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US immigration

US immigration is gaming Google to create a mirage of mass deportations

Thousands of press releases about decade-old enforcement actions topped search results, all updated with a timestamp from after Trump's inauguration

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News of mass immigration arrests has swept across the US over the past couple of weeks. Reports from Massachusetts to Idaho have described agents from Immigration and Customs Enforcement (Ice) spreading through communities and rounding people up. Quick [Google](#) searches for Ice operations, raids and arrests return a deluge of government press releases. Headlines include “ICE arrests 85 during 4-day Colorado operation”, “New Orleans focuses targeted operations on 123 criminal noncitizens” and, in Wisconsin, “ICE arrests 83 criminal aliens”.

But a closer look at these Ice reports tells a different story.

That [four-day operation](#) in Colorado? It happened in November 2010. The [123 people targeted](#) in New Orleans? That was February of last year. [Wisconsin](#)? September 2018. There are thousands of examples of this throughout all 50 states - Ice press releases that have reached the first page of Google search results, making it seem like enforcement actions just happened, when in actuality they occurred months or years ago. Some, such as the [arrest of “44 absconders”](#) in Nebraska, go back as far as 2008.

All the archived Ice press releases soaring to the top of Google search results were marked with the same timestamp and read: “Updated: 01/24/2025”.

The mystery first caught the attention of an immigration lawyer who began tracking Ice raids and enforcement actions when [Donald Trump](#) took office. She spoke on the condition of anonymity for fear of reprisal from the administration. At first, she was baffled when she clicked on these seemingly new press releases and they detailed Ice raids from more than a decade ago.

So she set to work doing some digital sleuthing and enlisted a friend who is a tech expert to help. What they found leads them to believe that Ice is gaming Google search.

Ice did not return a request for comment. A Google spokesperson said: “When people do these searches on Google, they’ll find a range of sources and information, including recent news articles.” She said Google aimed to “reflect the last time a page was updated” and that its “systems are not designed to boost a page’s ranking simply because they update their timestamp”.

Since the Guardian reached out to Ice and Google for comment, some of the press releases have reverted back to their original dates on Google search. Therefore, those releases are no longer appearing at the top of Google search results.

Cracking down on immigration is top of the agenda for Trump. During his inaugural address, he promised mass deportations “to repel the disastrous invasion of our country”. Since then, his administration has touted that hundreds of arrests and

raids have occurred in places like Los Angeles and Chicago. TV crews have followed Ice agents on raids and the homeland security secretary, Kristi Noem, has posted videos of herself on X wearing an Ice bulletproof vest in New York City. She captioned one: “Getting the dirt bags off the streets.”

