Remarkable impacts of COVID-19 on Google SERPs

30-second summary:

- Google has rolled out some of its most revolutionary features and additions in years in terms of how it displays the SERPs.
- These new SERP-related changes are meant as both a remedy and an insight into what the future of Google searches may look like.
- These changes have allowed Google to finally make some headway in combining two essential but vastly different needs of its users, that is, personalization and diversity of results.
- The new additions to the SERPs are tied to the ongoing COVID-19 epidemic, but its effect will undoubtedly take hold of Google's future approach towards its SERPs.
- This article explores exactly what these new additions bring to the table, what directions could they go into, and most importantly, how it helps Google help us better going forward.

What is perfection?

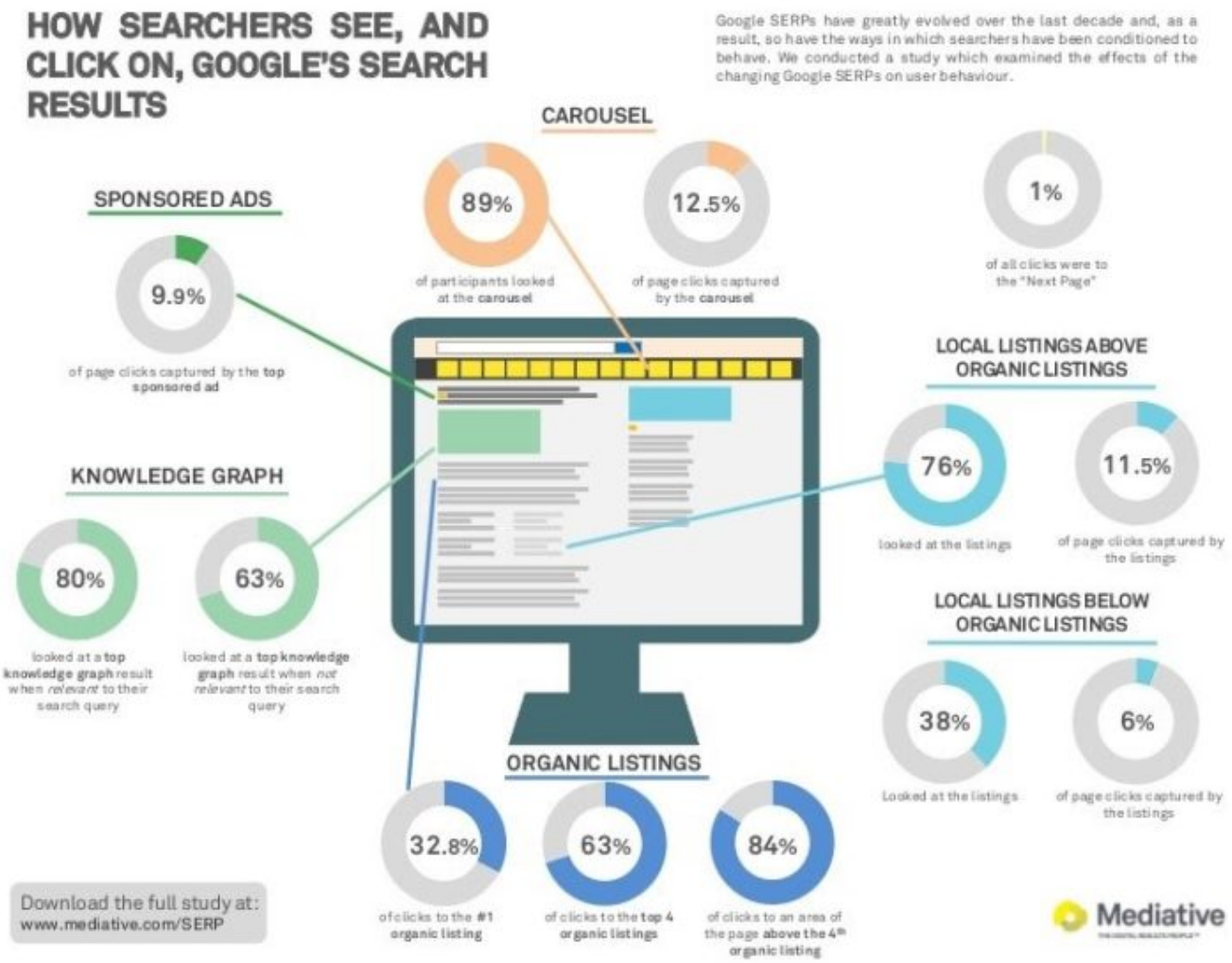
Though it might seem like a redundant question at first, it has been at the heart of all major tech innovations of our time. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Microsoft, Amazon, and Apple among others are examples of how this question drives constant improvements. Most of all, it reflects Google's metaphorical rise as the de facto "gateway" to the internet.

