

2020 *vision*

FIND OUT WHERE THE
SEO INDUSTRY
IS HEADING
IN 2020.



SEO in 2020



Where's the SEO industry going?

How will it affect your organic SEO and content marketing strategy over the coming years?

*Hear from 15 of the world's top SEOs and inbound marketers and over 300+ SEO practitioners who have taken the time to complete our **SEOin2020** survey.*

▶ *15 IN DEPTH INTERVIEWS WITH TOP SEO'S*

▶ *300+ SURVEY RESPONDENTS*

▶ *JOIN THE DISCUSSION*



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I recall hiring my first SEO agency around 2001 or 2002. I cannot quite remember exactly when, it was so long ago and so much has happened in our industry since then. Yet when I speak to some other industry veterans who have been practitioners for a decade or more they recognise the pace of change, but also

go on to point out that many fundamentals of successful SEO remain the same; get the technical foundations right so your content can be crawled and indexed, write great quality content for users; earn and seek quality links; rinse and repeat.

So a lot has changed, yet a lot hasn't! We live and work in such exciting times that sometimes we cannot see just how fast we're moving. We didn't interview him for this research, but wasn't it that great philosopher Ferris Bueller who said,

“Life moves pretty fast. If you don't stop and look around once in a while, you could miss it.”

And that's what we decided to do with this study. To stop and take stock of developments in the industry and look at what's going on around us and where that might lead us...

and of course, as all good SEOs always do, how we can develop a view of the future that might give us and our clients a competitive edge.

So a big heartfelt thank-you to our 15 first-class video interviewees and the 300+ professional SEOs and content marketers who took the time to complete the [SEO in 2020 survey](#) and share their thoughts.

“The fundamentals of Search haven't changed dramatically in the last four years, & I don't think they will change dramatically in the next four”

—Rand Fishkin, Moz



Compiling this research has given us a brief sneak peek into some of the top minds in our industry. Some of it has been enlightening, some of it has been scary and a tiny percentage, a little bit crazy!

Do we have a crystal ball? No. If we had undertaken this exercise 3 years ago would we have predicted what we're seeing now? Growth in mobile? Yes. Growth in Voice Search? Yes. Real-time Penguin? Possibly. What about AMP or Google building a separate mobile and desktop index? Maybe not.

Forward

01



The future of our industry is very exciting – the pace of technological advances, particularly in AI, and changes in user behaviour is accelerating and driving innovation. More than ever before this is a great time to be in digital marketing.

Who knows what the future will bring for us all. One thing is certain, constant evolution and change. Thinking about what's coming and how to be prepared can give us the edge over our competition.

▶ **JOIN THE DISCUSSION**



If there's just one insight from this exercise that helps everyone reading it to do just that then it's been worthwhile!

As I have been compiling this study over Christmas, it's been great to be able to stop and think beyond 2017 and make bigger and even grander plans for the years ahead.

The start to any year is always busy with new plans and resolutions for the year ahead. This year, I encourage you to stop for a while and dare to think and dream a little further ahead – it's a lot of fun!

Finally, to my team who arranged and conducted the interviews, devised the survey and compiled the research and read through over 100 pages of transcripts – thank-you David and Lauren. If I've misrepresented anyone's views in my summary of the research then it's entirely my fault!

Please feel free to join in on the discussion of the future of our industry on Twitter or LinkedIn.

Laurence O'Toole , CEO

www.authoritas.com

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We love playing with new technology and evaluating how advances in big data collection, data science and AI techniques might be combined to transform our working lives.

At the beginning of every year, it is not uncommon for major SEO blogs and news sites to write articles with their predictions for the coming year. You only have to look at the start of January 2017 to see a host of sites with articles predicting the year ahead for the SEO industry:

- ▶ **Preparing for SEO in 2017: yes it's that time already** ([Search Engine Watch](#))
- ▶ **7 New Year's Resolutions For SEO In 2017** ([Forbes.com](#))
- ▶ **SEO trends to prepare for in 2017** ([Searchengineland.com](#))
- ▶ **Five ways virtual reality will impact SEO in 2017** ([Thedrum.com](#))
- ▶ **3 Unstoppable SEO Trends To Look Out For In 2017** ([Entrepreneur.com](#))
- ▶ **9 Crazy Predictions for SEO in 2017** ([Wordstream.com](#))

We believe that to get real competitive advantage, every once in a while it's worth looking further ahead and thinking about where the industry is heading so that we can plan accordingly.

During the summer and autumn of 2016 we undertook in-depth interviews with prominent figures in the SEO industry to try and get their perspectives on how the industry might change, not in 2017 or even 2018, but what it might look like by the year 2020.

By asking the leading lights in the industry to cast their minds further ahead than normal, we hoped to shine a light on where the industry is heading and how you can best prepare for the future of search.

So we approached 15 of the main commentators in the industry across the UK and United States.

These luminaries are not just our friends or our clients - some might even be considered competitors - it is simply an all-star cast of experienced SEO and content

marketing practitioners who are willing to share their experiences, thoughts and opinions and are comfortable with being proven right or wrong in 3 years' time!



These structured video interviews were approximately 30 to 45 minutes in length – and you can watch any (or all) of the [SEO in 2020 interviews](#) with full transcripts on the [Authoritas blog](#). If you have a favourite SEO you want to hear from then you can go straight to their interview in section **04**.

We decided to add a quantitative aspect to the study as well and so followed up this research with a quantitative survey sent to a multi-national database of professional SEOs and content marketers at agencies and major brands worldwide. To avoid bias, this included a random sample of customers, prospects and influencers in the industry.

We had 323 responders broken down as follows:

- ▶ A period of 4 months for survey completion: August 2016 - November 2016.
- ▶ Open to individuals with varying levels of SEO & content marketing experience e.g. SEO Managers to Content Marketing Directors to Global Heads of SEO.
- ▶ Respondents from both agencies and brands participated.
- ▶ Countries involved: the US, UK, Australia and South Africa.

The results of both studies have been compiled during the last quarter of 2016. This has included watching over 7 hours of video, reading 70,000 words in transcript and wading through over 300 survey responses that many people took the time to complete.

We'd like to thank everyone who took the time to contribute in one way or another. Whether the results, or more correctly our synthesis and interpretation of the results, prove to be accurate - only time will tell!

