

Response from Barry Adams, Founder, Polemic Digital

You warned mid last year re AI Overviews "I think 'extinction' is too strong of a word for what's going to happen to websites," ... "'Decimation' is the right word." Are you seeing this play out?

Pretty much, yes. Search traffic to websites is diminishing gradually as Google injects AI Overviews into more search results. At [the last count](#), AI Overviews now show on 43% of Google queries in the UK and 38% of Google queries in the US. When an AI Overview is present on a search page, the clickthrough rate on the top organic result (below the AI Overview) drops from an average 27% to 11%. As you can imagine, this severely and directly impacts traffic to websites whose Google rankings are now flooded with AI Overviews.

Which websites/publications are being impacted the most?

The most affected publishers are those that produce 'commodity information': Content that is not in any way unique. There are too many publishers that merely rewrite what others are reporting, without any kind of added value or insights of their own. This rehashing of stories is a traffic dead end because AI Overviews now summarise those stories, providing all the information a user needs without requiring a click-through to a website.

Additionally, news publishers who have been broadening the scope of their output into non-news areas (lifestyle content, product reviews, etc.) to scale up their revenue are feeling the pain. AI Overviews are affecting the traffic this type of non-news content can generate.

What does this mean for publishers?

Effectively, there is a diminished traffic potential from Google search. Previously publishers could safely plod along and continue to grow, as Google's own search volumes and the clicks it sent to the wider web also continued to grow. That growth curve has now flatlined, which means Google search traffic is truly zero-sum. If your competitor gets the click, you don't. It is a recalibration of the search ecosystem, shifting from endless growth to a finite pool of traffic.

What are they doing about it?

Some publishers are decreasing their investment in search, scaling back their SEO efforts. This leads to a self-fulfilling prophecy, where reduced investment in search leads to less search traffic, and thus further reducing search investment. Smart publishers look at areas where gains can be made. Google still handles trillions of search queries every year, and even a small percentage of clicks from those queries represents enormous traffic potential. It just got harder to get that traffic. You'd be surprised how many publishers have never truly optimised their site for search and have primarily been coasting on brand power.

Some publishers are pivoting to or (re)focusing on content areas where AI Overviews are less present or even entirely absent, such as breaking news, hyperlocal stories, detailed analysis, and unique perspectives and insights.

Google's Discover feed is seen as an alternative traffic channel that can mitigate the losses from search, but Discover is a highly volatile ecosystem that is unreliable and highly susceptible to huge fluctuations on a day to day basis. Plus, optimising for Discover can encourage bad habits such as clickbait content, which may lead a website to accumulate signals indicating it is a low-quality outlet. That can have severe long term repercussions, as Google regularly rolls out updates to its core algorithms to downgrade the visibility of websites it sees as 'low quality'.

Beyond Discover, there is no real alternative source of traffic. No other platform is rising to take Google's place as the gateway to the web. Social media, email newsletters, podcasts, and other similar channels are not viable sources of traffic. They can help a publisher establish a strong brand presence and should absolutely be part of a holistic marketing strategy, but for traffic-dependent websites these alternative channels will not rescue them.

Is this a problem, and what does it mean for media/news consumers?

It is a problem inasmuch as publishers who've gotten used to endless traffic growth now have to adapt to a context where growth is much harder to achieve. I suspect some online publishers will disappear soon through selloffs, mergers, or by shuttering the business entirely, as the traffic impact makes their business models unsustainable. Paywalls will become much more common, and news consumers will need to get used to paying for quality news again. I do believe it will eventually lead to a healthier ecosystem, where publishers focus more on delivering true value to their audience instead of chasing after clicks.

