Feedback, evidence and suggestions following CMA roundtable Fair Ranking and Publisher roundtables.

General sentiments

With websites Google is THE gateway to a website via search. The impact of ranking ensures a website is successful, or fails. As a publisher we have benefited, but we have also suffered.

In 2023 a Google Core Update changed the traffic patterns on two of our websites that we were investing in to become successful publications. We expended considerable resources trying to understand the drop: analysing our editorial content and every element of website tech. All for nought. The traffic plummeted, as did the revenue we made from the display advertising around it. The change in ranking with the drop in referral traffic on Google Search directly led to the decision to lay off two teams of journalists as the websites became unsustainable.

In July 2025, another Core update hit three of our websites, including our biggest revenue driver. It supports a team of UK-based gaming journalists, and a number of freelance UK games journalists. At time of writing in February 2026 we have not seen a recovery, indeed it continues to decline in Search, and our business is in jeopardy.

We have observed first-hand our content in AI Overviews extracted and re-presented, and misrepresented, and inadequately referenced. We understand how useful getting answers for people is, but the business model of taking substantive and significant elements of it is unsustainable for the producers of that content, our journalists, and those of our competitors.

Our journalists get paid from the advertising on our websites where people read our content. If a person reads our content on an AI Overview we don't get paid. ███████████████ ███████████ The endgame being no journalists because Google has the content and doesn't pay for it.

Our journalists are experts in their field. We are all passionate professionals, yet our survival is beholden to Google almost in its entirety. There is no competitor in search that comes close. We appreciate the work the CMA is doing to push for fairness, transparency, and to raise the particular issues affecting UK businesses online.

Fair Ranking

1. Poor quality websites ranking highly in Google Image Search for niche gaming content

Our position is that good writing, from experts, or those with first-hand knowledge should be ranked well for a topic. With weighting given to authoritative work and sites with good reputation for that topic.

Google no doubt is in a constant battle with those that game the system.

In 2024 I performed an experiment to determine if we could improve our ranking on Google Image Search. We already had a web article that ranked #1 regularly because our website was an authority on mobile gaming and the journalists would source codes for the games regularly. The experiment was to use a more compelling unique image, with machine-readable text to give more context to the image and article.

I discovered that a number of sites returned in the results for the niche search query. The lowest quality being hijacked sites such as a construction company, a magazine for older people, or educational institutes where bad actors were hosting content unknown to the site owners. There were also images associated with high domain authority sites but where the purpose of those sites were wholly unrelated to the subject matter. One of the sites that returned in Google Image Search as a result was not accessible.

These issues were reported to Google via a couple of routes but have yet to be addressed.

2. Lack of means to report Image Search ranking issues to Google vs the ability to do so on Bing Image Search

With the example of image ranking for poor quality websites above there is, at time of writing, no method to send feedback on Google Image Search results page with a suitable follow-up. Feedback can be given on individual images but no perceived action is taken, or audit trail created.

With Bing Image Search a Feedback method is available via a drop-down menu. This results in an acknowledgement of the issue. I would like to see consistent implementation for Feedback on Google so that publishers can flag issues. The issues would be varied: copyright, reporting a ranking issue, etc. I would only expect an acknowledgement if the issue related directly to our content, which we can verify via Google Search Console, for example.

We wanted to let you know we're investigating the issue you reported to Bing.

You sent feedback about this page.

3. Failure of Google to guard against, and respond adequately to canonical hijack

In June 2025 the Editor of one of our publications noticed that an article had disappeared from Google Search. We found via Google Search Console that Google had assigned the canonical URL (a declaration that a website article is the authoritative source of content) to a spam website, a cloned website of our publication.

We uncovered multiple sites were using our content, and Google was assigning them as the authority. In some cases we were able to show that these websites were 'cloaking', that is showing Google's automated system one version of a web page, and human visitors another. Over 30 high-trafficking articles of ours were hijacked in this way, from a variety of domains. This issue was also present on other sites owned by us.

We logged it as in issue in Google Search Console Help but did not receive satisfactory help.

As we deemed this a serious issue for us, and fellow publishers as it relates to Fair Ranking relative to cloned websites, and an inadequacy on the part of Google by incorrectly assigning a canonical link to sites other than the authoritative source, we reported, with detailed information, to Google Bug Hunters, via the Report an Indexing Issue Form[1], and also reported to one of our Google advertising contacts via our advertising tech partners who said that he raised an issue for us - but not everyone has access to a representative from Google. At time of writing we've heard nothing further on this issue from Google.

Below is an excerpt from the Indexing Issue we filed in June 2025

Critically, this situation highlights a fundamental flaw in Google's canonical selection process.

Google is currently attributing canonical preference to unknown, low-reputation domains instead of well-established, authoritative ones. *In doing so, it is de-indexing legitimate journalism in favour of cloned or malicious pages. Some of these pages ultimately serve inappropriate content. This should not happen.*

It suggests that Google's canonical heuristics can be misled by cloaked or spoofed signals, even when the original site is clean, accessible, and properly configured. That represents not only an SEO issue but a broader risk to trust, accuracy, and user safety in search.

1
https://support.google.com/webmasters/contact/indexing_issue_form?sjid=17093592478290432845-EU

Given the nature of the attack and the implications for visibility and integrity, ongoing monitoring, formal reporting to Google (including canonical feedback and possibly reconsideration requests), and broader escalation may be necessary to protect the affected domains and prevent recurrence.