Executive Summary

03

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This is merely a synopsis of the main emerging themes, challenges, issues and action points from 15 in-depth video interviews and over 300 survey responses. If you are interested in digging a little deeper then please do [watch the videos](#) yourself and make up your own mind.

There are plenty of unknowns but there are also lots of common insights around where we might be heading and what steps you can take to prepare your business.

In the following pages we've combined both qualitative and quantitative aspects of the study to give you some food for thought.

The main emerging themes centre on:

The Future of Search

- ▶ There will be huge growth in voice search fuelled by consumer adoption of AI personal assistants.
- ▶ The SERPs will always be there. However, the nature of it will rapidly evolve, with Google constantly testing new features with better and customised data.

- ▶ Google will not be losing market share anytime soon, but, if it was to, the threat would likely come from Facebook, Apple or a new AI start-up that completely disrupts the search experience.

Future Algorithm Changes

- ▶ User signals have become an increasingly important part of the algorithmic mix.
- ▶ Social signals are easy to game and are largely irrelevant as a ranking signal but can be used to help search engines discover new content.
- ▶ A search engine's ability to better understand a site's content and match it correctly to a user's journey will continue to improve.

Future Optimisation Techniques

- ▶ 'Structured Markup' of some sort to better enable automated voice commerce.
- ▶ HTTP2 will be provided by Google.
- ▶ Real-time SERPs - real-time indexing of content, AMP and user generated videos as it happens.
- ▶ Carousels of Direct Answers of the best choices for your query.

Executive Summary

03

- ▼
- ▶ The rise of intelligent AI agents that help you complete a task.
- ▶ Search engines are heavily evaluating your site and your content - are you? By 2020, marketers will need to have an algorithmic/automated way to evaluate and refine the content they are producing.

The Future of SEO for us (industry practitioners) and our clients

- ▶ SEOs will be optimising much more than just the SERPs by 2020.
- ▶ They will become more generalist and thought of as digital leaders in their teams.
- ▶ SEOs will continue to wear multiple hats whether they are in multi-disciplinary teams or not.

Takeaways

- ▶ Search is a zero-sum game, so there is very little margin for error.
- ▶ This industry is moving in the direction of Artificially Intelligent devices, so we need to start strategizing about how we can optimise for these kinds of search queries.
- ▶ The role of an SEO will change and it is important to remember to change your 'SEO hat' when the need arises.

The Interviews & Bios

04



Interview 1

MOZ | **Rand Fishkin**

Uses the ludicrous title, Wizard of Moz. He's founder and former CEO of Moz, board member at presentation software startup Haiku Deck, co-author of a pair of books on SEO, and co-founder of Inbound.org. Rand's an unsavable addict of all things content, search, & social on the web, from his multiple blogs to Twitter, Google+, Facebook, LinkedIn, and a shared Instagram account. In his miniscule spare time, he likes to galavant around the world with Geraldine and then read about it on her superbly enjoyable travel blog.

Bas van den Beld | STATE OF DIGITAL 

An award winning consultant, trainer and speaker and the founder of State of Digital, one of Europe's biggest online learning platforms. He is a highly sought after marketing and SEO professional speaker, consultant and trainer. Bas has helped big brands like KLM and Viacom develop a solid marketing strategy based on the needs and behaviour of the customers. Bas trains other speakers to be excellent at their jobs.

Interview 2



Interview 3

DEALERON | **Greg Gifford**

The Director of Search and Social at DealerOn, a software company that provides websites and online marketing to new car dealers all over the country. He's got over 16 years of online marketing and web design experience, and he speaks internationally at both automotive and SEO conferences, teaching thousands of small business owners and marketers how to get their sites to show up higher in local search rankings. Greg also spends his time doing freelance website design and SEO for local businesses. He graduated from Southern Methodist University with a BA in Cinema and Communications, and has an obscure movie quote for just about any situation.

Interviews were conducted in the summer of 2016

The Interviews & Bios

04

Interview 4



equator

| **Andrew Steel**

Head of SEO at Equator, leading a large team of SEO experts working for some of the world's largest brands, including AXA and National Australia Group. Based in Glasgow, UK, Andrew has over 10 years' experience working in SEO and has played a key role in devising & delivering some of the UK's most successful, award-winning SEO campaigns.

Lukasz Zelezny



Interview 5



A speaker, author and the head of organic acquisition at uSwitch.com, a leading UK based price comparison website with offices in London. Listed as Top 10 Social Media influencer in UK, he speaks around the world at SEO and Social Media conferences.

Interview 6



yext

| **Duane Forrester**

Duane has over 20 years of direct search and digital marketing experience and has authored two books about digital marketing and conversion rate optimization. His marketing and management experience spans a number of high profile companies that range from Caesar's Palace to Microsoft with his most recent venture being VP of Industry Insights at Yext. He has also written for numerous publications from Forbes to Search Engine Land and has also been featured in the New York Times.

Interviews were conducted in the summer of 2016

The Interviews & Bios

04



Interview 7



Eric Enge

2016 Search Marketer of the Year (Male) at the Landys and 2016 Search Personality of the Year at the US Search Awards. Stone Temple Consulting was also named Best Large SEO Agency of the Year at the US Search Awards. Eric has been speaking about digital marketing for more than a decade. He keynotes many conferences every year, including this year's Pubcon, Las Vegas in a joint keynote with Gary Illyes, co-author of The Art of SEO. Eric also writes columns for sites such as Search Engine Land, and Moz and is founder and CEO of Stone Temple Consulting (STC), a 70+ person digital marketing agency based in Massachusetts, offering content marketing, SEO, and social media services. STC's clients include some of the world's largest e-tail sites and brands.

Ian Lurie |  **PORTENT**

CEO and Founder of Portent, a full-service digital agency he started in 1995. Ian's professional specialties and favorite topics are marketing strategy, history, search and all things nerdy. His random educational background includes a B.A. in History from UC San Diego and a degree in Law from UCLA. Along the way, he's been a very amateur competitive cyclist, a bike messenger, a roof consultant, a technical writer and an Adobe FrameMaker consultant. You may find him teaching his kids to play Dungeons and Dragons on the weekends, or dragging his tongue on the ground as he pedals his way up Seattle's ridiculously steep hills.

