Misusing Monopoly over Online Search - Google

What is the issue?

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US President Donald Trump recently accused Internet giant Google of abusing its monopoly over online search.

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What is the concern?

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- Google has become an inalienable part of almost everyone’s online life.
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- However, not a lot is known about how the search engine works and how it picks results.
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- Google does not disclose much about its search formula because of two reasons:
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1. its entire business is based on it
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2. a lot of people would try to game the system if they got to know how it was done
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How does Google possibly work?

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- The primary factor that determines the Google algorithm is the PageRank formula.
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- Under this, it gave value to how many sites are linked to a certain page.

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- There are many other factors that help a page to rank well.
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- These may include the URL structure, headlines, bounce rate of the page, and the time spent on the page.
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- There is a whole industry that is built around trying to understand this system.
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- It does this by incorporating pages with keywords and packing in other elements to help a page do better.
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- But this so-called search engine optimisation (or SEO) does not always help.
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- As, other factors like authority of the website and its tradition cannot be faked.
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- Over the years, Google has updated its algorithm at regular intervals to prevent people from taking advantage of it.
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- Each update brings some pages up and others down.
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What is Trump's allegation?

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- Trump alleged that Google was “suppressing positive stories” about his administration.
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- E.g. the negative stories are being done by authoritative websites like The New York Times or CNN.
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- The positive stories are limited to the relatively small rightwing sites.
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- Given the discussed algorithm, the negative stories are likely to show up on top more often.
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- Google has said its search is not affected by political ideology in any way.
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- However, it has been found that 0.25% of its daily traffic is linked to intentionally misleading, false or offensive information.
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- This is where it tweaked the algorithm, leading to complaints of a drop in traffic for many sites.
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What next?

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- Google moves towards a search format where users don’t really have to search to find a result.
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- It is using artificial intelligence and machine learning to pre-empt a query and surface a result.
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- This could mean results get prioritised and are hence not really neutral.
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Source: Indian Express

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