

## You probably haven't even noticed Google's sketchy quest to control the world's knowledge

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"Google is an organized crime operation designed to steal elections, taxpayer money from governments and public perceptions using subliminal media tricks. Under the guise of a friendly uncle with free gifts, Google seeks to lure the public into the basement where dark deeds can be performed without the benefit of transparency.."

[The Intersect](#)

## You probably haven't even noticed Google's sketchy quest to control the world's knowledge

By [Caitlin Dewey](#)



(Amy Cavanaugh/The Washington Post; Google; iStock)

Google's "knowledge panels" materialize at random, as unsourced and absolute as if handed down by God:

Betty White is 94 years old.

The Honda Civic is 2016's best car.

Taipei is the capital of — ahem — the "small island nation" of Taiwan.

If you've ever Googled a person, place or thing — which, survey suggests, you almost definitely have — then you've encountered these aggressive, bold-faced modules, one of Google's many bids for your fleeting attention. Since their quiet, casual introduction in 2012, knowledge panels and other sorts of "rich answers" have mushroomed across Google, appearing atop the results on [roughly one-third](#) of its [100 billion](#) monthly searches, not only in response to simple, numerical queries like "Betty White age," but also to more complex, nuanced questions like "capital of Israel" or "D.C.'s best restaurant."

[\[Always click the first Google result? You might want to stop doing that.\]](#)

To Google, that's proof of its semantic search technology; to Googlers, it's a convenience that saves them a few clicks. But to skeptics, of whom there are a growing number, it's a looming public literacy threat — one that arguably dwarfs the recent revelations that Facebook's trending topics are curated by humans.

"It undermines people's ability to verify information and, ultimately, to develop well-informed opinions," said Dario Taraborelli, head of research at the Wikimedia Foundation and a social computing researcher who studies knowledge production online. "And that is something I think we really need to study and process as a society."

For Taraborelli, the primary issue with Google's knowledge panels is that they aren't terribly knowledgeable: They provide information but often leave out any context on where that information came from. That makes it difficult for readers to evaluate the accuracy of the statement or whether it's the best and most complete of the available options.

They could just scroll down the page and click through some links, of course — but that becomes increasingly difficult as searchers migrate to voice and mobile, and as Google expands its rich-answer offerings without differentiating which programs those results source from.


[\[How to see everything you've ever Googled, if you're so brave\]](#)

There are "snippets," for instance, which pull a portion of text from a cited webpage in response to a question like "how to lose weight." There are maps, sourced from Google's local search program, that will direct you to local businesses if you search something like "best pizza D.C."

These are all concerning, as they algorithmically confer a lot of unearned authority. (There's no indication as to [what makes a restaurant the "best,"](#) for instance — the locations proffered during a recent Google search wouldn't make my top 10, let alone my top three.) But most pertinent to our interests are the modules and carousels linked to Google's Knowledge Graph, an advanced database sourced largely from Wikipedia and constructed in part from user search patterns. According to a October 2015 analysis by the digital marketing firm Stone Temple Consulting, these knowledge panels, which are frequently unattributed, are one of the fastest growing types in Google's arsenal.

Betty White / Age

**94 years**  
January 17, 1922



Bob Barker 92 years  
Sandra Bullock 51 years  
Cloris Leachman 90 years

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**Betty White - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia**

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Betty\\_White](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Betty_White) - Wikipedia  
Allen Ludden. ( m. 1963 ; his death 1981 ) Betty White Ludden (born Betty Marion White; **January 17, 1922**), known professionally as Betty White, is an American actress, animal rights activist, author, comedian, radio host, singer, and television personality.

**93-Year-Old Betty White Reveals Her Biggest Regret - ABC N...**

abcnews.go.com/Entertainment/93-year-**betty-white**-reveals.../story?id...  
Mar 27, 2015 - Betty White attends the SNL 40th Anniversary Celebration at Rockefeller Plaza, Feb. 15, 2015, in New York City. Betty White's biggest regret in life involved her late husband Allen Ludden, who died from stomach cancer in 1981. White, 93, spoke to Oprah Winfrey for Sunday's "Oprah ...

