

The Net: My Life in Cache

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Brendan Gullifer

Earlier this year, when I was at home working on a novel and had writer's block, I decided to google someone. It was a spontaneous act, done out of boredom really, and given no more than passing thought.

I googled an acquaintance. He was someone with whom I'd had only fleeting interaction, distinctly unsatisfactory. And up it came, the very first listing.

In 2004, he'd been accused of inappropriate conduct with a female client and called [IslandAd] before a professional disciplinary board. It was all there: the allegations, his admissions, Advertisement evidence given from the plaintiff and the defendant, other witnesses, and the ultimate findings.

The document was in the public domain, available on the board's website. It stressed the man's behavior was unprofessional but 'not of a serious nature,' and recommended counseling.

But I felt like I'd read his private mail. It was too easy, and too intimate. And I wouldn't have stumbled across it without Google, or any of the other freely available search engines.

When someone says they have searched the web with Google, this is, in fact, not correct. When we undertake a Google search, we are actually searching Google.

In simple terms, the search engine comprises three parts. The crawler is an automatic program that finds and harvests nearly all web content. The indexer catalogues and stores this content on Google's servers. And finally, the query processor is the system you interact with to get search results.

It's here that Google analyses what you're looking for, chooses the best matches, then goes to Google document servers where the pages that match your request are retrieved. Google then supplies you with a results page by extracting the titles of matching pages and linking them to the actual pages on the web.

Whenever Google crawls and indexes a page, it stores a copy on its database. This is known as the 'cache.' That's how Google can appear to search millions of sites in fractions of a second. By clicking on the cached link, which appears under most Google listings, you see an exact copy of what Google has in its records, and the date when that record was taken. Apparently, re-indexing can take place anywhere from a day or two, to 30 days later.

And this is where the theoretical becomes personal.



ABC Radio has a program called *Perspective*. It's a short national soapbox that gives people the chance to speak uninterrupted on-air, about any topic they choose. I appeared on the show in July to recount how, when driving down to the beach with two of my children, I accidentally ran over the family dog.

It was a family game that went distressingly wrong. We were on a deserted country road. We had let the dog out for a wee. I drove off slowly, which encouraged the dog to chase the car. On prior occasions, the dog had run after us barking, while I had driven slowly and carefully and my children had called and cheered him on.

This time I ran over the animal and killed it.

The piece I did on the ABC was a much shortened version of an original story I wrote. It covered how we were all exhausted from moving house, and that I had been suffering from an extended period of ill-health, and that we had played this game 30 or 40 times before, always only on deserted roads, with no mishap.

But it caused a veritable storm.

ABC *Perspective* producer Sue Clark told me that it attracted the biggest response of any non-political story in her two and a half years with the show. And as the piece was available as a podcast to subscribers in Australia and around the world, she was continuing to receive comments by phone and email six weeks later.

Clark said comments 'were split 50/50' in terms of support or condemnation. Some shared my grief. Others attacked me for irresponsible and stupid behavior.

One comment posted on the *Perspective* website read in part:

Apart from the seeming criminal negligence of an adult encouraging dangerous animal practices and allowing his children to be out of their seatbelts and hanging out the car windows, Brendan Gullifer killed this dog through his own willful negligence.

This is inaccurate. Nowhere did I say my children were out of their seatbelts. But the comment was selected in full by Clark and used as a billboard for the program's comments page. It stayed up for several weeks.

And this is where things get interesting. Privacy experts recommend regularly googling yourself. They say it's important to keep abreast of what others see when they do a search on your name. As I write this, if I google my name, up comes a portion of the above comment, fifth on the list, below a link which takes you to the program's homepage.

The Google listing reads: 'was appalled at last week's *Perspective* article by Brendan Gullifer. Apart from the seeming criminal negligence of an adult encouraging dangerous animal ... '

If I click on the cached link, Google says it captured this page 18 days earlier. It no longer stands at the website's opening comments page, but there it is, for all to see, when you google me.

As someone who occasionally writes for the media, and has a book coming out next January, I now face the prospect of any media interest being clouded by inaccurate editorialising on a family tragedy completely unrelated to my professional life. Of course, I made it public by talking on the program. But the reference to 'seeming criminal negligence' means an emotional and possibly libelous comment by someone I have never met may colour future media contact with me.

I assume the listing will change next time Google sweeps the ABC website, but I can't be sure. While googling my own name, I came across a link to a newspaper article about a conference I was involved in eight years ago. The link pointed to a story in an Asian business magazine published in 1998. The article was available, still readable, and the cached date for the listing was January 23, 2006.

This is not the first time this has happened.

Last year, my daughter was the victim of a school bully. It was dealt with well by the school, but one of the things the student threw at my daughter during the incident was, 'I know you're father is looking for a job in China, and I know where you live.'

We are not listed in the telephone directory, but I had posted my contact details and qualifications on a job site run by the Australia China Business Council months earlier. If you googled my name, up came everything: phone number, address, and other personal information. I had asked the ACBC to remove

my listing. They did. But the search engine kept presenting with all my details because that page had been cached.

A former colleague now working for a major American newspaper tells me she had to turn down a posting to Iraq because after writing about the brutality of the Chechen kidnapping industry in the late 1990s, her story was picked up by reactionary websites to exemplify the abhorrent nature of Muslims.

She said she had been told that editors can get Google to change the search in the case of kidnapping, but this is hard to confirm.

In the meantime, what's left for those who want to secure their privacy? Google offers webmasters the option of precluding their site from cached pages, but it must be your site or one that you control.

For the rest of us, it's a case of beware and be aware.

About the author

Brendan Gullifer is a Melbourne author. Since writing this piece, the Google listing he wrote about has 'disappeared.'