Below was the response from Google Bug Hunters

`VA...@GOOGLE.COM JUN 6, 2025 | 11:48 | #3`

🟥 CLOSED   Status updated

Hi! We've decided that the issue you reported is not severe enough for us to track it as a security bug. When we file a security vulnerability to product teams, we impose monitoring and escalation processes for teams to follow, and the security risk described in this report does not meet the threshold that we require for this type of escalation on behalf of the security team.

Regarding VRP, we feel that the submission falls outside of the intended program scope, since we require submissions to demonstrate technical security vulnerabilities with a sufficient severity. For example, Google VRP covers only submissions that "substantially affect the confidentiality or integrity of user data".

To provide feedback on our products, you can use our Google Product Forums, where you can share your feedback with other users and our product team. That said – if you think we misunderstood your report, and you see a well-defined security risk, please let us know what we missed.

Thanks again for your report and time,
The Google Bug Hunter Team

The impact from this lack of Fair Ranking, and assigning a canonical to another website led to a loss of traffic and revenue, and in a way is reputational abuse as Google did not assign the canonical to us as the source of content, favouring the malicious actors in this instance. We did not, and have not received adequate support for this issue from Google.

With Bing, if we report an issue via Bing Webmaster Tools we receive follow-up emails with a response usually within 24 hours. I would like to see a similar system for publishers from Google.

Publishers viewpoint

4. Unable to access to Search experiments via Google Labs

In May 2023, following the announcement at Google IO about the launch of Google Bard and Generative AI I attempted to sign up for access to the experiments at https://labs.google/ in order to understand the technology that was coming and how it could impact our business. However the experiments were not available outside the US, and appeared to be only available to certain accounts as we attempted to sign up via an American colleague - we believe this being related to having a Business Gmail account.

I want Google to provide fairer access to publisher/Search related experiments so that businesses worldwide can evaluate them, provide feedback, and assess the impact.

5. Worldwide access to new Search features

AI Overview testing began in March 2024, with an initial US launch 14th May. The wider global launch followed in October 2024, with a wider European launch in March 2025. I would like Google to consider rolling out experiments to wider geographical regions earlier, or provide access to from other regions to the experiments that are geo-fenced. This would reduce the competitive advantage available to publishers in those regions over UK publishers.

6. What we would like to see for attribution in AI Overviews

We understand We would like to see the named website highlighted with a traditional blue link WITHIN the AI Overview.

Having links hidden behind page furniture where another click, or another scroll is required is inadequate.

We want to see the brand name or domain linked within the content of the AI Overview. This gives us suitable attribution, and is more likely to drive a link through to the publishers site as it has suitable prominence.

Example below from Google AI Overview with a 'blue link'.

General Consensus

Reviews from sources like IGN and
like BoardGameGeek, are overwhe
"instant classic" and a "perfect ga

7. How we would like to see reporting on our content within AI/AI Overview

We would like to see Clicks, Impressions, Click through rates, and keywords reported in Google Search Console for AI results. We would like to track the appearance of our articles for keywords over time. It is important to understand how our content performs. It is important to account for the amount of our content cited in AI Overviews as it demonstrates the impact on our business and can be used by the CMA as evidence should this technology prove detrimental to companies.

8. We want to see a reduction in substantive extracts of content presented in AI Overview

If a reader sees substantive amounts of our content in AI Overviews they have no reason to visit our website. I would say it's getting close on occasion to plagiarism and theft. It is taking revenue away from us, and we cannot pay our journalists, our expert writers, to craft compelling content for our readers. We can expect AI Overviews to give some insight, but they should be a gateway to find out more, not a closed door.

We supplied to the CMA an example whereby our content was substantially repurposed for AI Overviews including the copy and the unique images that our journalist sourced. These were uncredited.

The AI Overview lacked adequate citation. It featured favicons of the sites that it constructed the result from but only showed three of the eight brands. Having a favicon is not a suitable brand representation due to the small dimensions of a favicon, and hiding the other brands is not a suitable representation.

The AI Overview extract re-used significant elements from our review such that a reader would have little to no cause to find a link to the source and read on our website.

The layout of the AI Overview mimicked the layout of an editorially-crafted article. It was not a snippet or excerpt. This again defeats the need to read the article on our site, or those of our competitors that were used to construct the 'Overview'.

The Citations for the excerpts are often hidden behind carousels. The citations and links to the source are not directly in the AI Overviews, presenting a barrier to click through to the source, and effectively hiding the sources behind the design of the AI Overview with some carousels off screen.
Where a link to a named source was observed, the named source for our publication was not linked.

The Editor of our publication was devastated to see his hard work lifted in a substantive manner and republished in Google AI Overviews. He wrote:

> *I saw a carousel of my photos, and thought "hey, we've got a cool snippet!*
> *No, those are part of Google's review now.*

Every single photo in the AIO's automatic carousel is mine, but individual photos don't show provenance unless you click them, and our logo isn't in the top three listed as sources above the images.

9. Misrepresentation of our content in AI Overviews

We supplied to the CMA evidence of misrepresentation of our review. In our review we refer to a product as "near faultless design". The AI Overview says "flawless design". There is a chasm of meaning between these two words.

What I want to see is accuracy. What I also want to see is rapid recourse to correct errors. Not a generic 'Send Feedback' form. I want to see a ticketing system and an email chain or reporting system so that publishers can flag generated content which is plain wrong.

10. Other

It would be desirable if the CMA were to solicit evidence from others on whether fair use is employed for content on AI Overviews, and collate evidence for when AI Overviews is factually incorrect. However, I understand this may be outside the remit.