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## Googlethink

The giant's creepy efforts to read my mind

BY **NICHOLAS CARR**

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IMAGE CREDIT: JACOB THOMAS

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I TYPE THE letter *p* into Google's search box, and a list of 10 suggested keywords, starting with *pandora* and concluding with *people magazine*, appears just beneath my cursor. I type an *r* after the *p*, and the list refreshes itself. Now it begins with *priceline* and ends with *pregnancy calculator*. I add an *o*. The list updates again, going from

*prom dresses* to *proxy sites*.

Google is reading my mind—or trying to. Drawing on the terabytes of data it collects on people's search queries, it predicts, with each letter I type, what I'm most likely to be looking for. The company formally introduced the automatic recommendation of search terms in 2008, after a few years of testing. It's been tweaking the service, which it calls Google Suggest, ever since. This past spring, it

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rolled out the latest enhancement, which tailors suggestions to a searcher's particular city.

Google Suggest, like the similar services offered by other search engines, streamlines the discovery of information. When you click on a suggestion, you arrive at a page of search results, and the accompanying advertisements, a little faster than you would have, had you typed out the query yourself. Google Suggest is technically remarkable. It testifies to the power of cloud computing—the serving-up of software and information from big, distant data centers rather than from a computer's own hard drive. When I typed that first *p*, the letter was beamed across the Internet to a Google server in a building hundreds of miles away. The server read the letter, gathered 10 popular search terms beginning with *p*, and shot the list back to my screen. This intricate data processing took less than a second. It felt magical.

It felt a little creepy, too. Every time Google presents me with search terms customized to what I'm typing, it reminds me that the company monitors my every move. The privacy risks inherent in such long-distance exchanges became apparent in February, when three European researchers revealed that they had used intercepts of some Google Suggest traffic to reconstruct people's searches. Alerted to the breach, Google quickly added a new layer of security to the transmissions, but the researchers claim that vulnerabilities remain.

I like Google—it's a cuddly company, and endlessly helpful—but I also resent it. It's like a nosy mother, intent on knowing everything her children are doing and thinking. Worse, it's like a meddlesome mother, the kind who can't let her kids do anything on their own. Start typing a keyword, and she immediately butts in, trying to finish it for you. At first you enjoy the hyperactive solicitousness. But then you begin to bridle. You're being smothered.

Matthew Crawford, in his book, *Shop Class as Soulcraft*, writes eloquently about our modern affliction of "displaced agency." As corporations rush to anticipate our every need and preference, serving up a small selection of market-tested options the instant we require them, we are left with little room to act for ourselves. "We have too few occasions to *do* anything," Crawford writes, "because of a certain predetermination of things from afar." Everything becomes easier, but less satisfying.

Software programmers are taking the displacement of personal agency to a new level. Relentlessly

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focused on making their programs more “user friendly,” they’re scripting the intimate processes of intellectual inquiry and even social attachment. We follow their scripts when we click on one of Google’s keyword suggestions, and we follow them when we select from a list of categories to describe ourselves and our relationships on Facebook. These choices are convenient, but they’re not our own. They’re generalizations masquerading as personalizations.

Eric Schmidt, Google’s chief executive, once remarked that he looked forward to the day when Google would be able to tell him “what [he] should be typing,” which, if I’m interpreting the statement correctly, also means that Google would be telling him what he should be thinking. Such a service, Schmidt said, would be the product he’s “always wanted to build.” I can’t say I’m looking forward to it.

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**S\_Deemer** 1 month ago

3 people liked this.

Like most people, I love Google's automatic query suggestions; if I didn't, I could turn it off with a settings change:

Do not provide query suggestions in the search box.

I find Gmail ads much more disturbing, and filter them out using the Better Gmail extension in Google's Chrome browser.

Like

Reply

**Joby Elliott** 1 month ago [in reply to S\\_Deemer](#)

2 people liked this.

You realize they're still generating targeted ads for you in Gmail, right? The Better Gmail extension keeps you from seeing them, but the processes that create them are still going on.

Like

Reply

**S\_Deemer** 1 month ago [in reply to Joby Elliott](#)

1 person liked this.

Of course they are generating the ads, but that bothers me less than the junk mail that shows up in my USPS mailbox every day.

Like

Reply

**Brian - Seattle** 1 month ago [in reply to S\\_Deemer](#)

1 person liked this.

But do you? Isn't that the point? They are thinking of things to make your life "better" yet you say...I can turn it off if I want...but will you?

It takes a conscious effort to do that and with so many other things in modern life, we have things that make our lives "easier" but generally we gain more weight, spend more time inside, and live unhealthy lives. We could stop these activities too but do we?

Perhaps what Nicholas is bringing up is just another thing that we think is great, but is ultimately making us worse off.

(Edited by author 1 month ago)

Like

Reply

**S\_Deemer** 1 month ago [in reply to Brian - Seattle](#)

The search hints save me keystrokes, so I keep them enabled. I also let Google keep my search history (which has saved my bacon when I have forgotten where I found something). I'm much more concerned about Facebook, which I reluctantly joined this year, and the first thing I did was lock down my privacy settings as much as is possible.