Interview 8



Interview 9

Orainti | **Aleyda Solis**

International SEO & ASO Consultant - service that she provides with her boutique consultancy, Orainti-, a blogger (Search Engine Land, State of Digital and Moz), speaker (with more than 70 conferences in 17 countries in English and Spanish) & author (of "SEO, Las Claves Esenciales"). Included in Forbes as one of the 10 Digital Marketing specialists to follow in 2015 and in Entrepreneur as one of the 50 Online Marketing Influencers to follow in 2016, she has more than 8 years of experience doing Search Engine Optimization for European, American and Latin-American companies.

Interviews were conducted in the summer of 2016

The Interviews & Bios

04



Interview 10



Ammon Johns

A veteran Internet Marketing Consultant based in the UK and working with clients around the world since 1996. He is generally best known for his work in search engine marketing and SEO, he has often stated that search marketing is only 10% of what he can bring to clients, even if it happens to be 80% of what he is originally contracted for. Hailed as one of the pioneers of SEO, as well as a pioneer in holistic marketing. Highly regarded by many other leaders in the industry, (such as Rand Fishkin, Bill Slawski, and Will Critchlow), citing him as an important mentor to their own careers.

Barry Adams | **POLEMIC**
DIGITAL

The founder of specialist SEO consultancy Polemic Digital, co-chief editor at State of Digital, and a regular speaker at international conferences such as Pubcon, BrightonSEO, Learn Inbound, and Friends of Search. Barry has been doing SEO in one form or another since 1998 and has lost quite a bit of his sanity along the way.

Interview 11



iPULLRANK

Mike King



Interview 12

An artist and a technologist, all rolled into one, Michael King is the Founder and Managing Director of iPullRank, an agency specializing in performance marketing. Mike consults with companies all over the world, including brands ranging from SAP, American Express, HSBC, SanDisk, General Mills, and FTD, to a laundry list of promising start-ups and small businesses.

Interviews were conducted in the summer of 2016



Interview 13



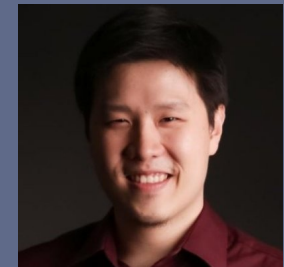
Nichola Stott

Twenty years' experience in digital communications, from advertising to PR to a five year stint at Yahoo! as head of UK search partners, prior to founding theMediaFlow in 2010. theMediaFlow focuses on SEO and CRO across a range of sectors, with specialities in technical SEO, e-commerce, international SEO and UX design for CRO. theMediaFlow's clients range from independent holiday companies to FTSE 100 listed giants.

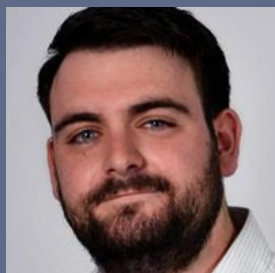
Sean Si | **SEO-HACKER**

BE VISIBLE. GET SEARCHED. |

Interview 14



The CEO and Founder of SEO Hacker and Qeryz, Sean is a start-up, data analysis and urgency junkie who spends his time inspiring young entrepreneurs with his talks and seminars. Check out his personal blog where he writes about starting up two companies and also about life in general.



Interview 15

BRANDED3 | Stephen Kenwright

Director of search at St. Ives Group-owned Branded3 – the best large SEO agency in Europe, according to the 2016 judges of the EU Search Awards – Stephen is responsible for owned media, including search, content and analytics. Writing weekly for the Drum Magazine, he has presented at more than 100 industry events since joining B3 in 2012 and now organises the Search Leeds conference, which hosts hundreds of marketers from around Europe every year.

Interviews were conducted in the summer of 2016

The Future of Search

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2015 was the year the [volume of mobile searches overtook desktop searches](#) in the major search engines and the year Google let slip that they had this thing called [RankBrain](#) and that machines were now running Web Search!

In October 2015, Google announced its [AMP \(Accelerated Mobile Pages\) project](#) and [AMP results started appearing in the SERPs](#) by February 2016. In October 2016, [Google announced](#) it was going to take a mobile-first approach to indexing and ranking. In just over a year, a lot has changed in Search. Who knows what might change over the next 3 years!

With the hype around Amazon Echo, Google Home, Cortana, Siri, the Internet of Things (IoT), autonomous drones and vehicles, AI-powered robots and so on; there's no doubt that Artificial Intelligence (AI) in its many guises hit the mainstream in 2016. It's likely that Christmas 2016 will be remembered as the year that everyone had an AI-powered personal digital assistant on their wish list.

And in 2017, SEOs and digital marketers worldwide are seriously beginning to wonder about the impact of voice search and AI on the SERPs and the risks and opportunities it presents for them and their clients. These are just some of the topics that our survey respondents raised:

- ▶ Will voice search have overtaken mobile (text-based) searches by 2020 (if not before)? In May 2016, [Google's CEO Sundar Pichai](#) announced that 20% of mobile queries are voice searches. So maybe they will?

“Microsoft Cortana is showing that it is entirely possible to compete with Google in a way that is feature-wise. Cortana is as good as Google Now, it just doesn't have a platform like Android, yet”

—Bas van den Beld, State of Digital



- ▶ Will automated AI search have overtaken searches by real-users?
- ▶ And if an AI assistant/device searches for you will that count as a voice search or a text search?

The Future of Search

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In understanding the future of search beyond our immediate horizon, you have to consider how user search habits are likely to change between now and 2020; how the SERP as we know it might evolve and whether there might be any alternative new entrants into the search market to give Google a run for its money?

We'll know in a few years' time how insightful our participants' views were and it was certainly great fun ruminating about how quickly things might change and how radically. If you would like to comment on any of these emerging thoughts or contribute your own, then feel free to join the discussion on LinkedIn.

Where and how will users be searching in 2020?

Who said SEOs were all technical, data geeks? This is where our contributors were at their sparking creative best, speculating on what the future might look like – a future built rapidly by the convergence of these emerging trends:

- ▶ Continued growth in cross-device eCommerce transactions.
- ▶ Rapid advances in supply chain management from predictive analytics and AI which will enable retailers to ship the product to the consumer as quickly as possible (even if it's unlikely we'll see [*Amazon's flying warehouse*](#) by 2020)!