What is it about Google that sets it so apart from the rest of the competition? At its core, it is the "yellow pages" of the internet. All our queries, questions, doubts, and inquiries can be answered from roughly the first five search results

that Google presents us. These search results or more formally known as the Search Engine Results Pages (SERPs) are the proverbial jewel in Google's crown. All of its extensive services rely on the infallibility of its SERPs.

Hence, it is unsurprising that Google pays meticulous amounts of attention to constantly maintaining and evolving these SERPs. This has paid great dividends for the tech giant's fortunes while being the source of incredible help for the general public. Perhaps, Google's latest round of improvements reflects these improvements the most.

These improvements are Google's direct response to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Utilizing its incredible litany of data resources, Google has made it possible for governments and citizens alike to know about the latest developments in real-time. But certain elements set these COVID-19 Google SERPs' improvements apart from the rest.



Source: Twincreek

What are these elements and how exactly do they improve Google's already remarkable precision-based SERPs protocols? More importantly, what do they mean for Google going forward? In other words, has Google achieved perfection? Read on below to find out the answers to these questions.

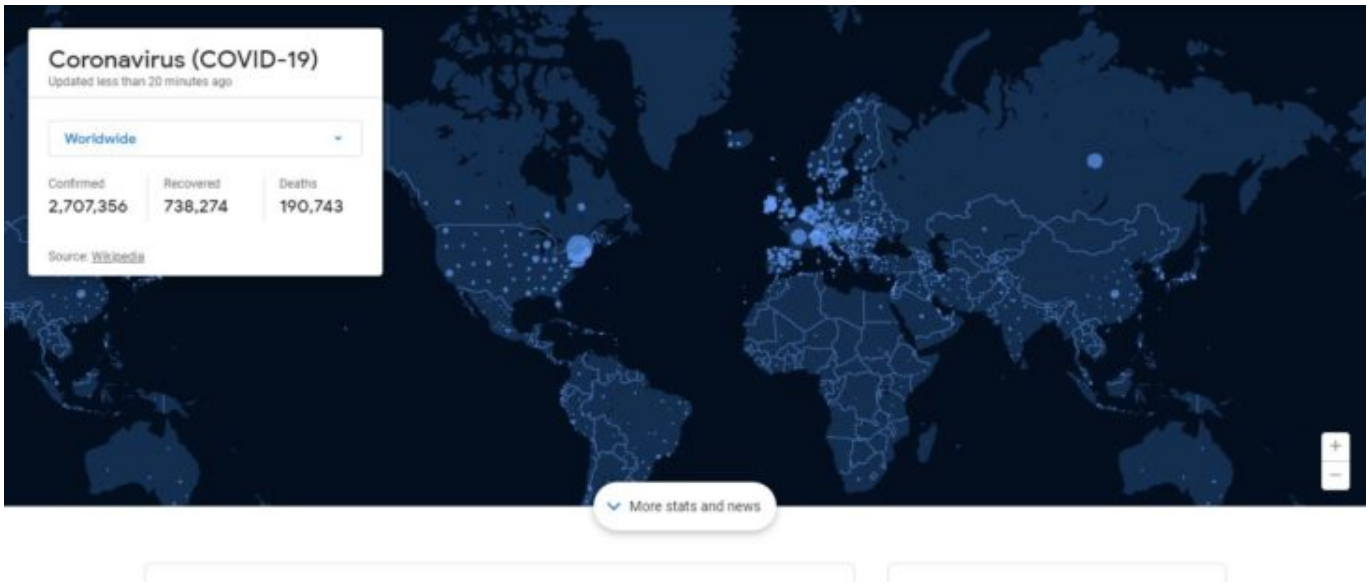
Tidying up the SERPs

While it may sound straightforward and almost routine, Google has visibly paid particular attention to these COVID-19 response changes to its SERPs. As users may have already noticed, searching "coronavirus symptoms" presents a sticky menu on the left side of the screen. Its simplicity is what makes it so groundbreaking as it helps Google address some of

the key issues plaguing it for quite some time now.