Like

Reply

**Alexander Kupriyanov** 1 month ago

1 person liked this.

It's a kind of smart management of our brains.

Like

Reply

**Alexander Kupriyanov** 1 month ago

IMHO.

These aspects of Google activity are responsible for Google-China conflict (hide motiffs).

Like

Reply

**GwynnOwens** 1 month ago

3 people liked this.

More frightening and worrying than Google is the popularity of Facebook. From there I get invitations to join the fun. Thanks but no thanks as more and more issues and problems appear.

As a US Census worker I find people in my surveys shudder at the thought of answering questions in any of the surveys." Look it up", they invariably say, "at the IRS. The Government already knows too much about us."

People, look yourself up online. Look yourself up on [whitepages.com](http://whitepages.com). There you will find your telephone number, and usually who lives with you. If you want more you link to people finders which is truly amazing in its capacity to provide even more info. Without subscribing to its service one can often discover exactly what one wishes to

know.

Yet they put intimate info on Facebook even to allowing it to search their email contact list. That's when I decided that was way too much to ask in this age of ID theft. Facebook to me is much more insidious and oddly reflective of the US citizen, you know too much but here's the info you want on Facebook.

Google provides me entry to searching the world. I try to use features that are non-invasive. Thus no g-mail nor access to my files. If I don't want to see the suggestions then I type mine without looking at theirs.

Again, be sensible in any on-line experience. If you are embarrassed to tell your friends then surely don't put it on-line.

Google is an exceptional and innovative company providing positive workplaces, trying to keep ahead of hackers and other miscreants, and for providing truly innovative experiences. Think Google Earth.

Like

Reply

**saritahs** 1 month ago

Just another attempt to keep us stupid. We have brains for a reason, not so that machines can tell us what to type, think or seek.

I love google as much as the next person--I have three email accounts with them alone! But I don't ever want it to replace my brain, maybe that's why I don't use google search so often. It's another reason why I keep a dictionary on my desk, so that when I have a misspelled word, I look it up rather than let spell check fix it.

Like

Reply

**tom** 1 month ago

2 people liked this.

The author is tottally right about everything in this revealing article. Google and other internet sites are slowly but surely taking over many aspects of our personal life. Although they are convenient in many ways, facilitating and supplementing our experience when surfing the net (Google Suggest for instance and Facebook's ability to reconnect distant acquaintances at a click of a button), they also seem to override a person's individuality.

And I find Mr. Schmidt's hopes rather disturbing when he remarked that someday in the near future, a computer will replace human intuition; an era just like in the science-fiction movies where one no longer have the capacity to think for oneself.

Like

Reply

**bystander** 1 month ago

I've become afraid to type a query in front of another person, haha. They might as well just read all my email. At least when you type 'p' you get pandora and priceline.

Like

Reply

**BrandonS** 1 month ago

I've noticed when you type 'average' into google, the first thing that it suggests is 'average penile length'

Like

Reply

**John Cilli** 1 month ago

The perfect servant is one who anticipates your needs before even you do. The up side with this system is that its impersonal. It won't gossip about you and I get a free servant.

I think we tend to fall victim to heliocentric thinking. We are not individually so important to one another so who cares if they know my favorite food is Cheese. Please make that search more available to me Mr. Computer and be quick about it.

Like

Reply

**Cale** 1 month ago

"Everything becomes easier, but less satisfying."

I don't think that this assertion is sufficiently backed up. Nicholas, why exactly do you find Google Suggest less satisfying?

Like

Reply

**SombreReptiles** 1 month ago

My top favorites that appear when using Google Suggest:

'why can't I own a canadian'  
'why is my poop green'  
'where is chuck norris'  
'who is john galt'  
'when are my ovulation days'  
'what is the average penile size'

Check back every few days or so for updates and you'll be amazed at what some people are searching for.

Like

Reply

**David desJardins** 1 month ago

3 people liked this.

I'm sorry, Nicholas Carr, you have totally failed to "interpret" Eric Schmidt's comment. The comment is about the fact that many people (everyone, on occasion) finds it difficult to figure out exactly what to type into a search engine in order to get answers to their information needs. It would be better to have an interface that didn't require users to master a complicated skill of selecting keywords that when fed into a rather mechanical search engine will call up the right answers. It has NOTHING to do with telling people "what to think", that is a totally spurious criticism.

Like

Reply

**Brian - Seattle** 1 month ago [in reply to David desJardins](#)

If it's difficult to figure out what exactly to type, is that because it's naturally difficult or because we have dumbed ourselves down so much that we are having problems doing simple things like thinking up a phrase or remembering a keyword? That's what he's talking about here.

Like

Reply

**S\_Deemer** 1 month ago [in reply to Brian - Seattle](#)

2 people liked this.

I spent much of my career developing software for searching libraries and other information resources, and one of the things about human behavior that has not been changed by Google is that people have a difficult time expressing what they want, but are very good at recognizing what they want. Google's suggestions fit this behavioral characteristic perfectly.