- ▶ Growth in voice search fuelled by consumer adoption of AI, personal assistants, not just on our phones, but in the home and in our cars too.
- ▶ Adoption of voice search interaction into business applications – Yes, forget [*Google Webmaster Central Office Hours*](#), you will soon be able to converse with Google Analytics, Google Search Console or your favourite SEO & Content Marketing software to get the answers you need as the major AI providers offer SDKs to make it easy to add 'skills' or integrate with your favourite applications.
- ▶ Secure wallets – Apple Pay, Google Wallet, Bitcoin and the blockchain.
- ▶ Contextual Search – search engines are getting better at localising and personalising their results, based on your search history and behaviour, where you are and how you are querying.
- ▶ Predictive Search – services like Google Now and Microsoft's Cortana will continue to use the data they have about you to present answers before you search for them.
- ▶ AI & Conversational Search – as Search Engines improve in this area they will get better at understanding the user's mission and the likely journey they will take providing more relevant refinement and filtering options to help the user achieve their goals more quickly.

The Future of Search

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- ▶ IoT (automated queries) – all our connected devices will routinely be making automated queries (if not always to search engines) to help us run our daily lives.
- ▶ AI – Intelligent agents – the next generation of AI will go beyond a single query. It will be able to tackle more complex projects, aggregating and synthesising the results, e.g. Why spend hours trawling the web for viable holiday destinations when your AI agent can do it for you?
- ▶ Privacy issues – with consumers having greater control over how, where and to whom they share their data and the benefits/risks of sharing.
- ▶ Consumer trust issues and the importance of reviews in your marketing strategy – look beyond Google's trusted stores to [Google's Guaranteed Home Services](#) – how far might they go with this?
- ▶ The developments at the Search Engines and their investments in 'Deep Learning' all point to an even greater pace of advancement in the battle for commercial dominance. Their unabated burning ambition to create faster, more personalised, engaging and relevant consumer experiences will result in rapid innovation and A/B testing of different experiences.

It's the pace of advancement in all of these areas and the simultaneous convergence of these areas that makes step changes in what we know as Search today seem eminently possible.

Put it all together and what could the future look like?

- ▶ It won't be just users that are searching – a huge volume of searches will be automated and AI-driven from our cars, our personal AI devices, intelligent agents and IoT devices.
- ▶ A whole new world of consumer engagement and satisfaction with Search; as AI delivers better results, a trusted range of options makes sense and a single best answer might be all that is needed.
- ▶ The emergence of conversational search experiences and services, e.g. Imagine an AI agent that automatically turns on whilst you are discussing say holiday plans or home improvement plans with your partner, listens to your discussion, analyses your historic holiday data (budget and spending patterns, destinations, mode of travel, time of year, school term dates, Facebook posts and photos and so forth) automatically researches and finds suitable itineraries and options and presents them to you.

The Future of Search

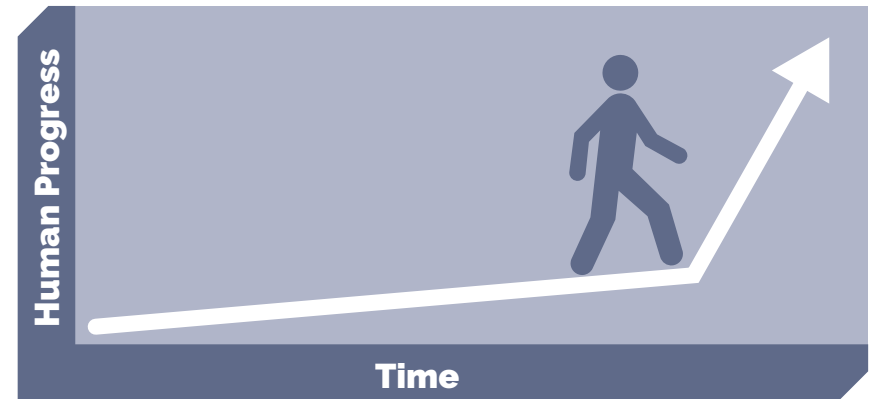
05

- ▶ Automated Voice eCommerce - the collision of voice search, mobile wallets and e-commerce will make booking commodity, low-value products and services, or paying bills (e.g. cinema tickets, booking restaurants or the Congestion Charge) easier, with a simple voice request and a confirmation. If the web giants get together to agree standards, we could all be implementing Structured Data to configure and enable our e-commerce sites and apps for voice commerce in 2020 or before.
- ▶ AI Agents will be semi-automating decisions for us and whilst they may not be yet automatically making purchase or booking decisions for luxury items or complex services they will play a key role in evaluating options and narrowing the field to a choice of suitable alternatives.

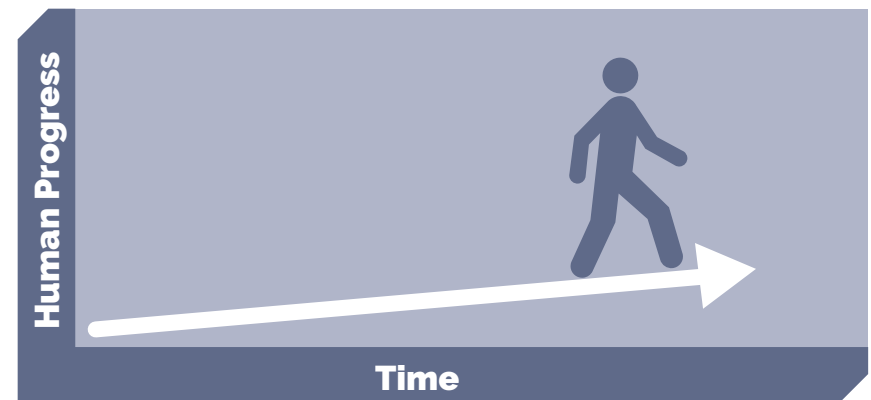
If all this sounds a little far-fetched then consider the following excerpt and illustrations from this super article, "The AI Revolution: The Road to Superintelligence" by [Tim Urban on Waitbutwhy.com](http://TimUrbanonWaitbutwhy.com):

"Human progress is about to take a huge leap forward in a very short timeframe."

What does it feel like to stand here?



