today we announce Google Duplex, a new technology for conducting natural conversations to carry out 'real world' tasks over the phone. The technology is directed towards completing specific tasks, such as scheduling certain types of appointments. For such tasks, the system makes the conversational experience as natural as possible, allowing people to speak normally, like they would to another person."*

Google obviously thinks that a quick phone call to the hairdresser to make an appointment - one of the examples demonstrated at the conference - is too onerous a task for mere mortals! And if you find writing emails a chore there is Gmail Smart Compose. (Write emails faster with [Smart Compose](#) in Gmail.)

*"From your greeting to your closing (and common phrases in between), Smart Compose suggests complete sentences in your emails so that you can draft them with ease ... It can even suggest relevant contextual phrases. For example, if it's Friday it may suggest 'Have a great weekend!' as a closing phrase."*

What could possibly go wrong?

AI and machine learning are also being applied to News and Maps, and RankBrain has been used for a while as part of search to help sort and organise results. (See: A Complete Guide to the Google [RankBrain Algorithm.](#)) Despite this Google still gets it wrong, not because the technology has failed but because, we are told, people are confusing it! (Google says it is struggling to "understand truth" because people are [confusing its search algorithm.](#))

All of this would be laughable if more sinister possibilities were not possible. A video produced for internal viewing within Google in late 2016 was recently leaked and imagines how data collection by Google could influence users into actions to help achieve their goals, or even guide the behaviour of entire populations to solve global problems. Entitled the "Selfish Ledger", it is scary stuff. (See the article "Google's [Selfish Ledger](#) is an unsettling vision of Silicon Valley social engineering", published on The Verge website.) According to a spokesperson from X (formerly Google X) it is intended to be disturbing. It is a thought experiment using a technique called speculative design to explore uncomfortable ideas to provoke discussion and debate. "It's not related to any current or future products". On the contrary, looking at recent announcements and presentations from Google, it seems that some of the concepts of the Selfish Ledger are beginning to appear in its products and services.

I urge you to read The Verge article and watch the video (viewable from within the article) and then look at what is happening to Google's services. Google's future is not about search. Perhaps now is a good time to consider alternatives?

Karen Blakeman's UKeIG CPD course [Navigating the Deep Web: Advanced Search Strategies for Researchers](#) is on Thursday, 15<sup>th</sup> November 2018 at CILIP headquarters in London.