



# The Man Who Killed Google Search

EDWARD ZITRON / APR 23, 2024 / 14 MIN READ

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This is the story of how Google Search died, and the people responsible for killing it.

The story begins on February 5th 2019, when Ben Gomes, Google's head of search, had a problem. Jerry Dischler, then the VP and General Manager of Ads at Google, and Shiv Venkataraman, then the VP of Engineering, Search and Ads on Google properties, had called a "code yellow" for search revenue due to, and I quote, "steady weakness in the daily numbers" and a likeliness that it would end the quarter significantly behind.

For those unfamiliar with Google's internal scientology-esque jargon, let me explain. A "code yellow" isn't, as you might think, a crisis of moderate severity. The yellow, according to Steven Levy's tell-all book about Google, refers to — and I



promise that I'm not making this up — the color of a tank top that former VP of Engineering Wayne Rosing used to wear during his time at the company. It's essentially the equivalent of DEFCON 1 and activates, as Levy explained, a war room-like situation where workers are pulled from their desks and into a conference room where they tackle the problem as a top priority. Any other projects or concerns are sidelined.

In emails released as part of the Department of Justice's antitrust case against Google, Dischler laid out several contributing factors — search query growth was "significantly behind forecast," the "timing" of revenue launches was significantly behind, and a vague worry that "several advertiser-specific and sector weaknesses" existed in search.

*I should note that I've previously — and erroneously — referred to the "code yellow" as something that Gomes raised as a means of calling attention to the proximity of Google's ads side getting too close to search. The truth is much grimmer — the Code Yellow was the rumble of the Rot Economy, with Google's revenue arm sounding the alarm that its golden goose wasn't laying enough eggs. Gomes, a Googler of 19 years that built the foundation of modern search engines, should go down as one of the few people in tech that actually fought for a real principle, destroyed by and replaced with Prabhakar Raghavan, a computer scientist class traitor that sided with the management consultancy sect. More confusingly, one of the problems was that there was insufficient growth in "queries," as in the amount of things people were asking Google. It's a bit like if Ford decided that things were going poorly because drivers weren't putting enough miles on their trucks.*

Anyway, a few days beforehand on February 1 2019, Kristen Gil, then Google's VP Business Finance Officer, had emailed Shashi Thakur, then Google's VP of Engineering, Search and Discover, saying that the ads team had been considering a "code yellow" to "close the search gap [it was] seeing," vaguely referring to how critical that growth was to an unnamed "company plan." To be clear, this email was in response to Thakur stating that there is "nothing" that the search team could do to operate at the fidelity of growth that ads had demanded.

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***(Editor's note: If you read those emails, start from the bottom and work your way up).***

Shashi forwarded the email to Gomes, asking if there was any way to discuss this with Sundar Pichai, Google's CEO, and declaring that there was no way he'd sign up to a "high fidelity" business metric for daily active users on search. Thakur also said something that I've been thinking about constantly since I read these emails: that there was a good reason that Google's founders separated search from ads.

On February 2, 2019, just one day later, Thakur and Gomes shared their anxieties with Nick Fox, a Vice President of Search and Google Assistant, entering a multiple-day-long debate about Google's sudden lust for growth. The thread is a dark window into the world of growth-focused tech, where Thakur listed the multiple points of disconnection between the ads and search teams, discussing how the search team wasn't able to finely optimize engagement on Google without "hacking engagement," a term that means effectively tricking users into spending more time on a site, and that doing so would lead them to "abandon work on efficient journeys." In one email, Fox adds that there was a "pretty big disconnect between what finance and ads want" and what search was doing.

When Gomes pushed back on the multiple requests for growth, Fox added that all three of them were responsible for search, that search was "the revenue engine of the company," and that bartering with the ads and finance teams was potentially "the new reality of their jobs."

On February 6th 2019, Gomes said that he believed that search was “getting too close to the money,” and ended his email by saying that he was “concerned that growth is all that Google was thinking about.”

On March 22 2019, Google VP of Product Management Darshan Kantak would declare the end of the code yellow. The thread mostly consisted of congratulatory emails until Gomes responded congratulating the team, saying that the plans architected as part of the code would do well throughout the year.

Prabhakar Raghavan, then Google’s Head of Ads and the true mastermind behind the code yellow, would respond curtly, saying that the current revenue targets were addressed “by heroic RPM engineering” and that “core query softness continued without mitigation” — a very clunky way of saying that despite these changes, query growth wasn’t happening.