It seems like a pretty intense place to be standing - but then you have to remember something about what it's like to stand on a time graph: you can't see what's to your right. So here's how it actually feels to stand there:



"Which probably feels pretty normal!"

(Read the whole article).

The Future of Search

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What will the SERP look like? (Will there even be a SERP?)

You'll be pleased to read that the consensus was that the SERP was here to stay but its make-up would continue to evolve rapidly with new features, better data and a customised search experience for crossdevice continuity.



“If Google gets the chance to integrate a value adding experience into the SERPs, they will certainly seize the opportunity”

– Barry Adams, Polemic Digital

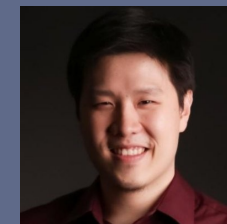
The recent direction from Google will continue, with its continued emphasis on mobile-first ([Mobile-first Index and Ranking](#)), fast loading ([AMP](#)), trusted and authoritative sites ([Google Quality Guidelines](#)) that give users a quality experience ([Mobile testing tool](#)) and the answers they need ([Featured snippet](#)).

The recent changes by Google have made the desktop SERPs more like the mobile SERPs, e.g. [Moving ads from the right-rail](#), mobile-first indexing and the rise in volume of Featured Snippets mean that the prize for ranking #1 is greater and this is coupled by a greater loss if

you rank #2 (which might well be below-the-fold on most mobile devices).

“Try to be on top of your game because, more than ever, search is a zero-sum game”

– Sean Si, SEO Hacker



We've also seen Google (and others) continue to roll-out interesting interactive SERPs features like Carousels and People Also Ask and this level of innovation is likely to continue.

The desire to provide the single best answer is strong and makes sense for Voice search especially for factual queries which can be answered by a Knowledgebase of connected entities and it makes sense that the proliferation of these kind of results will grow. However, people do like to have some element of choice or at least an understanding of why something is being recommended. Think about the decisions you make in your personal and business life; how often do you pick the very first option without considering at least one (or two) alternatives? For this reason, it's likely that formats and features like Carousels and AMP will be used to allow users to quickly be offered and cycle through alternative recommended sites.

The Future of Search

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There is an (ir)rational fear expressed by many commentators that Google is trying to keep users and their purchasing power within its own ecosystem. Think about the services that it has vertically integrated into Search; hotels, insurance, flights, local, lyrics, knowledge graph, travel, direct answers, reviews, trusted and now guaranteed home services, video and AMP. Google has certainly come a long way from 10 blue links!

The move to real-time SERPs is an interesting trend that we'll see even more of as more services and data providers are integrated into Search. Just look at the real-time nature of these developments and you can see that Google wants to discover (or get fed) the latest information as it's happening, and to index, authenticate and rank that content for presentation to users as fast as possible.

- ▶ Google and Twitter struck a new deal to show Tweets in the SERPs
- ▶ Real-time indexing API (AMP, structured data, schema.org and ATOM XML feeds)
- ▶ Speed – After Google's strong pitch to get sites to go HTTPs their next major push will be for sites to implement AMP, HTTP2 and their real-time indexing API to make the web (and their indexing) as fast as possible.

- ▶ Live search coverage carousel – lets publishers feed Google content in real time that is related to live sports, elections and breaking news.
- ▶ Google now not only tells you a store's opening hours, but how long people stay, how busy it is typically at this time and as of November 2016 a real-time view of how busy it is right now.

Is it a big leap to see the results showing you a crowd-sourced carousel of real-time videos of breaking news, the vibe at a venue... or the size of the queue...? Or even an algorithmic prediction of when it's best to start queueing for Wimbledon given the weather conditions and the progress of British players in that year's tournament?

Certainly, with its purchase of Motorola and the launch of Google Pixel – Google will have access to millions of users all over the world, all with cameras and the ability to live broadcast in real-time! Plus, it has the video capabilities of YouTube to live stream and vet content in near real-time.

The Future of Search

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Will there be any alternatives to Google in most markets?

Can we see a future where Google does not dominate Search globally?

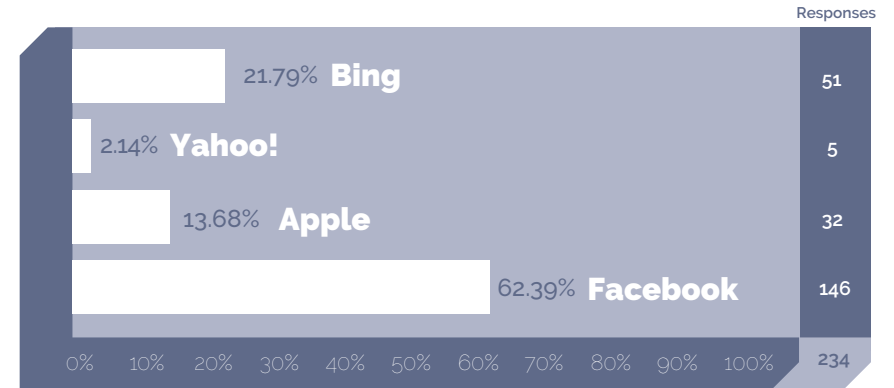
In a word, "No".

The overwhelming consensus was that if a competitor to Google was to emerge and rapidly grow and sustain market share then it was unlikely to be one of the current search engines such as Bing, Yahoo, Baidu, Yandex, DuckDuckgo, etc.

Participants felt that a threat to Google was more likely to come from Facebook, Apple or a new AI startup that turned things on its head (something which people could imagine but struggled to foresee with any specific detail).

Our survey respondents suggested Facebook as most likely to disrupt and then Bing.

Which search engine might be Google's biggest competitor in the year 2020?



The biggest threat is poised to come not from traditional search engines or other major players like Apple or Facebook launching their own search engines, but from the fragmentation of search across devices (desktop browsers, mobile browser, mobile apps, AI assistants, IoT devices and so on). For example, take Apps on phones. Search market share in a key commercial vertical could shift to cool new apps with a single well-defined purpose and goal, e.g. Amazon Echo or Ticketmaster.

The Future of Search

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“IoT is not going to decrease the number of searches performed, what is going to change is what we consider Search to be.”

