

WO YEARS AGO, Microsoft president Brad Smith told a US congressional hearing that tech companies like his own had not been sufficiently paying media companies for the news content that helps fuel search engines like Bing and Google.

“What we’re talking about here is far bigger than us,” he said, testifying alongside news executives. “Let’s hope that, if a century from now people are not using iPhones or laptops or anything that we have today, journalism itself is still alive and well. Because our democracy depends on it.” Smith said tech companies should do more and that Microsoft was committed to continuing “healthy revenue-sharing” with news publishers, including licensing articles for Microsoft news apps.

Yet, Microsoft this week began testing a new chatbot interface for Bing that can sometimes provide a way to sidestep news websites’ paywalls, providing glossy conversational answers that draw on media content. As Google and others also prepare chatbots, their potential to sap traffic from media companies could add a new twist to their conflicts with tech platforms over how content appears on search engines and social feeds.

When WIRED asked the Bing chatbot about the best dog beds according to *The New York Times* product review site Wirecutter, which is behind a metered paywall, it quickly reeled off the publication’s top three picks, with brief descriptions for each. “This bed is cozy, durable, easy to wash, and comes in various sizes and colors,” it said of one.

Citations at the end of the bot’s response credited Wirecutter’s reviews but also a series of websites that appeared to use Wirecutter’s name to attract searches and cash in on affiliate links. The *Times* declined to comment.

Bing’s bot, based on technology behind OpenAI’s chatbot sensation ChatGPT, also neatly summarized a Wall Street Journal column on, well, ChatGPT, even though the newspaper’s content is generally behind a paywall. (The tool did not appear to directly plagiarize any of

the columnist's work.) *WSJ* owner News Corp declined to comment on Bing.

Microsoft communications director Caitlin Roulston says that “Bing only crawls content publishers make available to us.” The search engine has access to paywalled content from publishers that have agreements with Microsoft's news service, she says. The scheme predates Bing's AI upgrade this week.

The new Bing interface is built on technology from OpenAI that learned to generate text by analyzing the statistical patterns of words in articles, forums, and other text scraped from the web, as well as other sources such as books.

OpenAI is not known to have paid to license all that content, though it has licensed images from the stock image library Shutterstock to provide training data for its work on generating images. Microsoft is not specifically paying content creators when its bot summarizes their articles, just as it and Google have not traditionally paid web publishers to display short snippets pulled from their pages in search results. But the chatty Bing interface provides richer answers than search engines traditionally have.