A day later, Gomes emailed Fox and Thakur an email he intended to send to Raghavan. He led by saying he was “annoyed both personally and on behalf of the search team.” in a long email, he explained how one might increase engagement with Google Search, but specifically added that they could “increase queries quite easily in the short term in user negative ways,” like turning off spell correction, turning off ranking improvements, or placing refinements — effectively labels — all over the page, adding that it was “possible that there are trade offs here between different kinds of user negativity caused by engagement hacking,” and that he was “deeply deeply uncomfortable with this.” He also added that this was the reason he didn’t believe that queries were a good metric to measure search and that the best defense about the weakness of queries was to create “compelling user experiences that make users want to come back.”

In the March 2019 core update to search, which happened about a week before the end of the code yellow, was expected to be “one of the largest updates to search in a very long time. Yet when it launched, many found that the update mostly rolled back changes, and traffic was increasing to sites that had previously been suppressed by Google Search’s “Penguin” update from 2012 that specifically targeted spammy search results, as well as those hit by an update from an August 1, 2018, a few months after Gomes became Head of Search.

While I'm guessing, the timing of the March 2019 core update, along with the traffic increases to previously-suppressed sites, heavily suggests that Google's response to the Code Yellow was to roll back changes that were made to maintain the quality of search results.

A few months later in May 2019, Google would roll out a redesign of how ads are shown on the platform on Google's mobile search, replacing the bright green "ad" label and URL color on ads with a tiny little bolded black note that said "ad," with the link looking otherwise identical to a regular search link. I guess that's how it started hitting their numbers following the code yellow.

In January 2020, Google would bring this change to the desktop, which The Verge's Jon Porter would suggest made "Google's ads look just like search results now."

Five months later, a little over a year after the Code Yellow debacle, Google would make Prabhakar Raghavan the head of Google Search, with Jerry Dischler taking his place as head of ads. After nearly 20 years of building Google Search, Gomes would be relegated to SVP of Education at Google. Gomes, who was a critical part of the original team that made Google Search work, who has been credited with establishing the culture of the world's largest and most important search engine, was chased out by a growth-hungry managerial types led by Prabhakar Raghavan, a management consultant wearing an engineer costume.

A quick note: I used "management consultant" there as a pejorative. While he exhibits all the same bean-counting, morally-unguided behaviors of a management consultant, from what I can tell Raghavan has never actually worked in that particular sector of the economy.

But do you know who has? Sundar Pichai, who previously worked at McKinsey — arguably the most morally abhorrent company that has ever existed, having played roles both in the 2008 financial crisis (where it encouraged banks to load up on debt and flawed mortgage-backed securities) and the ongoing opioid crisis, where it effectively advised Purdue Pharma on how to "growth hack" sales of Oxycontin

Used Purdue Pharma on how to "growth hack" sales of Oxycontin.

McKinsey has paid nearly \$1bn over several settlements due to its work with Purdue. I'm getting sidetracked, but one last point. McKinsey is actively anti-labor. When a company brings in a McKinsey consultant, they're often there to advise on how to "cut costs," which inevitably means layoffs and outsourcing. McKinsey is to the middle class what flesh-eating bacteria is to healthy tissue.

These emails are a stark example of the monstrous growth-at-all-costs mindset that dominates the tech ecosystem, and if you take one thing away from this newsletter, I want it to be the name Prabhakar Raghavan, and an understanding that there are people responsible for the current state of technology.

These emails — which I encourage you to look up — tell a dramatic story about how Google's finance and advertising teams, led by Raghavan with the blessing of CEO Sundar Pichai, actively worked to make Google worse to make the company more money. This is what I mean when I talk about the Rot Economy — the illogical, product-destroying mindset that turns the products you love into torturous, frustrating quasi-tools that require you to fight the company's intentions to get the service you want.

## Heroes and Villains

Ben Gomes is a hero. He was instrumental in making search work, both as a product and a business, joining the company in 1999 — a time long before Google established dominance in the field, and the same year when Larry Page and Sergey Brin tried to sell the company to Excite for \$1m, only to walk away after Vinod Khosla (an Excite investor and the co-founder of Sun Microsystems) lowballed the pair with a \$750,000 offer.