— Ian Lurie, Portent



You only have to look at the giant Consumer Electronics Show in January 2017 to see the pace of innovation. There are so many new devices and services integrating with AI ([CES January 2017](#)) and it's not just Amazon's Alexa, Google Now, Apple's Siri or Microsoft's Cortana; its also consumer goods manufacturers and consumer brands like [Samsung with their Viv AI platform](#).

Most manufacturers are partnering with one of the major AI providers but some products are integrating with multiple AIs; so in 2020 you may not have one digital assistant but a whole team of assistants to perform different things for you. It's when they start talking to each other that things will get even more interesting!

Google is already heavily invested in [Deep Learning](#), so it is likely to be one of the main innovators in this area and may even consolidate its market position. The consensus was in 2020 we'll still spend 90% of our time talking about and working out how to optimise for Google!

“In the future of voice, AI and personal assistants, the structure and mark-up of content is going to be even more important.”

— Andrew Steel, Equator



Future Algorithm Changes

06



As always the conversation around future algorithm changes was a passionate one and of course not everyone can agree on the make-up of the current algorithm.

Industry veterans like Rand Fishkin and Ammon Johns were both quick to point out that despite all the SERPs changes and algorithm updates over the years, good SEOs still follow many of the same fundamental principles that they have done for the past two decades and this is unlikely to change.

“Recently, I referenced a link building discussion from 2003, and every single part of it is still applicable today”

– Ammon Johns, AmmonJohns.com



Others such as Mike King were quick to remind us that we should just be publishing great content that our users are likely to value and share.

“Focus on creating content that people actually want, rather than just thinking about link building”

– Mike King, iPullRank



Whilst others reminded us that whilst the essential SEO principles were still very familiar, there are so many more considerations today than there were even a few years' ago and that the weighting attached to different ranking factors had shifted. They also felt that both the number and variety of relevant ranking factors and their respective weightings was likely to change over the next 3 years. The main areas of the algorithm discussed were user signals, spam, AI, links, social and content evaluation.

Future Algorithm Changes

06

User Signals

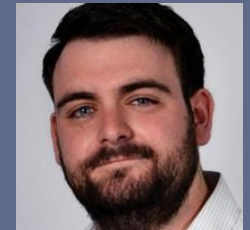
Stephen Kenwright talked at length about why user signals have become an increasingly important part of the algorithmic mix; citing click-thru rates and time on site before bouncing back to the SERPs as important factors for marketers to measure and improve.

There are two main reasons for this;

- ▶ Google has access to so much user behaviour data that we don't have access to, it seems it's almost inconceivable that Google is not feeding user data from Google Analytics and Chrome/Android (or its planned *combined Andromeda operating system*) and consumer clickstream data into its decision making; and
- ▶ This user data is much harder to manipulate by bad actors (though of course people will always try) making it a much more reliable indicator than relying on links.

“Google has lost the war on web spam and we’re heading for a new age of user signals”.

– Stephen Kenwright, Branded3



These were just some of the user signals that people mentioned as being 'interesting' factors and possible contenders for ranking signals. Overall, everyone was of the view that these kind of user 'satisfaction' factors (and others yet to surface) will increase in influence by 2020, but not the kind of social user signals that are too easy to manipulate using bots.

- ▶ Brand and non-brand signals – e.g. Consumer demand for branded terms and branded + generic terms together.
- ▶ Whether there was a purchase or not.
- ▶ Customer reviews
- ▶ Cross-device usage for signed-in users
- ▶ Depth of site visit

Future Algorithm Changes

06

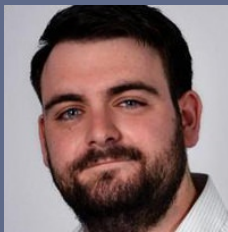
- ▼
- ▶ Repeat visits – type of queries used, e.g. Generic then branded.
- ▶ Dwell time on site.
- ▶ Bounce back to the SERPs and selection of alternative results
- ▶ Click-thru rates – in instances where the algorithm finds several viable top ranking results, Google will continue to automatically test viable alternative ranking results and allow users signals to have the final say in picking a winner.
- ▶ Genuine conversations about your brand.

Manipulative Practices and Spam

There was close to a consensus that Google has done a pretty solid job on reducing the impact of spammy manipulative link practices and negative SEO. But this would continue to be a battle for all search engines in the years ahead.

“People only really stopped link and content spam, not when they started getting penalised for it, but when it stopped working”

– Stephen Kenwright, Branded3



AI

There was also little doubt in everyone's mind that machine intelligence would continue to become a bigger and bigger piece of every search engine's arsenal but modern ethical SEO techniques would not necessarily have to change to ensure continued success.

“Google wants to better understand intent, so the publisher doesn't have to do that”

– Eric Enge, Stone Temple Consulting



Future Algorithm Changes

06

Social Signals

The impact of social signals was debated at some length – again there was a strong view that tweets, shares and so forth are so easy to game that they are largely irrelevant as a ranking signal but could be used to help search engines discover new content. This is also an area where AI advances will help search engines better understand the contextual sentiment of a comment or a review in order to distinguish between promotional comments and genuine conversations which are more useful and organic in nature and less likely to be bots.

“Social provides a lot of opportunity – people are using these platforms to not only share their content but to search for information as well”

– Aleyda Solis, Orai



Links

The verdict here is that links have always played a part in SEO since PageRank and will always play a part in SEO (even if it's only to get relevant sites to link to you to bring you relevant users rather than for the ranking power).

“The concept of links will not change. It's been like that for 30 years and will continue to be like that”

– Lukasz Zelezny, uSwitch



As manipulative link building has proved to be a successful approach in the past, SEOs will still push the envelope and paid links will still be a viable approach for many. But since it is so easy to game, it was not surprising that the importance of links have reduced in significance over time, as Google and other engines have got better at properly evaluating and understanding website content.

“I would love to say that links won’t matter in four years’ time, because they’re gameable, but I just don’t think an alternative will be found very quickly”

– Greg Gifford, DealerOn



In September 2016 Google announced that Penguin 4.0 would now run in real-time within the core search algorithm and would be more granular than before, targeting pages or sections of sites affected by spammy signals not just the whole site. As a result, the positive or negative (as the case may be) impacts of spammy links affecting the quality of users’ search results has diminished. So arguably due to real-time spam filtering, links have become a more useful signal again.

