

This alternative search engine is basically Google without the privacy headaches

By Jared Newman 6 minute Read

Picture for a moment a version of Google Search that barely evolved from its early years. Instead of a results page cluttered by informational widgets, this one would primarily link out to other sites. And instead of tracking your search history for ad targeting purposes, this search engine would be decidedly impersonal.

It turns out that such a thing exists today in [Startpage](#), a Netherlands-based Google search alternative that emphasizes privacy. While it's not the only privacy-first search engine — [DuckDuckGo](#) is a better-known example — Startpage is the only one whose search results come from Google, due to a unique and longstanding agreement in which Startpage pays the search giant to get a feed of links for any search. The result is a search engine that feels a lot like Google did before it [leaned into personalized search and advertising](#) — and all of its requisite data collection — about 15 years ago.

“We don't collect, share, or save any personal information,” says Robert Beens, Startpage's CEO. “That means not setting cookies. It means not storing IP addresses. We don't store your searches, and we don't profile you.”

Although StartPage has been around as a privacy-focused search engine since 2006, it's made several major improvements lately as people become more wary of data collection by tech giants. Last year, the search engine launched a new design and an “Anonymous View” feature that hides your device's identity from the sites you click on. StartPage doesn't disclose user numbers but [said](#) in early 2018 that it was handling two billion searches annually, and says that it's seen 10% growth in search volume this year.

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Earlier this month, Startpage added another big feature: it's an answer to Google News in the form of a “News” tab, which provides a feed of stories based on your search results. Beens says the News tab is a response, of sorts, to the way personalized newsfeeds can predominantly surface ideas people agree with, thereby reinforcing their existing biases. Because Startpage isn't collecting any data on users, its story selection — which comes from Microsoft's Bing search engine instead of Google — is inherently more neutral.

“We feel it's a great extension for our privacy search engine, and if people want to look at news that's unbiased, and where they don't get profiled, they can come to our website,” he says.

Google without the Googliness

Startpage wasn't always focused on privacy. When it launched under the name Ixquick in 1998 —the same year as Google—its goal was to provide a “meta” search engine that would combine results from various other contemporary search tools, such as Altavista, Lycos, Infoseek, and Yahoo. It was an interesting idea at the time, but it became less necessary as search engines like Google started to feel all-encompassing.

Ixquick survived the rise of Google, and in 2005, Beens says he had a privacy epiphany after examining the legal risks of collecting users' search data. While it may seem obvious in hindsight, at the time, he hadn't realized the extent to which the company was storing information that could be traced back to individual users (such as IP addresses) along with their history of searches and link clicks.

“If you have a constant stream of searches, and you're able to connect that to one particular person . . . you get an insight into people's lives that is really shocking,” he says.

Shortly after this revelation, Ixquick began pivoting to privacy. It stopped storing users' search data in 2006, and it stopped logging IP addresses in 2009. It also made an unusual deal with Google, giving it access to Google search results under the condition that they not be combined with results from any other source, like the existing meta-search engine was doing. Startpage was initially a separate service, serving up Google search results without the privacy headaches, but in 2016, it subsumed Ixquick's old meta-search product entirely.

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“We did that because we feel everyone has the right to enjoy what we feel still are and have been the best search results in the world, and at the same time not be profiled and have no information being stored about that person,” Beens says.

Beens won't get into specifics on Startpage's deal with Google but says it came about partly because of “personal contacts” at the company, and partly because Google “appreciated the option for consumers” who wanted more privacy. In any case, this arrangement has since become unique among search engines. Although Google still offers [an API](#) that lets any developer access its search results, high costs and usage limits would make it impractical for an all-purpose search engine like Startpage.

Even so, Google hasn't bothered to cut off Startpage yet. Beens says the companies have renewed their agreement every two to three years since 2006, and he's not particularly worried that will change, especially as Google faces [more scrutiny from regulators in Europe](#), where Startpage is based.

“I can't say there's no risk, because you don't say that in life,” Beens says. “But as far as we know, they're happy with the partnership, and they feel that we really offer something special to our audience, to people who are looking for a privacy search engine.”

The ups and downs of a Google alternative

There is a catch to all of this: Although Startpage is technically getting its search results from

Google, those results aren't quite as good as the ones that appear on Google proper.

I've noticed, for instance, that Startpage doesn't always get equal results from social media sites such as LinkedIn and Twitter, and if I search for a name in quotes along with a search term, Startpage can have far fewer results than Google does. Startpage also struggles with site-specific searches, so if I enter "site:fastcompany.com" along with some keywords to find one of my previous stories, it's less likely to come up compared to the same search on Google.

Beens says he's asked Google about these kinds of discrepancies in the past but has never received a clear answer.

"We don't know what the strategy is on Google's side with the slight differences that you noticed," he says. "We do feel it's a great feed, and we feel it's better than any other feed."

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The other issue is the primitive nature of Startpage's results page, which largely sticks to the "10 blue links" approach that search engines have been moving away from for years. While Google's attempts to provide instant answers to certain queries can be heavy-handed—and, in some cases, [problematic for publishers](#)—Startpage swings too far in the other direction. It occasionally provides a little answer box next to its search results with an excerpt from Wikipedia, but that's about it.

This is the area that Startpage seems most interested in improving, which helps explain why the company recently took on a significant outside investment from a Los Angeles-based advertising company called System1. Some privacy advocates have [criticized the investment](#), noting that System1 is in the behavioral ad targeting business, and Startpage's refusal to disclose the size of System1's stake only added to the concern that the company might someday have to [abandon its privacy principals](#).

In response, Beens [says](#) that System1 is merely trying to enact its own kind of privacy pivot, forming a subsidiary called PrivacyOne after witnessing the change in people's attitudes about data collection. He also says Startpage has provisions in its agreement with System1 to ensure that the founders get to make all privacy-related decisions. The investment, he says, merely gives Startpage more resources to build features like the News tab. (The company is also working on a maps feature but hasn't yet said how it'll work or where the mapping data will come from.)

The resulting search engine may never be exactly like Google. But with a few more tabs and information panels for things like news, maps, and weather, maybe it'll get close enough.