Utilizing raw, user-driven data

Just managing all the data that it has at its disposal can be a daunting task at times for Google. However, with COVID-19 it has chosen to transform this user-driven data into infographic representation. This not only helps get the message across a lot more clearly, but it also helps it avoid any miscommunication. After all, it is likely that a world map showing how each country has been infected can be misinterpreted if proper markers are provided.

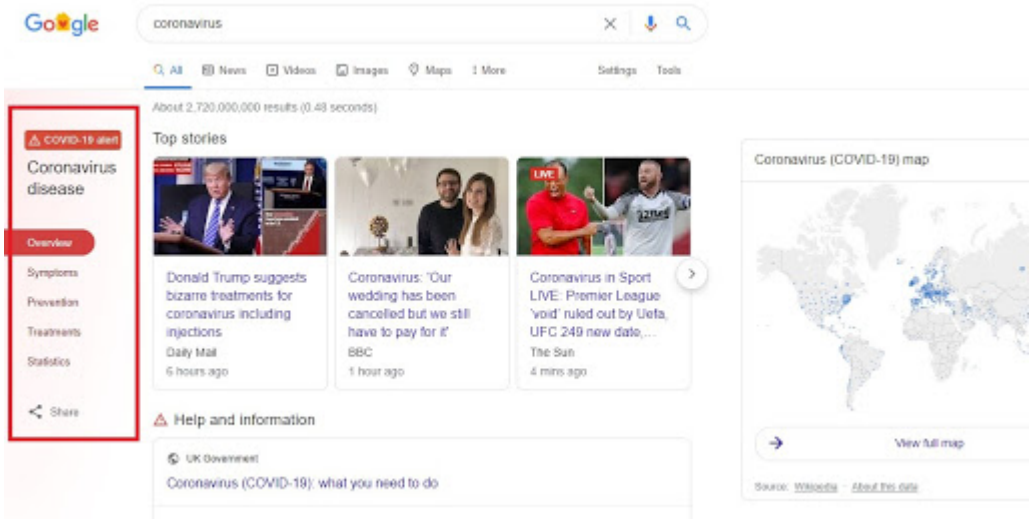


Similarly, these infographics are a lot easier to update based on real-time user-generated data. If users click on any of these infographics, they can find more information as well as qualitative data on the issue. In short, this ability to incorporate data means that it can rely on the users to provide both real-time diversifications as well as the personalization to the SERPs.

The sticky menu

The sticky menu is undoubtedly a feature that millions of users will find incredibly useful. It breaks down data into several categories without requiring users to search for these

separately. For instance, this is how the sticky menu looks when you search for “coronavirus symptoms”.



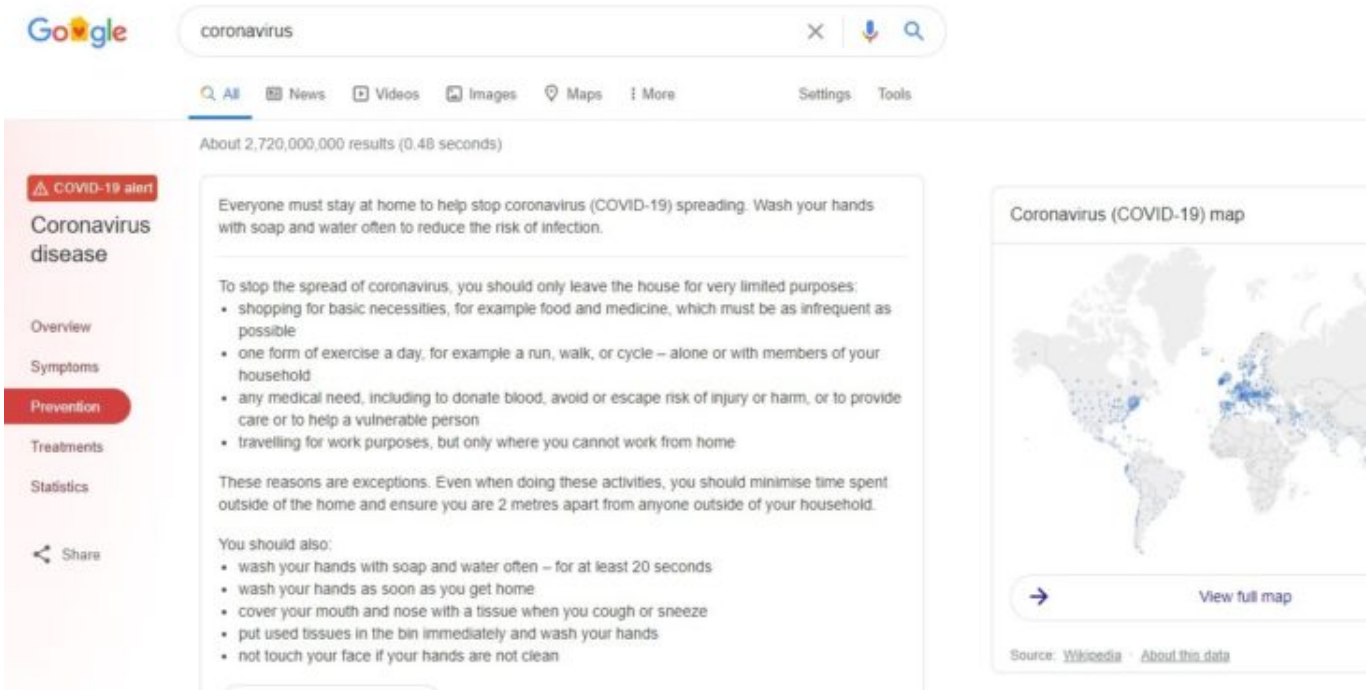
As users can see, all the SERPs are related to COVID-19 symptoms with their ranking dependent on their authority on the subject such as the WHO, official government sites, and reputable publications like the New York Times.

