The MTA’s got porn in its Google search results

On the list of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority’s most-pressing problems right now, porn is nowhere near the top. But that doesn’t mean the agency, which operates New York City’s subway and bus systems as well as its commuter rail systems, isn’t irked that obscene language keeps showing up in its search results on Google.

The problem was first noticed by the *Queens Daily Eagle* newspaper, which published its findings in an article titled “The MTA has a porn problem.” It turned out that if you searched for a Metro-North station name in Google, you’d get some, shall we say, less-than-delicate-sounding language among your results. And the description kept showing up for at least 13 stations along Metro-North’s Hudson line. This was no isolated incident.

As you can see, as of Monday, July 27th, at 3:57PM ET, the X-rated results are still showing up when you search for the Ossining Metro-North station.

The MTA probably would have preferred that *Queens Daily Eagle* headline include the addendum “— and it’s Google’s fault.” That’s because these bawdy search results were exclusive to the company based in Mountain View. The MTA’s search results on Bing and Yahoo were decidedly G-rated.

I have so many questions about this particular string of words — how can a dildo be flirtatious? I’m so confused — but I don’t want to get sidetracked by the ribald content because, at its heart, this is a tech problem, and *The Verge* is a tech site. Let’s focus on the ones and zeroes.

To be clear, these results were not redirecting to any actual porn sites. They are just showing up in the Google search results. I see my job as a journalist to take risks in the service of my readers. So with that in mind, I clicked on the link and was surprised – and relieved – to see the MTA's regular, terribly designed website for the Ossining Station come up.

As previously noted, the MTA could do without this. The agency, which is facing a $4 billion budget shortfall this year and a $16.2 billion gap through 2024 as a result of the coronavirus pandemic, has way bigger fish to fry right now – like whether the federal government is going to free up the money so the MTA (and many other desperate public transportation agencies) can continue to exist. As such, a spokesperson was eager to lay this all at Google's doorstep.

"Google needs to fix this now."
"This is offensive and inappropriate language that is being generated by a Google search algorithm," the spokesperson said in a statement. "There is no issue with the MTA's website. We reached out to Google yesterday to ask them to fix this immediately. Google needs to fix this now."

For its part, Google owned up to the problem. "This is an error in our systems that we are working to diagnose and fix," a spokesperson said. "We apologize for any concern or offense this may have caused."

Apparently the issue is with a file called robots.txt that tells search engine crawlers which pages or files the crawler can or can't request from your site. When a page uses robots.txt to prohibit certain content from appearing in its search results – like, I don't know, "Flirtatious *something something* for *something something* blonde *something*" – Google may still list the page and form a title for it from other sources that link to it. Normally, the company's systems work to prevent forming any titles that might be obscene. That

system failed in this case, and Google is working to figure out why.

Google recommends sites that really want to block certain content from making uninvited cameos in their search results use the noindex tag rather than robots.txt. Noindex prevents a page from appearing in Google’s listings at all.

The MTA sounds satisfied that the search giant will eventually figure out what went wrong. “We appreciate that Google is now engaged in addressing this unacceptable situation,” the agency spokesperson said. “We look forward to Google’s promptly identifying all possible solutions.”

In the meantime, if you really must know how to get from Grand Central Terminal to Metro-North’s Hastings-on-Hudson stop, may I recommend you DuckDuckGo it instead?

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