

technomancy search

why?

Did you learn to use the Internet in the 90s like me? There's a lot of nostalgia around those simpler times before the Web had been colonized by companies. Some of it is valid and some is seen thru rose-colored glasses, but anyone who was there at the time can attest to the fact that *it was hard to find stuff*. The web was wild, weird, and deeply chaotic. But then I remember back in 2002 or 2003 the feeling of discovering Google and realizing I could stop bouncing around search engines, because this one was better than all the others. I would guess that you, dear reader, either had a similar realization, or that you started using the Web after the rise of Google and may have had trouble imagining a web without it.

Google offered us a deal: accept their role as arbiter of the Web, and they would allow you to make sense of the chaos. At the time, it seemed like a good deal. They had a cute "don't be evil" slogan, and their competition consisted of clunkers like Yahoo and AltaVista. Their ads were light and unobtrusive compared to the flashy banner ads of the day. But most importantly, back then the Web yet wasn't the World; it was just some weird nerd thing. That was all it took for us, I guess. We just all sort of agreed that Google was how you found things on the Web, and that was it.

Well, if you're reading this in 2025 or later, you know how well that turned out. The [declining quality of search results](#) has made it so it's no longer particularly difficult to imagine a Web without Google Search.

It's tempting to wax nostalgic about how things used to be. "It was amazing," you might say, "you could just put a few keywords into Google, and if it existed, you'd be able to find it!" The problem is *that was never true*. In exchange for saving us from a chaotic web where you bounced around and couldn't find what you wanted, we allowed Google to *change our very definition of what the Web was*.

"If it's not in Google, it doesn't exist," we said. Of course, we were wrong. But we're only now starting to see how wrong.

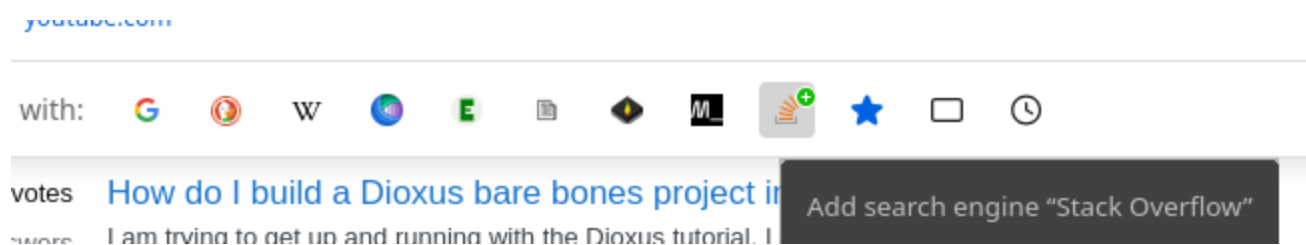
The problem, of course, is that this objective gods-eye view of the Web fundamentally *cannot* exist. Indexing something as big as the Web while resisting abuse requires making thousands of judgment calls; some large and some small. Whenever you search—no, whenever you *abstract*—you must accept a certain simplification of reality. Just as the map is not the territory, the index is not the Web.

In the process of programming, or scanning or sampling or digitizing or transcribing, much of the world is left out or forgotten. Programming is an attempt to get a handle on a small part of the world so we can analyze and reason about it. But a computer program is never itself the world.

[- Allison Parrish, Programming is Forgetting](#)

What are we left with, then? Should we just go back to never being able to find anything? That's a little too nihilistic for me. There are two parts to my approach. On the one hand, remaining aware of this dynamic helps a lot. There's nothing wrong with making queries on Google if you recognize that what you're getting back is the take of one unaccountable, profit-seeking company, not *the definitive answer*. But this mindset is difficult to maintain, both because they act as if they provide a definitive answer, and because our own desire for a definitive answer is strong.

One way that I've found is to change my default search engine to something with a much smaller index. Getting poor results by default has trained me to take a second before hitting enter; asking myself where I want to submit my query. A lot of the time I'll go directly to Wikipedia. Some question about web development? Point that query at MDN. Reddit has its own issues, but it's host to an array of highly specialized community knowledge.



The second part to my approach is to experiment to see what a potential future for the web looks like where we aren't beholden to the interests of tech megacorps. That's what this site is for. It's not the final say in search; it's my first step in one direction. It may turn out to be a misstep as we learn more. The current view of search as something provided

by an immense monolithic opaque oracle is so deeply embedded in our consciousness that it's difficult to even *imagine* what an alternative would look like.

This is me, imagining.

I started with every page in my bookmarks. Then I went on to index every link I'd posted on my social media account. Maybe next I'll include the links posted by people I follow, or the highlights from my browser history? Right now I'm hyper-personalizing for myself because you have to start somewhere, but hopefully future steps can build this out into something that could work for anyone.

How do our relationships with other people affect our view of the web? How would *you* [hyper-personalize](#)? What signals can we find in the noise that might not be legible to the current kings of search? Remember, the web is *ours*.

Let's start acting like it.

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