Similarly, users can further customize this menu to choose a selection of various filter bubbles or categories and have SERPs dedicated to them. This would help users avoid the hassle of having to skim through the results that a normal “COVID-19” inquiry would have brought and save the time it would take to make individual inquiries.

Google’s personalization problem is finally addressed

Unsurprisingly, personalization still represents one of the key issues facing Google in 2020. It becomes trickier when you take into consideration the fact that this issue has more to do with ethical concerns rather than Google’s technical ability. On the odd occasions when Google has achieved a customer-oriented form of personalization, it has had to face allegations of bias.

Apart from the external pressures that have curbed Google from building on its initial success, Google's internal culture presents a roadblock as well. It has long been proud of its algorithms that it promises to deliver the most diverse SERPs as possible. To its credit, Google has maintained a non-partisan approach to its SERPs until now.



Even during the height of the 2016 US Elections, it managed to keep the SERPs as diverse as possible without becoming a catering platform for political extremists on either side of the aisle. However, there is a limit to the extent of which it can continue to do so. The need for increased personalization by users as well as diversification has meant that Google has never been able to achieve the highly sought "balance" until now.

As mentioned earlier, these latest technical additions to Google's SERPs mean that it is finally able to merge both the filter bubble with issues of personalization and diversity. Without sacrificing much in terms of UI or accuracy of the SERPs, Google may have achieved or at the very least, has gotten on track to attain absolute personalization.

The answer lies in user input

Over the years, Google has looked at various solutions to its "personalization" problem. The most obvious solutions brought ethical issues that Google chose to avoid. It is becoming evident that the answer may have been far simpler than even Google may have anticipated i.e. user input.

Consider this, a liberal journalist that uses Google more than the average user to conduct their research. Naturally, over time Google's algorithms will understand what this journalist's typically sought SERPs are. If the user chooses to cite particular news outlets, it'll make SERPs from those outlets more visible. All standard protocol, but what if the same journalist wanted to see the other side of the picture? What if in a particular moment, that journalist wanted to see what some of the more conservative publications are publishing on the same issues?

Of course, the journalist's past search patterns mean that they'll have to spend an extensive amount of time skimming through the results presented. These results would probably be relevant 99% of the time…but in that particular instance, they're counter-productive to the journalist's needs.

This is precisely the problem that these latest SERP changes address. The sticky menu on the left would allow this journalist to be in total control of the SERPs presented to them. Not all users have the same intent and more importantly, not all users have the same intent all of the time.

Letting a user choose the intent and have greater control over the SERPs catering to multiple intents is the next step in Google's quest to achieve the kind of personalization it has spoken of in the past. Imagine, being able to see two completely different sets of SERPs on two different tabs just by making some simple changes on the sticky menu.

Building a strong foundation

The COVID-19 SERPs represent a massive step towards building a standard protocol that supports a user-driven balance between personalization and diversity of results. There might be an argument that there are still some plaguing holes in the current SERPs update. However, as mentioned earlier, it is best to see these developments as baby steps. Steps that will hopefully serve as a strong foundation that balances out both of these.