**Betty White**

Actress

Betty White Ludden, known professionally as Betty White, is an American actress, animal rights activist, author, comedian, radio host, singer, and television personality. [Wikipedia](#)

**Born:** January 17, 1922 (age 94), Oak Park, IL  
**Height:** 5' 4"  
**Movies:** The Proposal, The Lorax, You Again, Lake Placid, More  
**Spouse:** Allen Ludden (m. 1963–1981), Lane Allen (m. 1947–1949), Dick Barker (m. 1945–1945)  
**Books:** If You Ask Me (And of Course You Won't), More

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The Golden Girls 1985 – 1992  
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Betty White's Off Their Roc... Since 2012  
The Mary Tyler Moore Show 1970 – 1977  
The Betty White Show 1977 – 1979

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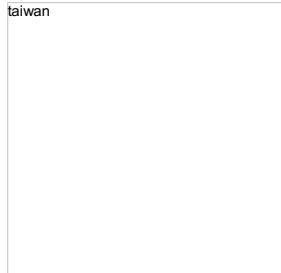
The results for the search "Betty White age," which include two knowledge panels: The one on the left is unsourced; the one on the right is sourced to Wikipedia. (Google)

In a [2012 blog post](#) announcing the introduction of these modules, Google's Amit Singhal rejoiced in the "critical first step" toward the future of search, an engine that "understands the world a bit more like people do." Which is all well and good, until you get into subjects more complex than the current time in Timbuktu.

Mark Graham, a geographer at the Oxford Internet Institute, recently did just that: He and his colleague Heather Ford analyzed, in [a paper published last month](#) in the academic volume Code and the City, how the city of Jerusalem was represented both on Wikipedia and in Google knowledge panels. They found that while Wikipedia may explain the city's contested geopolitical status in enormous depth — as of this writing, that portion runs to almost 1,500 words — the nuance was jettisoned completely when the article was deboned and ingested by Google.

"Google, through its data and algorithms, now controls how we interact with many facets of the cities we live in," Graham warned. "So we should be asking whether we are happy ceding decisions about how we live our everyday lives to them."


In fact, as Graham dug into [other contested cities](#), he discovered that Google's knowledge panels regularly, if inadvertently, make rather important decisions for us: Taiwan, you'll remember, is described as if it were an independent nation, when only 22 countries actually recognize it as such. Meanwhile, Google corrects searches for "Londonderry," Ireland's fourth-largest city, to "Derry," the (unofficial) term favored by Irish nationalists.



Google's knowledge panel for Taiwan, which does not cite a source. (Google)

Since Google frequently does not cite its sources — a ploy, Taraborelli says, to make it seem more authoritative — there's no way for users to double-check "answers" for bias or error, which doubtlessly exist. In September, for instance, my colleagues in the Style section [published a story](#) on the peculiar fact that no one seems to know Hillary Clinton's height — not even Google, which until recently listed it as 5-foot-7 in a prominent knowledge panel. That error appears to date back to an unsourced Wikipedia edit from 2007, which has since been debated and deleted by Wikipedians. Now Googling Clinton's height produces a mere rich-answer "snippet," which incorrectly measures Clinton at "5 feet tall, maybe 5' 2". But at least now you can click through to CelebHeights.com and see exactly what you're dealing with.

I believe Hillary Clinton is **5 feet tall, maybe 5' 2"** at most. Re. Hillary Clinton: Anyone stating over **5'6"** has no idea about height. Taking into account her seemingly having a large head (she is very brainy), I'd say between 5'4-5".



**Hillary Rodham Clinton Height**  
[www.celebheights.com/s/Hillary-Rodham-Clinton-47003.html](http://www.celebheights.com/s/Hillary-Rodham-Clinton-47003.html)

[About this result](#) • [Feedback](#)

The "snippet" that appears atop a search for Clinton's height. (Google)

Intersect newsletter

The corner of the Internet and interesting.

In its defense, Google has made some changes to certain types of knowledge panels that suggest it's aware of the whole sourcing thing. Medical queries now pull up proprietary editorial panels fact-checked by doctors at Google and the Mayo Clinic. And if you search for a food or recipe ingredient, the accompanying knowledge panel will also link you to the Agriculture Department's database on food nutrition. "Our goal is to be useful; we realize we'll never be perfect, just as a person's or library's knowledge is never complete," a Google spokesperson said in a statement. "We're constantly working to improve search, and to make searching with Google easier and results more accurate for people."

Unfortunately, as long as Google has a commercial interest in appearing omniscient, it probably won't work to improve knowledge panel transparency. That burden will fall instead to people like Taraborelli and nonprofits like the Wikimedia Foundation, which is working on an open-license, machine-readable [knowledge base](#) that will both source all of its statements and accommodate conflicting sources. The hope is that Google will begin pulling from that database and citing its sources, instead of dumbing down Wikipedia.

Where history was once written by its victors, and later by its nerds, it's now being shaped by its algorithms.