For this reason, many felt that by 2020 there would be a renaissance in the importance of links in the algorithmic mix.

Content Evaluation

Perhaps the biggest advancement by search engines in recent years is their ability to better understand the nature of the content a site is publishing.

Google can now crawl JavaScript and can render pages to ‘visualise’ how a user would see this content on a device and make a decision about the quality of user experience this page will offer. It can understand page speed and whether its design gives a mobile-friendly user experience. It can understand page structure with or without structured mark-up, determine where content is on the page, where it fits into the site structure, assess sentiment, discover entities and relate them, determine the most important content, validate whether it is plagiarised (internally or externally) or not and algorithmically assess a page’s expertise, authority and trust levels.

Future Algorithm Changes

06



There is no doubt that AI-fuelled advances in this area will continue at a hot pace until 2020 and beyond and that Google will get better and better at understanding the content served on a page and its linking pages (definitely including images, and videos) before determining its relevance and authority to a user in a given context.

So there you have it. In 3 years' time we'll mostly be talking about the same types of factors and signals; but user signals and content evaluation will be high on our agendas.

In the meantime, let's focus on "great content marketing".

"A valid strategy for the next four years is to align the content that you create with your audience and their needs from the start"

— Andrew Steel, Equator



Future Optimisation Techniques

07

▼
So the question on everyone's lips was will the SEO techniques that we're successfully using in 2017 work well in 2020?

Hopefully, the previous colourful commentary and this crowdsourced checklist from our experts will stand you in good stead. One thing is crystal clear: SEOs will continue to wear multiple hats even in multidisciplinary teams.

“The fundamentals of SEO remain the same. Make sure your site is structurally robust and well architected so your pages can be crawled easily”

– Nichola Stott, The Media Flow



Be an SEO

Get the SEO essentials right - SEO Fundamentals haven't changed that much. Continue what you are doing today (as long as it's not spammy link building!)

Be a student

Study the ever changing SERP and the opportunities and risks it represents. Optimise for Rich Snippets, Direct Answers and Video and concentrate on answering users' questions and journeys with authoritative, well-structured answers in a variety of formats.

Be a UI/UX designer

Build an amazing user experience!

Be a market researcher

“Track user signals tomorrow like you do revenue today”. Use third-party tools to benchmark and evaluate your sites' Expertise, Authority and Trust (EAT) against the competition.

Be a content writer

Create great content – that's what marketing is all about.

Future Optimisation Techniques

07

Be structured

Remember that content structure is important, but it's no longer about the number of H1s on a page, word count, keyword use in a page's title, the page's first 100 words and so forth. Implement (where relevant) structured data such as Schema.org, Facebook Open Graph and Twitter Cards. Build a checklist to ensure your pages comply with the standards you set!

Be a strategist

Build clusters of related topics - don't just think about one page! Think about creating a cluster of semantically related pages and keywords that will help users on their journey to their goals. Creating more than a page as a valuable resource is likely to help you build relevant links that pull in real visitors as well as providing benefits with ranking performance. Understand consumer behaviour and their relevant journeys better than ever. Build your content in a way that not only gives them the best initial answer but a series of best answers that helps them complete their goal.

Be a PR/Link builder

Cultivate relationships to build links - it's still important so nurture those relationships with the key players and influencers that are relevant in your niche.

Be a techy

We don't all need to be SEO engineers but we do need to understand what needs to be implemented to ensure the developers building our websites are up-to-speed with mobile friendly design, how to make the site as fast as humanly possible, AMP, HTTP2, real-time indexing and whatever comes next!

Be a marketer

Continue to work on an integrated multi-channel approach - optimise all you can, not just the organic SERPs, but also paid and social. Promoting organic content can drive social signals and engagement which, in turn, can lead to improved algorithmic signals and better rankings. In 2020, we'll be optimising for AI devices, apps, Facebook Instant Articles, LinkedIn, as well as CRO (Conversion Rate Optimisation).

Future Optimisation Techniques

07

Be a Data Scientist

Tools will continue to be your friend - What tools will we be using? Will we still be doing keyword rank checks? Probably because that's what clients understand, but we'll be using the data differently to help discover content marketing opportunities. Tools will evolve rapidly and soon the benefits of big data and data science/AI techniques will be helping you optimise how you go about optimising. If you are in a competitive market and relying on disconnected siloed point solutions in 2020 then you'll be one or two steps behind the competition.

Be an Systems Integrator

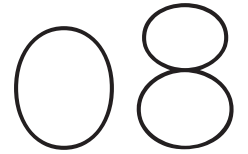
Ensure your website and apps are connected to the right AI eco systems in order to open up new channels to market.

Be an Customer

Put yourself in your customer's shoes - deliver the best possible service and nurture the largest mass of high quality reviews you deserve. By 2020, AI systems are going to be making decisions for us, or, at the very least, narrowing the choice of options for us. 'Trust' is going to be an important factor - whilst the machine will learn from user feedback, its designers (let's assume for now they are still human!) won't want to give you poor recommendations initially - you will therefore need to have a trusted, credible reputation and enough third party links and references in order to compete. Reviews and quality content/links will continue to be a winning strategy.

Clearly, there's a lot to think about in this list and the scale of what SEOs will have to consider in 2020 brings us on nicely to the debate around the future of our industry.

The Future of the SEO Industry

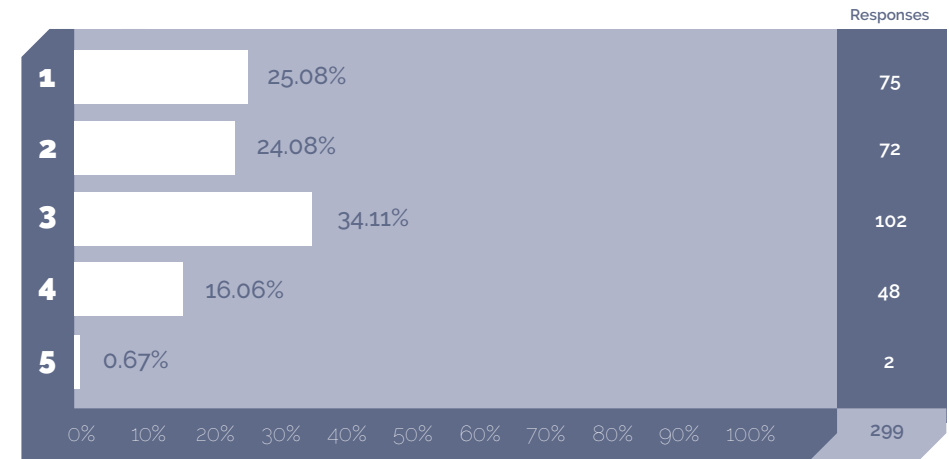


What will the world look like for industry practitioners like us in 2020 and for our clients?