In an interview with FastCompany's Harry McCracken from 2018, Gomes framed Google's challenge as "taking [the PageRank algorithm] from one machine to a whole bunch of machines, and they weren't very good machines at the time." Despite his impact and tenure, Gomes had only been made Head of Search in the middle of 2018 after John Giannandrea moved to Apple to work on its machine learning and AI strategy. Gomes had been described as Google's "search czar,"



beloved for his ability to communicate across departments.

Every single article I've read about Gomes' tenure at Google spoke of a man deeply ingrained in the foundation of one of the most important technologies ever made, who had dedicated decades to maintaining a product with a — to quote Gomes himself — "guiding light of serving the user and using technology to do that." And when finally given the keys to the kingdom — the ability to elevate Google Search even further — he was ratfucked by a series of rotten careerists trying to please Wall Street, led by Prabhakar Raghavan.

Do you want to know what Prabhakar Raghavan's old job was? What Prabhakar Raghavan, the new head of Google Search, the guy that has run Google Search into the ground, the guy who is currently destroying search, did before his job at Google?

***He was the head of search for Yahoo from 2005 through 2012*** — a tumultuous period that cemented its terminal decline, and effectively saw the company bow out of the search market altogether. His responsibilities? Research and development for Yahoo's search and ads products.

When Raghavan joined the company, Yahoo held a 30.4 percent market share — not far from Google's 36.9%, and miles ahead of the 15.7% of MSN Search. By May 2012, Yahoo was down to just 13.4 percent and had shrunk for the previous nine consecutive months, and was being beaten even by the newly-released Bing. That same year, Yahoo had the largest layoffs in its corporate history, shedding nearly 2,000 employees — or 14% of its overall workforce.

The man who deposed Ben Gomes — someone who worked on Google Search from the very beginning — was so shit at his job that in 2009 Yahoo effectively threw in the towel on its own search technology, instead choosing to license Bing's engine in a ten-year deal. If we take a long view of things, this likely precipitated the overall decline of the company, which went from being worth \$125bn at the peak of the Dot Com bubble to being sold to Verizon for \$4.8bn in 2017.

With search no longer a priority — and making less money for the company —

Yahoo decided to pivot into web 2.0 and original content, making some bets that paid off, but far, far too many that didn't. It spent \$1.1bn on Tumblr in 2013, only for Verizon to sell it for just \$3m in 2019. It bought Zimbra in 2007, ostensibly to compete with the new Google Apps productivity suite, only to sell it (for a reported fraction of the original purchase price) to VMware a few years later. Yahoo was a company without a mission, purpose, or objective. Nobody — and, I'll speculate, even those leading the company — really knew what it was, or what it did.

In an interview with ZDNet's Dan Farber from 2005, Raghavan spoke of his intent to “align the commercial incentives of a billion content providers with social good intent” while at Yahoo, and his eagerness to “inspire the audience to give more data. Before that, it's hard to find out exactly what Raghavan did — according to ZDNet, he spent “14 years doing search and data-mining research at IBM.”

In April 2011, the Guardian ran an interview with Raghavan that called him “Yahoo's secret weapon,” describing his plan to make “rigorous scientific research and practice... to inform Yahoo's business from email to advertising,” and how under then-CEO Carol Bartz, “the focus has shifted to the direct development of new products.” It speaks of Raghavan's “scientific approach” and his “steady, process-based logic to innovation that is very different to the common perception that ideas and development are more about luck and spontaneity,” a sentence I am only sharing with you because I need you to see how stupid it is, and how specious the tech press' accolades used to be. This entire article is ridiculous, so utterly vacuous that I'm actually astonished. What about Raghavan's career made this feel right? How has nobody connected these dots before and said something? Am I insane?

To be clear, this was something written several years after Yahoo had licensed its search engine to Microsoft in a financial deal that Marisa Mayer, who replaced Bartz, was still angry about for years. Raghavan's reign as the “search master” was one so successful that it ended up being replaced by a search engine that not a single person in the world enjoys saying out loud.

This Guardian article ran exactly one year before dramatic layoffs at Yahoo that involved firing entire divisions-worth of people and four months before Carol



Bartz would be fired by telephone by then-Chairman Roy Bostock. Her replacement — Scott Thompson, who previously served as President of PayPal — would last only five months in the role before he too was replaced by former Google executive Marissa Mayer, in part because it emerged he lied on his resume about having a Computer Science degree.

