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## INDIGENOUS REPRESENTATION IN COMMERCIAL SEARCH

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### Introduction

Search engines are powerful epistemic actors. A substantial body of critical literature has drawn attention to the tendency of search engines to reproduce historical bias through filtering, ranking and search assistance techniques (Baker & Potts, 2013; Introna & Nissenbaum, 2000; Noble, 2018; Urman & Makhortykh, 2022). The integration of new modes of information retrieval and curation supported by large language models into search engine systems poses novel and enhanced threats to information diversity and the visibility of historically marginalised perspectives and knowledge (Gillespie, 2024; Shah & Bender, 2022).

This study examines how Google presents and prioritises information related to Aboriginal identities and histories in two answer formats – AI overviews and featured snippets. Historically, information institutions in Australia have played a central role in propagating colonial myths and tropes about Aboriginal peoples, while marginalising Aboriginal voices, knowledge and realities. A rich body of scholarship discusses how representations of the Indigenous ‘Other’ pervade media discourse (Thomas et al., 2019), national archival and memory institutions (Barrowcliffe, 2021) and film and television (Fredericks et al., 2022). The need for redress through more and different modes of self-representation and truth-telling is widely recognised, including in the *UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (UNDRIP, 2007, art. 15).

Recently, scholars have contextualised the ways in which Indigenous social media users in Australia harness platform affordances to express identities (Carlson, 2013; Carlson & Frazer, 2021), challenge institutional silences, disrupt racist tropes, and amplify social issues (Fredericks et al., 2022). However, inquiries into how search engines sustain or subvert colonial discourses in Australia have thus far been limited. Due to their epistemic power, the extent to which search engines promote harmful representations, and marginalise or centre Indigenous self-representation and knowledge, warrants attention. The growing shift in emphasis – from ranked blue links to direct, ‘authoritative’ answers on search engine result pages (SERPs) – make inquiries more pressing. What does the trend started by formats like featured snippets (Newton, 2024) and accelerated by the appearance of AI-generated answers imply for Indigenous representation and truth-telling online?

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The aim of this study is to provide a basis for reflection on that question. Through thematic and close textual analysis of question-direct answer pairs generated by Google, this study contributes to understandings of: What representations and perspectives do Google prioritise in direct answers? Who is presented as an authoritative knower? What does this imply for struggles to self-represent, reread and reframe?

## Method

The study focuses on two direct answer formats – AI overviews and featured snippets. The first stage involved collecting a corpus of question-answer pairs shown in Google's People Also Ask feature. Using People Also Ask as a source for question-answer pairs held several benefits. First, the feature contains questions that are promoted by Google as popular and relevant. As such, the feature is prone to reflect the assumptions and preoccupations of dominant discourses – where self-representation, rereading and reframing is critical. Second, it presents users with an answer to each question in the form of either AI overviews or featured snippets. Third, recent studies show that variations in how a query is formulated impacts results (Alaofi et al., 2022; Krafft et al., 2019). As People Also Ask promotes questions formulated by users in different ways, drawing a corpus from the feature helps to account for query diversity. I generated 1,260 question-answer pairs<sup>1</sup> by conducting keyword searches for common identity terms.<sup>2</sup> To account for contextualisation (ie. temporal and location-based variations), I repeated keyword searches on separate days, at various times of day.

The second stage of the study involved a thematic analysis of the pairs in order to identify recurring questions and salient themes for closer analysis. The final stage involved a close textual analysis of direct answers for recurring questions. To gauge the types of sources Google presents as most authoritative, I grouped similar questions and examined the domains cited in the corresponding answers.

## Findings

Similar questions about identity, appropriate terminology and history repeatedly appeared in People Also Ask. Many of the questions invoked colonial frames and narratives. As critiques of similar features like autocomplete point out, the choice to incorporate these suggestions into user interaction flows has a naturalising effect; such design choices do not simply reflect and fulfil but *shape* actual user intent (Halavais, 2018; Noble, 2018).

How do Google's systems 'definitively' respond to these questions? Overall, I found that direct answers in both formats sever the links between knowers, knowledge and context in different ways, with implications for Indigenous self-representation, rereading and reframing.

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<sup>1</sup> Containing 150 AI overviews and 1,110 featured snippets.

<sup>2</sup> Namely, 'Aboriginal' and 'Aboriginal people', 'Indigenous', 'Indigenous people', and 'Indigenous Australian' and one demonym, 'Koori' (there are many other demonyms). This list does not reflect the diversity of nations, language and family groups but was selected with a view to attracting results potentially shown to large audiences.

The corpus hinted at the potential for direct answers to reframe and prompt critical reflection by showing answers in their political contexts. There were also reminders of the longstanding problem of Google's systems favouring content that aligns with user assumptions. For instance, colonial blood narratives surfaced in the premise of questions about identity. While featured snippets sometimes problematised these premises, a majority reinforced them – often by taking quotes out of their historical or textual context. AI overviews reinforced in more subtle ways – combining language that problematised notions of blood quantum (for eg. as 'based on outdated and racist assumptions') with contradictory sentiments (for eg. by framing notions as 'complex and often debated' or adopting the language of nineteenth century 'doomed race' theory).

Google's direct answers dislocate knowledge from knowers in ways that work against self-representation and make it more difficult for users to evaluate answers. For instance, in response to a recurring question about skin tone, Google featured a snippet from a journal article written by a eugenicist. The text later appeared in AI overviews, intertwined with fragments of writing extracted from essays by Aboriginal leaders and writers. The synthesis of fragments of writing and sources into AI overview obscured provenance, while distorting and dislocating Indigenous standpoints.

Questions about history in the corpus converged on two preoccupations: the migration of Aboriginal peoples and the myth of pre-existing peoples on the Continent. The latter is tied to political narratives which seek to frame colonisation as natural or precedented. Featured snippets and AI overview reliably rebutted the myth but were silent on the ideological motives behind it. Users who decided to click on supporting sources for featured snippets or AI overviews could become acquainted with the colonial origins and politics of the myth. Those who decided their information needs were met by the direct answer would not. AI overviews framed the debunked theory of multi-wave migration in neutral terms; disembodied and detached from any knower or other context.

By contrast, Indigenous knowledges of deep time history were presented as perspectives and postscripts. In this way, AI overviews replicated old knowledge hierarchies, in which Indigenous knowledge is sidelined, bolted on as alternative perspective, or selectively appropriated. The relatively infrequent citing of websites maintained by Indigenous organisations in both featured snippets and AI overviews further reinforced the framing of Indigenous peoples as 'known' rather than 'knowers' (Moreton-Robinson, 2014).

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