What's in a name?

Whilst most people felt comfortable with retaining the 'SEO' label. Several mentioned that they believed an SEO would be optimising much more than the SERPs by 2020. With AI devices, Apps, Facebook Instant Articles, LinkedIn and CRO hot on the list of areas to work on, alternative labels such as 'Optimisation Consultants' or 'User Acquisition & Engagement Specialists' were suggested. Whether this will catch-on or not remains to be seen – so we'll stick with using the term SEO for now.

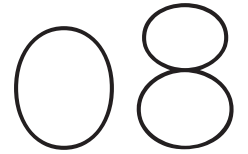
Will it still be called 'SEO' in the year 2020?



Answer choices

- 1 Yes - and the term "SEO" will have a more positive professional connotation.
- 2 Yes - and the term "SEO" will mean something similar to what it means today.
- 3 Yes - but the term "SEO" will mean something quite different compared with what it is generally perceived to mean today.
- 4 No - the role may still exist but it will generally be called something else.
- 5 No - the role will no longer exist in the year 2020.

The Future of the SEO Industry



Will SEOs be Specialists or generalists?

Many felt that given the breadth of ground and knowledge that SEOs will have to cover, most SEOs would be generalists and would be the digital leaders in their teams coordinating activity across a marketing team.

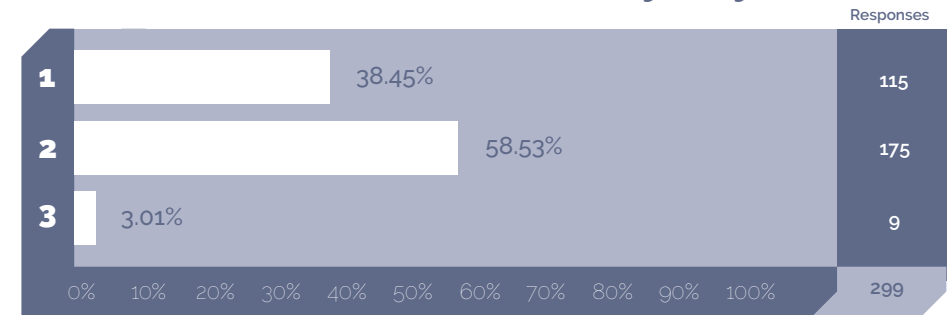
"I see a huge future for people in SEO, especially if you are a more general SEO with fingers in many pies. You have the ability to craft strategic digital plans for businesses"

- Duane Forrester, Yext



There is still going to be scope for people to specialise within bigger brands and these specialists will continue to be hired for their expertise on major projects such as site redesigns.

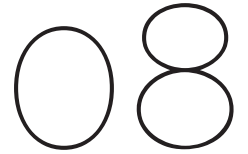
How will the 'SEO' role evolve by the year 2020?



Answer choices

- 1 The SEO role will become even more specialist by the year 2020.
- 2 The SEO role will become more generalist by the year 2020 and incorporate their digital marketing activities.
- 3 The level of specialism of the SEO role in the year 2020 will stay about the same as it is today.

The Future of the SEO Industry



Will Agencies or In-house team predominate?

Recently there's been a marginal move towards brands having in-house SEO teams and this is set to continue, but agencies will still play an important role in advising on strategy and execution, becoming even more data-driven, interpreting the insights from the data and technologies at their disposal across multiple clients in order to devise winning strategies.

The biggest question of all – what will clients need, want and expect in 2020?

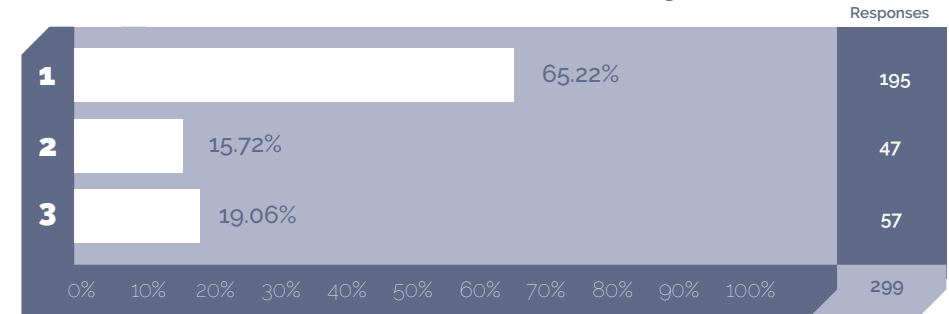
Some things will never change! Clients all want to be more successful and for 99.9% that means making more money from their websites and achieving a great return on their SEO and Content Marketing investments.

Will we even be here in 2020?

Not one SEO from the hundreds involved in this study suggested that SEOs will be replaced by AI in 2020.

Either we're not very self-aware or we figure that someone will still have to turn the machine on!

Will the average business (not agency) have more or less in-house SEOs in the year 2020?



Answer choices

- 1 There will be more in-house SEOs by the year 2020.
- 2 There will be less in-house SEOs by the year 2020.
- 3 There will be about the same number of in-house SEOs in the year 2020 as there is at the moment.

Closing Remarks

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It's been great fun exploring the minds of the great and the good of our industry. I hope you've enjoyed the themes and topics that have cropped up.

The beauty of this industry is the willingness of everyone to talk and share.

So whether you believe all, some or none of what you've read let's continue the discussion on either LinkedIn or Twitter.

One thing I'm sure we can all agree on it's an exciting time to be an SEO.

The future is nearer than we think!

I'd like to leave you with a quote from Ray Kurzweil; an author, inventor, computer scientist and futurologist who does this kind of thinking for a living.

Because of the 'Law of Accelerating Returns' the 21st century will achieve 1,000 times the progress of the 20th century.

Ray Kurzweil



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