When parsing ‘Googlespeak’ is a distraction

Over the almost 16-years of covering search, specifically what Googlers have said in terms of SEO and ranking topics, I have seen my share of contradictory statements. Google’s ranking algorithms are complex, and the way one Googler explains something might sound contradictory to how another Googler talks about it. In reality, they are typically talking about different things or nuances.

Some of it is semantics, some of it is being literal in how one person might explain something while another person speaks figuratively. Some of it is being technically correct versus trying to dumb something down for general practitioners or even non-search marketers to understand. Some of it is that the algorithm can change over the years, so what was true then has evolved.

Does it matter if something is or is not a ranking factor? It can be easy to get wrapped up in details that end up being distractions. Ultimately, SEOs, webmasters, site owners, publishers and those that produce web pages need to care more about providing the best possible web site and web page for the topic. You do not want to chase algorithms and racing after what is or is not a ranking factor. Google’s stated aim is to rank the most relevant results to keep users happy and coming back to the search engine. How Google does that changes over time. It releases core updates, smaller algorithm updates, index updates and more all the time.

For SEOs, the goal is to make sure your pages offer the most authoritative and relevant content for the given query and can be accessed by search crawlers.

When it is and is not a ranking factor. An example of Googlers

seeming to contradict themselves popped this week.

Gary Illyes from Google said at Pubcon Thursday that content accuracy is a ranking factor. That raised eyebrows because in past Google has seemed to say content accuracy is not a ranking factor. Last month Google's Danny Sullivan said, "Machines can't tell the 'accuracy' of content. Our systems rely instead on signals we find align with relevancy of topic and authority." One could interpret that to mean that if Google cannot tell the accuracy of content, that it would be unable to use accuracy as a ranking factor.

Upon closer look at the context of Illyes comments this week, it's clear he's getting at the second part of Sullivan's comment about using signals to understand "relevancy of topic and authority." SEO Marie Haynes captured more of the context of Illyes' comment.

> *Q: Is content accuracy a ranking factor?*
> *A: "YMYL so yes. We go to great lengths to surface reputable and trustworthy sources, so yes."@methode @jenstar #Pubcon*
>
> *— Marie Haynes (@Marie_Haynes) October 10, 2019*

Illyes was talking about YMYL (your money, your life) content. He added that Google goes through "great lengths to surface reputable and trustworthy sources."

He didn't outright say Google's systems are able to tell if a piece of content is factually accurate or not. He implied Google uses multiple signals, like signals that determine reputations and trustworthiness, as a way to infer accuracy.

So is content accuracy a ranking factor? Yes and no. It depends if you are being technical, literal, figurative or explanatory. When I covered the different messaging around content accuracy on my personal site, Sullivan pointed out the difference, he said on Twitter "We don't know if content is

accurate" but "we do look for signals we believe align with that."

> *Also I didn't say accuracy wasn't ranking factor. Wasn't what I was asked. Asked if we could tell content is accurate. No, we can't. But again, signals, we look for things we believe correspond to accuracy. In that regard, damn right having accurate content is ranking factor….*
>
> *— Danny Sullivan (@dannysullivan) October 11, 2019*

It's the same with whether there is an E-A-T score. Illyes said there is no E-A-T score. That is correct, technically. But Google has numerous algorithms and ranking signals it uses to figure out E-A-T as an overall theme. Sullivan said on Twitter, "Is E-A-T a ranking factor? Not if you mean there's some technical thing like with speed that we can measure directly. We do use a variety of signals as a proxy to tell if content seems to match E-A-T as humans would assess it. In that regard, yeah, it's a ranking factor."

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You can see the dual point Sullivan is making here.

The minutiae. When you have people like me, who for almost 16 years, analyze and scrutinize every word, tweet, blog post or video that Google produces, it can be hard for a Google representative to always convey the exact clear message at every point. Sometimes it is important to step back, look at

the bigger picture, and ask yourself, Why is this Googler saying this or not saying that?

Why we should care. It is important to look at long term goals, and as I said above, not chase the algorithm or specific ranking factors but focus on the ultimate goals of your business (money). Produce content and web pages that Google would be proud to rank at the top of the results for a given query and other sites will want to source and link to. And above all, do whatever you can to make the best possible site for users – beyond what your competitors produce.

About The Author

Barry Schwartz is Search Engine Land's News Editor and owns RustyBrick, a NY based web consulting firm. He also runs Search Engine Roundtable, a popular search blog on SEM topics.
http://feeds.searchengineland.com/~r/searchengineland/~3/RKEYoj_5tMM/when-parsing-googlespeak-is-a-distraction-323337