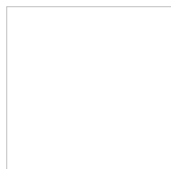
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Caitlin Dewey is The Post's digital culture critic. Follow her on Twitter @caitlindewey or subscribe to her daily newsletter on all things Internet. ([tinyletter.com/cdewey](http://tinyletter.com/cdewey))

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When the FTC ended its earlier Google probe, critics said the agency — which secured a handful of concessions from Google on patents and some business practices — had essentially delivered a slap on the wrist to the search giant, which has a heavy lobbying presence in Washington. | Getty

## Sources: Feds taking second look at Google search

By [Nancy Scola](#)

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Federal Trade Commission officials are asking questions again about whether Google has abused its dominance in the Internet search market, a sign that the agency may be taking steps to reopen an investigation it closed more than three years ago, according to sources familiar with the discussions. Senior antitrust officials at the FTC have discussed the matter in recent months with representatives of a major U.S. company that objects to Google's practices, according to sources with the company. While the inquiry appears to be in the early, information-gathering stage, it signals renewed agency interest in the kind of search case it examined — but ultimately closed without charges — in 2013.

When the FTC ended its earlier Google probe, critics said the agency — which secured a handful of concessions from Google on patents and some business practices — had essentially delivered a slap on the wrist to the search giant, which has a heavy lobbying presence in Washington. Since then, the European Commission has charged Google with anti-competitive behavior for allegedly manipulating search results to favor its own shopping services and using its Android mobile operating system to secure better placement of its apps with smartphone makers. An FTC spokesperson said in a statement that because agency investigations are non-public, "we do not comment on an investigation or the existence of an investigation." Google, now part of parent company Alphabet, did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The FTC has, according to recent media reports, also been meeting with companies concerned about Google's dealings over Android. But a U.S. investigation into so-called search bias would be more sweeping and consequential because it strikes at the heart of Google's core business model.

Critics complain that Google has used its online dominance to treat competitors unfairly — for example, by pushing search results for competing products off its homepage or siphoning valuable content from third-party sources without express permission. The practices, according to critics, undermine the widespread view that Google acts as a neutral gateway to information on the Internet.

The FTC's discussions with the major U.S. company have centered on the nuts-and-bolts of how Google's search products behave today and any possible anti-competitive effects, according to the company sources. The discussions were initiated at the company's request.

Where the agency goes from here is unclear. FTC staff regularly examine issues they ultimately don't pursue. Requests from staff to conduct full investigations are typically approved by a majority of the FTC's commissioners in a closed-door session.

Still, the inquiries could indicate the start of a second pass at a case that the commission voted 5-0 to close in 2013. At the time, the FTC's then-chairman Jon Leibowitz said, "Google's primary reason for changing the look and feel of its search results to highlight its own products was to improve the user experience." Google's chief legal officer David Drummond said, "The conclusion is clear: Google's services are good for users and good for competition."

The Wall Street Journal later [reported](#) last year that FTC staff had recommended bringing a lawsuit against some Google practices. The article prompted now-Chairwoman Edith Ramirez and Commissioners Julie Brill and Maureen Ohlhausen to defend their actions in a joint statement, saying that after a "comprehensive review of the voluminous record and extensive internal analysis," the five FTC members at the time "agreed that there was no legal basis for action" on search. The commissioners added that "Contrary to recent press reports, the Commission's decision on the search allegations was in accord with the recommendations" of agency staff.

As the EU has mounted a more aggressive probe of Google, some voices in the U.S. have been pressing the FTC to look again at the search issue. In June, former FTC senior advisor and Columbia Law School professor Tim Wu — who, after returning to academia after his FTC stint, publicly supported the agency's decision to end its investigation of Google without charges — co-authored a study, sponsored by frequent Google critic Yelp, that concluded Google is "reducing consumer welfare" through some of its search practices. And at a Senate antitrust hearing last month, [Richard Blumenthal](#) (D-Conn.) floated the possibility of the FTC re-opening its search investigation. "While the company is a great American success story, their position in the marketplace has led to legitimate questions about whether they have used their market power to disadvantage competitors unfairly and ultimately limit consumer choice," Blumenthal said in a statement. Due to the departures of two commissioners — Brill, a Democrat, and Joshua Wright, a Republican — the agency is now down to three members, including Democrats Ramirez and Terrell McSweeney and Republican Ohlhausen. Last year, the FTC created an Office of Technology Research and Innovation designed to give the commission the ability to quickly and effectively conduct tech-centric investigations.

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