Like

Reply

**David desJardins** 1 month ago [in reply to Brian - Seattle](#)

1 person liked this.

Brian, it's naturally difficult to compose good searches because it requires a detailed understanding of how search engines work. I worked at Google for many years and I can find information with web search much better than most people, but that's because I know a lot about how it works and have learned a lot about how to formulate queries. There's nothing natural about selecting keywords for searches. The problem is not "remembering a keyword". The problem is that what might be a good way to express your information need to another person in ordinary language might be a terrible way to express that same information need to a search engine.

It's like the difference, say, between knowing where you want to go and learning how to drive a car. Driving is a specialized skill to transport themselves around. Or knowing what you want to write and learning how to type it on a keyboard quickly. Modern society is always going to need specialized skills, but it would be better if we needed fewer of them.

Anyway, you or Nicholas don't have to agree with Eric Schmidt about what would be good. But what Nicholas says above about what Eric Schmidt was saying is just wrong.

Like

Reply

**Shyam Kumar** 3 weeks ago [in reply to David desJardins](#)

I agree with you, David.

Most of the time I end up typing my search query without bothering about Google's suggestions.

And when I am not sure of what is the best search term for me to use, Google Suggest is definitely helpful.

I understand when Nick says that Google Suggest may be, intentionally or not, influencing a behavior to be directed by the software, rather than direct the software.

But your choices as a user for each of your queries do not necessarily mean you are a 'victim' of this influence.

Thank you, Nick, for a continuous stream of thought provoking posts.

Like

Reply

**Brian - Seattle** 1 month ago

I'm enjoying your take on technology lately Nicholas. Thanks for the refreshing perspective.

Like

Reply

**S\_Deemer** 1 month ago

1 person liked this.

A slight digression from Google suggestions, but an area where Google \*has\* significantly changed my behavior is that of reading. As an example, last year I read Philip Pullman's "His Dark Materials" trilogy, in which there were so many references to the Milton's "Paradise Lost," the Bible, and Greek mythology that I was constantly googling for information as I read the books. This greatly improved the experience of reading these books for me, because I understood references and connections that would otherwise have slipped right past me.

Like

Reply

**Barret Denman** 1 month ago

Google will also give a complete detailing of search queries from a specified IP address without warrant to law enforcement agencies.

Like

Reply

**kathas** 1 month ago

Regarding search information (both queries and results) interception Google has launched Google SSL search where all the information you send to the network is encrypted.

<http://www.google.com/support/websearch/bin/ans...>

Like

Reply

**Curt Sampson** 3 weeks ago [in reply to kathas](#)

Sure this encrypts things between you and Google, but the issue is that now it's Google itself that's compiling a rather alarming amount of data about its users.

For a lot of people, Google knows not only their searches, but the videos they watch on YouTube, the blogs they read through Google Reader, the blog entries and comments they post on Blogger, and a half dozen other

things as well. Even leaving e-mail aside, this builds up a disturbingly large (and probably easy to misinterpret) picture of someone's life.

Every once in a while someone (AOL, Netflix) releases some "anonymized" data about their customers (search queries, movie rentals) and within a week or two some researcher has shown how to personally identify people from those data. This sort of data collection identifies you a lot better, and tells a lot more about you, than most people would believe.

Like

Reply

**Lou Quillio** 1 month ago

Leaving aside that Google Suggest is often hysterically funny ...

<http://www.autocompleteme.com/>

... I'd say that if Google Suggest (and similar) can erode your will and intellect, that was gonna happen anyway.

Consider, too, that this sort of innovation mostly alarms only the folks who witness its arrival -- those who remember "before," who perceive the contrast -- and not the generation that knows no different. If you think the next generation is doomed to diminished independent thought, there's a nice tract house in a red state with your name on it, and a grand old political party with open arms. Just do it. Won't be the last guy to turn into his grandfather.

LQ

Like

Reply

**Bill G** 21 hours ago [in reply to Lou Quillio](#)

Yeah, we all know how innovative Dems are with their persistent belief in economic theories long invalidated.

Like

Reply

**Agriel** 2 weeks ago

Do we realize our brains already works like that for thousands of years ? All the human culture already tells us "what we should think" - and only a few minds manage to think "out of the box" of the pre-conceived ideas ?

Like

Reply

**Agriel** 2 weeks ago

Do we realize our brains already works like that for thousands of years ? All the human culture already tells us "what we should think" - and only a few minds manage to think "out of the box" of the pre-conceived ideas ?

Like

Reply

**David Collado** 4 days ago

Decent article, but Nicholas definitely misinterprets Schmidt's statement at the end. Google does not try to tell anyone what s/he should be thinking, but rather tries to help us find what we seek on our very own. It will hopefully one day tell us "what [we] should be typing" in order to find what our own brain desires to find out. Our original thought and intention is not altered in this process, only our ease of finding what we're looking for.

But it sure made for a nice catchy journalistic ending.

Like

Reply

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