Bartz joined Yahoo in 2009 in the aftermath of its previous CEO Jerry Yang refusing to sell the company to Microsoft for \$45 billion. In her first year, she laid off hundreds of people and struck a deal to power Yahoo's search using Microsoft's Bing search engine tech, with Microsoft paying Yahoo 88% of the revenue it gained from searches — a deal that made Yahoo a couple hundred million dollars for handing over the keys to its most high-traffic platform.

As I have previously stated, when Prabhakar Ragahavan, Yahoo's secret weapon, was doing his work, Yahoo Search was so valuable it was replaced with Bing. The company's sole value, in many ways, was entirely driven by nostalgia and the association with the days before he worked there.

## A Near-Anonymous Villain

It's very, very difficult to find much on Raghavan's history — it took me hours of digging through Google results to find the three or four articles that went into any depth about him — but from what I've gleaned, his expertise lies primarily in “failing up,” ascending through the ranks of technology on the momentum from the explosions he caused. In a WIRED interview from 2021, Steven Levy said Raghavan “isn't CEO of Google— he just runs the place,” and described his addition to the company as “a move from research to management.”

While Levy calls him a “world-class computer scientist who has authored definitive texts in the field,” he also describes Raghavan as “choosing a management track,” which definitely tracks with everything I've found about him. Raghavan proudly declares that “Google's third-party ad tech plays a critical role in keeping journalism alive” at a time when he was aggressively incentivizing search engine optimized content, and a year after he'd deposed someone who actually gave a shit about search

Under Raghavan, Google has become less reliable, less transparent, and is dominated by search engine optimized aggregators, advertising, and outright spam.

As I've argued previously, we — with good reason — continually complain about the state of Twitter under Elon Musk, but I'd argue Raghavan (and, by extension, Google CEO Sundar Pichai) deserve as much criticism, if not more, for the damage they've done to society. Because Google is the ultimate essential piece of online infrastructure, just like power lines and water mains are in the physical realm.

Raghavan and his cronies worked to oust Ben Gomes, a man who dedicated a good portion of his life to making the world's information more accessible, in the process burning the Library of Alexandria to the ground so that Pichai could make more than 200 million dollars a year.

And Raghavan — a manager, hired by Sundar Pichai, a former McKinsey man and a manager by trade — is an example of everything wrong with the tech industry. Despite his history as a true computer scientist with actual academic credentials, Raghavan chose to bulldoze actual workers and replace them with toadies that would make Google more profitable and less useful to the world at large.

Since Prabhakar took the reins in 2020, Google Search has dramatically declined, with the numerous “core” search updates allegedly made to improve the quality of results having an adverse effect, increasing the prevalence of spammy, search engine optimized content.

It's because the people running the tech industry are no longer those that built it. Larry Page and Sergey Brin left Google in December 2019 (the same year as the Code Yellow fiasco), and while they remain as controlling shareholders, they clearly don't give a shit about what “Google” means anymore. Prabhakar Raghavan is a manager, and his career, from what I can tell, is mostly made up of “did some stuff at IBM, failed to make Yahoo anything of note, and fucked up Google so badly that every news outlet has run a story about how bad it is.”

This is the result of taking technology out of the hands of real builders and handing it to managers at a time when “management” is synonymous with “staying as far away from actual work as possible.” And when you’re a do-nothing looking to profit as much as possible, you only care about growth. You’re not a user, you’re a parasite, and it’s these parasites that have dominated and are draining the tech industry of its value.

Raghavan’s story is unique, insofar as the damage he’s managed to inflict (or, if we’re being exceptionally charitable, failed to avoid in the case of Yahoo) on two industry-defining companies, and the fact that he did it without being a CEO or founder. Perhaps more remarkable, he’s achieved this while maintaining a certain degree of anonymity. Everyone knows who Musk and Zuckerberg are, but Raghavan’s known only in his corner of the Internet. Or at least he was.

Now Raghavan has told those working on search that their “new operating reality” is one with less resources and less time to deliver things. Rot Master Raghavan is here to squeeze as much as he can from the corpse of a product he beat to death with his bare hands.

Raghavan is a hall-of-fame rot economist, and one of the many managerial types that have caused immeasurable damage to the Internet in the name of growth and “shareholder value.” And I believe these uber-managers - these ultra-pencil-pushers and growth-hounds - are the forces destroying tech's ability to innovate.

And in my next newsletter, I'm going to walk you through how a very specific kind of managerial mindset has poisoned Silicon Valley, making career failures unfathomably rich while your favorite tech products decay.

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