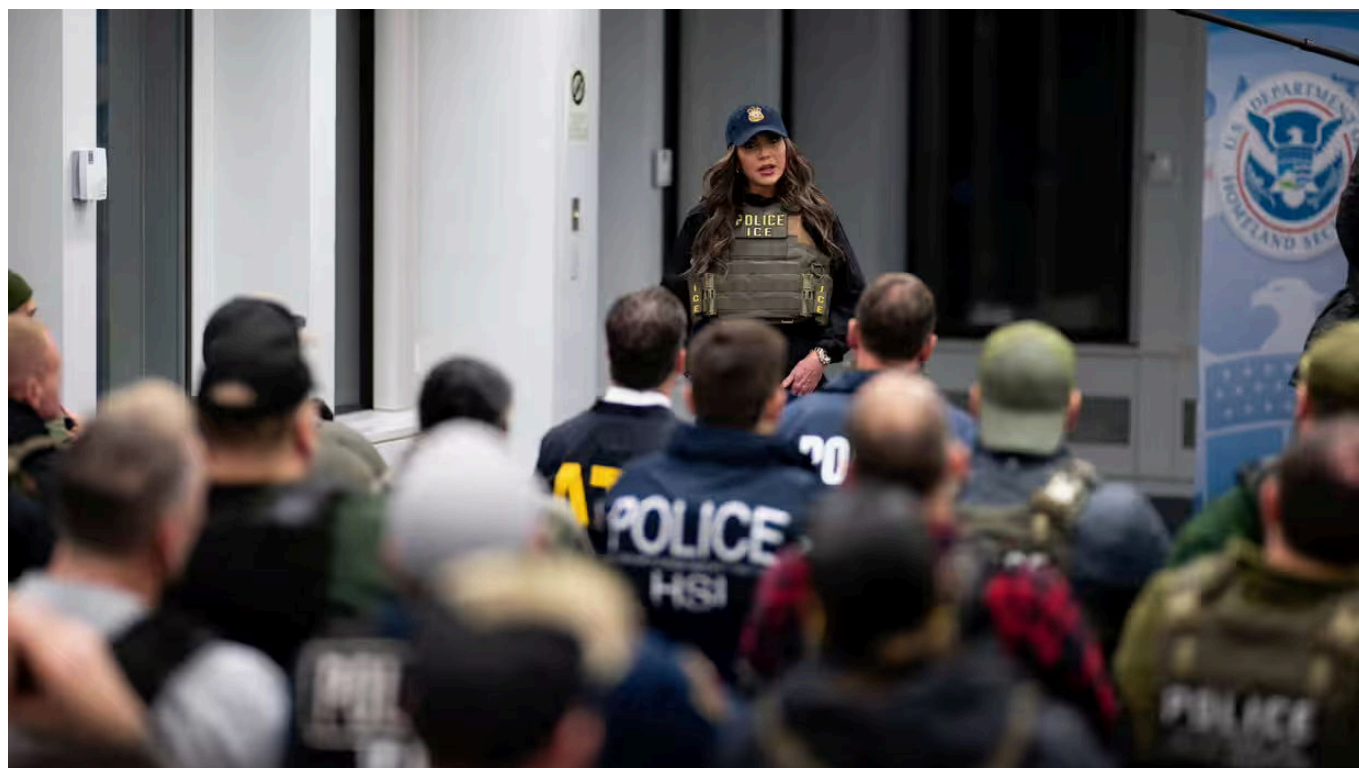
It is Ice’s made-for-TV moment. Inundating all forms of media, including Google search, with stories of mass arrests fits into a strategy of fearmongering, said Lindsay M Harris, a law professor at the University of San Francisco who specializes in immigration and asylum law.

“All of that is intended to send a message to immigrants to be afraid and that they’re coming for you,” said Harris. “Regardless of the actual numbers, the optics of these mass arrests throughout the country have very real ramifications.”

A pattern emerges

As reports of arrests poured in last month, the immigration lawyer watched in shock. Social media and listservs filled with rumors of raids and local news programs showed Ice apprehensions in towns as small as Cartersville, Georgia, population 25,000. “There was a lot of noise online,” she said. “And it was creating terror in the community.” She said it was hard to separate fact from fiction, so she decided to create a nationwide map that aggregated all actual Ice arrests.

At the end of her workdays, she would sit down and start Googling - typing in searches like “ice arrests Nebraska” and “recent ice arrests Arizona”. Then she would plug in other states.





Kristi Noem wears an Ice vest as she speaks to law enforcement agents in New York last month.
Photograph: @Sec_Noem/Reuters

The lawyer noticed a strange pattern. In almost every state, at least one press release from Ice’s website appeared in Google’s top results. Nebraska, for example, surfaced links for two press releases. One said “ICE executes federal search warrants in Nebraska”, the other said “ICE fugitive operations team arrests 44 absconders”. Both displayed their dates of publication as 24 January 2025 on Google search. But when the lawyer clicked through to the report, the actual dates of publication were August 2018 and June 2008, respectively.

“I’ve now done it in all 50 states ... and I’ve done it in multiple cities. And it’s the same thing,” the lawyer said. “They all had the last update of 1/24/2025 and they were all popping up at the front of the algorithm.”