For now, the sticky menu allows users to categorize their intent based on the filter bubble as shown above. This simple addition has removed a lot of extra steps, making the overall browsing experience more fluent for the average user. Similarly, it does not sacrifice the effectiveness or reliability of the results. Google's traditional algorithms ensure users receive the most dependable SERPs in each category.

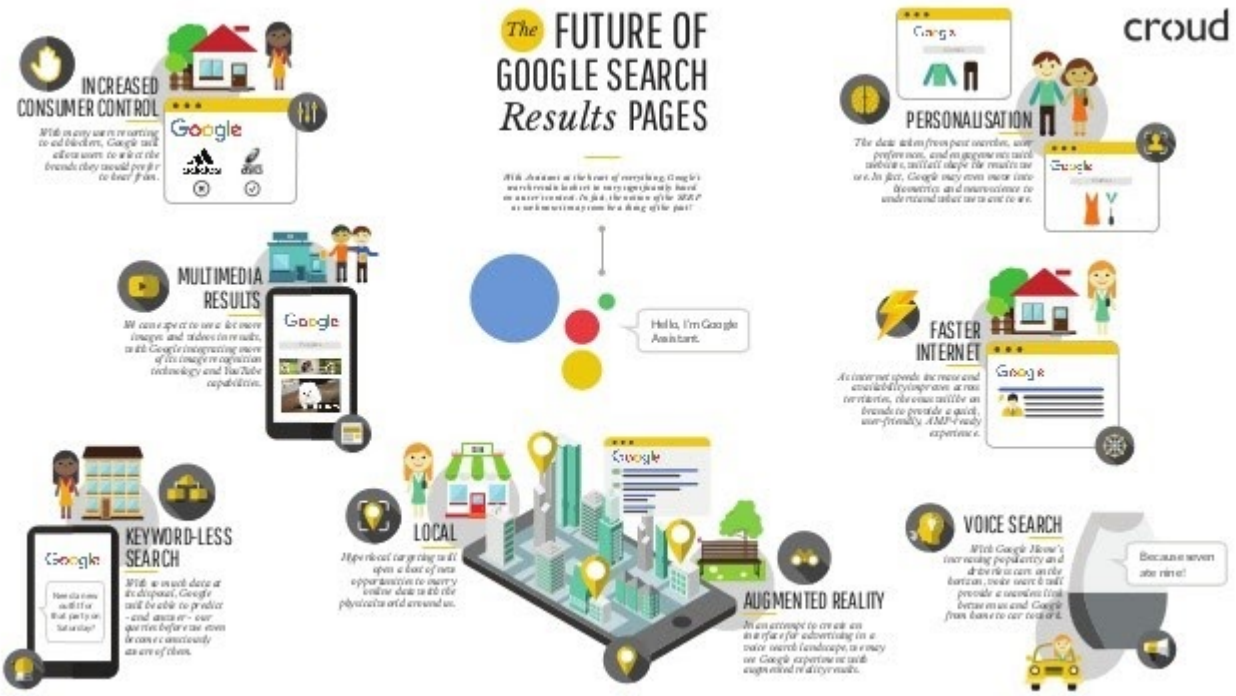
As for what else could Google does, there is never a death of suggestions. These suggestions will be of particular importance when it comes to an issue that has previously landed Google in hot water, that is, political bias.

Taking the example of the same liberal journalist as above, Google may understand their search intent. To mitigate any chances of confirmation bias, Google could have additional tabs such as "Also of Interest" or something similar. This would allow Google to ensure it does not have to compromise either on personalization or diversity of the results. At the same time, users may find it helpful that they're being shown both sides of the picture regarding any issue.

Some final thoughts

Every time Google comes up with a new feature, it seems that

it solves an issue that most users didn't even know existed. SERPs have long been the most talked-about aspect of Google as they are undeniably what gives it its authority within the market. As Google advances in its interpretation of data and merges it with personalization, we may see similar improvements in SERPs going forward.



Source: Slideshare Tiago Afonso

Without a doubt, COVID-19 inspired changes have allowed user-input to become a visible element in SERPs. The sticky menu represents to what extent users might have control of the SERPs visible to them. It is likely that in the time to come, Google will continue to work on it and implement it across the platform ensuring the same personalization is available across all pages.

Coming back to the original question, what is perfection? I like to believe that perfection is a lot of little things done well. A simplistic but adequate response that seems to fit the strategy Google has adopted. As radical as these changes might seem, they're essential tweaks in a much larger scheme. However, the results indicate that Google may have finally

found the answer to one of its most serious issues.

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