

## **Personalisation and Everyday Digital Search**

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A retrieval or search arrangement could be very simply and schematically defined as follows: a user interacts with a retrieval space through a retrieval interface such as a search engine or web browser. The retrieval space is comprised of information objects, which in the case of commercial web search services include unstructured or semi-structured content as for example text, multimedia objects, metadata and hyperlinks. The interface enables for the examination and navigation of results sets and the selection, ordering and display of search objects. The most commonly widespread assumption that initially underpinned the design and engineering of these spaces was that users had independently acquired and a priori subjective interests for different topics, issues or things. It was also assumed that users were also capable of cognitively and physically translating such interests into search queries or keywords, a string and concatenation of meaningfully but sometimes inaccurately typed-in words.

One problem that digital search engines have faced since their inception has been how to personalise search results in order to make them relevant to the level of a user's search interest. At the beginning, search results were depersonalised, engines offered search results that although were relevant at the aggregate level - in terms of how the index reorganised itself to each particular search query and used the method of link analysis to construct a ranking made visible as a query list (Mayer 2009) – these were still conceived as possibly irrelevant for the specific needs and subjective interests of individually situated users having operationalised the search (Stalder and Mayer 2009). It has been suggested that since the development of personalised digital web-based information retrieval indexes based on user's history and context among other data, search engines have become prominent in operationalising subjective worlds (Stalder and Mayer 2009; Feuz et al 2011). These worlds have been

particularly determined by an opaque reconfiguration of search histories and contexts, histories and contexts that delimit what information becomes suitable and relevant for an individual's subjective interest at a given point in time based on proprietary knowledge.

So while users' interests and needs were initially conceived as being unaffected by their interaction with the retrieval or search arrangement they participated in, with the advent of digital and personalised search results and the ubiquitous presence of search engines as part of everyday life, retrieval and search configurations started playing an important part in determining what users ultimately searched for and how. Search engines started configuring, formatting and anticipating the limits, contents and possibilities of interests and needs – needs impelled by the interface to become translated as search keywords. This is because I also suggest, web-based search engines are technical arrangements that not only make possible the transformation of incorporating practices into inscription practices but they also enable the conflation and synchronization between both (Hayles 1992).

An incorporating practice, such as a goodbye wave for example cannot be separated from its embodied medium - the hand - for it exists only when it is instantiated by a particular hand making a particular kind of gesture. When such embodied gesture is abstracted by translating it in a different medium such as for example a picture, the gesture is no longer an incorporated practice, but rather it has been transformed into an inscription that functions as if it were independent of any particular instantiation. The practice of searching (for things, places, persons, information) also constitutes an incorporating practice that can become encoded and naturalized as a particular habitual mode deployed for searching and navigating everyday life. In this sense, the encoding and translation of subjective search needs into search actions like the typing-in of keywords into an interface is a relatively newly established practice of search. With the advent of web-based search, inscription and incorporation have become configured in a particular technical arrangement, one which instantiates

and conflates the transformation of information needs into inscriptions such as search keywords.

What is particularly problematic about how incorporating and inscribing practices are made to conflate by interfaces such as web-based search engines is that inscriptions - or in this case search keywords - are mobilised as part of the retrieval arrangement to shape the practice of incorporating or knowing how and what to search for. This, I argue, complicates but also expands the critique of the personalising effects attributed to web-search engines already. It does so in two main ways: on one hand, search engines expand the inscription of incorporating practices such as search in the form of data like keywords amenable for the doing of persons – shaping and bounding the potentiality of personal information needs. When the range of incorporated practices that can become inscriptions is extended a more comprehensive register of life is created. Data multiplies as everyday bodily and cognitive experiences become materialized as strings of text. In other words, a wider range of life events and incorporating practices emerges as potentially personal or about persons. On the other hand, inscriptions such as for example a particular search query in time, are not cut entirely free from the incorporated practice of search that they are made to be an expression of, but routinely feed back into it. Under these arrangements, inscriptions become less diachronic but more intermittently synchronized to the incorporating practice of search in time.

The digitalisation of search establishes a temporality that enables the synchronisation of incorporating and inscription practices as well as effecting a sense of their immediacy – of knowing what to search for on one hand and search keywords on the other occurring as if they were ontologically the same. While it might have become widespread to think of search keywords as the natural expression of a particular form of agency – a user having a particular information need, translatable in the typing of a meaningful concatenation of words into a search engine interface – there is nothing ontologically essential in the relation the digital establishes between persons on one hand and a string or concatenation of words on the other.

## About Google Instant

Google Instant is a search enhancement that shows results as you type. We are pushing the limits of our technology and infrastructure to help you get better search results, faster. Our key technical insight was that people type slowly, but read quickly, typically taking 300 milliseconds between keystrokes, but only 30 milliseconds (a tenth of the time!) to glance at another part of the page. This means that you can scan a results page while you type.

The most obvious change is that you get to the right content much faster than before because you don't have to finish typing your full search term, or even press "search." Another shift is that seeing results as you type helps you formulate a better search term by providing instant feedback. You can now adapt your search on the fly until the results match exactly what you want. In time, we may wonder how search ever worked in any other way.

<http://www.google.com/insidesearch/features/instant/about.html>

## References

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Felix Stalder & Christine Mayer -- [The Second Index. Search Engines, Personalization and Surveillance](#)