Maria Andrade, a longtime immigration lawyer in Idaho, says Ice arrests have been scant in the state so far. “We had one that didn’t result in detention,” she said. “I haven’t heard of mass arrests in any area at all.”

Yet the first result for a Google search of “ice arrests Idaho” is a press release from Ice saying 22 people were arrested in an “enforcement surge”. The date of publication displayed in the search results is 24 January 2025, but the operation actually happened in July 2010. Andrade said that arresting 22 people would have been a large number for Idaho and that such incidents are extremely rare, given the minimal number of Ice agents, rural terrain and extreme weather. If so many people were arrested in one sweep in Idaho last month, she said, she would know about it.

“If the objective is to scare people who look up raids in Idaho, that would be a good way to accomplish it,” Andrade said. “That would be a good way to mislead people.”

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Confusion and fear over Ice’s operations have real-world consequences for both

immigrants and other law enforcement agencies. Panic in Idaho has hit such a fever pitch that at least one local sheriff [has made a public statement](#) trying to quell fears. “Rumors have circulated about ICE conducting ‘raids’ in the area,” Morgan Ballis, the sheriff for Blaine County, [announced last week](#). “These claims were completely unsubstantiated, with no evidence to support them.”

Solving the mystery

There are several ways to game Google search to boost a website to the top of the results page, the most valuable real estate on the internet. In fact, a whole field is built around it called search engine optimization, or SEO. Google’s algorithm works by looking at various factors on a webpage to determine if it is relevant and authoritative. Government web domains already get authoritative bonus points. Other tricks to nudge the algorithm include linking back to one’s own website and updating the timestamp on a web page to a more recent date, as it appears Ice has.

After dealing with all of the outdated Ice press releases, the immigration lawyer called up her tech expert friend to help get to the bottom of what was going on.

The tech expert, who likewise spoke on the condition of anonymity for fear of reprisal, said she was initially skeptical that anything unusual was happening. But she sorted through what the lawyer found, then she did her own Google searches targeted specifically for January 2025 and Ice’s website. She also tried Bing, Microsoft’s search engine. Those searches returned nearly 13,000 archived Ice press releases timestamped to 24 January 2025.

“I was like, ‘OK, this is pretty weird,’” she said.

Bing did not return a request for comment.

She then started a forensic examination of Ice’s webpages by inspecting the front-end code to look for clues.

What was interesting, she said, was that Ice had marked all of these press releases as old. The agency displayed a message at the top of every page the Guardian reviewed noting it contained “archived content” that was “from a previous administration or is otherwise outdated”.

The screenshot shows the official website of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, specifically the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) section. The header includes the ICE logo, the text "U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement", a search bar, and a "Report Crime" button. Below the header is a navigation menu with links for "About Us", "Immigration Enforcement", "Combating Transnational Crime", and "Newsroom". The "ICE > NEWSROOM" link is highlighted. A prominent orange banner at the bottom of the page displays an "Archived Content" warning, stating: "In an effort to keep ICE.gov current, the archive contains content from a previous administration or is otherwise outdated. This information is archived and not reflective of current practice."

JULY 23, 2010 • BOISE, ID • OPERATIONAL

ICE arrests 22 in Idaho immigration enforcement surge

All had been previously deported or had criminal convictions in the United States

Photograph: US Immigration and Customs Enforcement

But when the tech expert looked at the code of these online press releases, she saw a new element had been added - a time stamp. “Every article was updated on the 24th, which was causing the Google SEO to interpret that as a recently updated article, and therefore rank it higher,” she said.

To exhaust all possibilities, the tech expert did the same test with several other government agencies. She crosschecked with the websites of the Department of Labor, Department of Defense, Department of the Interior and Department of Veterans Affairs and found no evidence of new time stamps.

“[With Ice,] these are old articles that are now appearing at the top of the Google and Bing search results as recent headlines, where no other government agency is doing this,” she said. “As someone in tech, I would interpret that as an intentional play to get more clicks, essentially on these misleading headlines.”

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