

Search SMS Investigation

Publisher Roundtable

28 January 2025

Agenda

1. Overview of the Search SMS investigation
2. Landscape for publishers
3. Relationship between Google and publishers

Introduction

As part of its Strategic Market Status (**SMS**) investigation into Google's general search services, the CMA held a series of roundtable events for groups of stakeholders to explore the issues and hear their views.

Participants were reminded of the consequences of providing false or misleading information to the CMA in connection with its digital markets functions.

This note summarises the content of the roundtable held with publishers. The event was chaired by the CMA Director leading the SMS investigation and attended by CMA staff including the Executive Director, Digital Markets and the case team. Representatives from 26 publishers participated.

The views expressed in this note are those of the participants, which the CMA will consider as part of the body of evidence it gathers during the investigation.

Overview of the Search SMS investigation

The CMA thanked attendees for joining the roundtable and stressed the importance and value of their engagement with the case team during its SMS investigation and explained how the CMA intends to implement the participative approach to the digital markets competition regime.

CMA staff explained the scope and process of the SMS investigation, the issues the CMA intends to explore during the investigation, as set out in the [Invitation to Comment](#), and the expected timeline for the investigation. Attendees were then given an opportunity to ask questions.

Landscape for Publishers

Multiple participants stated that they are reliant on Google as a source of traffic due to its position as the largest search engine, and as a 'must have' distribution channel. Participants further stated that updates to Google's search algorithms can lead to unexplained drops in search ranking and traffic, alongside a concern that ongoing developments of Google Search were encouraging users to stay within the Google ecosystem rather than click through to publisher content, both of which have significant business impacts. Additionally, some participants also stated that support from Google on this issue is limited, and they only receive

generic advice which may or may not help to resolve traffic issues. One participant stated that they are sufficiently dependent on Google, that if Google were to degrade their publication's search ranking it could lead to the immediate closing of the business.

One participant also stated that Google provides little control over the manner in which publisher content is presented. Another stated that it had undertaken research and had found that around two thirds of users do not click through on news articles, and find the information they need from the headline, meaning that Google benefits from the publisher's content but not the publisher. Some participants also stated that they felt the news content available on their sites was particularly valuable for AI purposes due to providing real time or niche information.

Regarding recent developments in AI technology, multiple participants stated that they were concerned about how Google scrapes data from their websites, and Google's implementation of AI Overviews into the Search Engine Results Page (**SERP**). Multiple publishers stated that despite having the option to block the Google-Extended crawler which scrapes websites for AI training purposes, this did not appear to impact whether their content featured in AI Overviews. Further, they felt unable to control how their content featured in AI Overviews via the Googlebot crawler without impacting their site's position or appearance within Google's search rankings.

Multiple participants also stated that it was unclear to them how their content was being used in AI Overviews. One participant said that they had seen very limited referral and click through from AI Overviews, and that they believed the introduction of AI Overviews had led to the participant's publications receiving less traffic from search terms which they previously viewed as a successful source of traffic.

A further participant stated that it believed Google is able to take arbitrary decisions that impact its business, providing an example where the participant stated that Google introduced an update to disincentivise publications running articles focused on providing discount codes, which had previously been popular with users and a material source of revenue for the business, on the basis of increasing the quality of the SERP.

Relationship between Google and publishers

Several participants stated that they felt Google obtains data for use in its AI services unfairly, and that the CMA should focus on remedies that seek to restore the balance of power between publishers and Google. A participant also stated that Google holds the information required to accurately assess the value of publisher content and should be required to share this information if there was an intervention enabling payment for content use.

Participants stated that the CMA would need to carefully consider the impacts of remedies on publishers. For example, a participant stated that it perceived a risk that interventions requiring Google to share data such as its search index with third parties could further harm publishers as there would be no incentive for other parties to create better conditions for publishers.

One participant welcomed the CMA's statements in its ITC regarding potential CRs requiring an effective complaint procedure, and multiple participants stated an interest in interventions requiring Google to provide transparency over algorithm changes and provide publishers with forewarning of algorithm changes.

Some participants noted that publishing was a diverse ecosystem involving both smaller and larger organisations. They argued that any interventions should be designed to benefit publishers of all sizes and avoid entrenching existing market dynamics within the sector.

Participants also stated that the CMA should consider consumer benefits such as the quality of publications available and easily accessible to them as part of its remedy design process. This could include ensuring that Google gives due prominence to quality news providers, and prioritising news providers who are members of recognised trade bodies in any payment for content interventions.

Further, participants stated a desire for AI Overviews, and Google News Showcase to be included within any potential SMS designation, as Google provides these services using its search index. There were also multiple statements of support for the inclusion of Google's Discover product as falling within the scope of the investigation and any potential SMS designation. Additionally, multiple participants also stated a belief that Google News Showcase does not guarantee publishers fair payment for their content.