

POV: Real-Time Search

Raymond Rosti, Ron Sansone & Jamie Ross, January 2010

Defining Real-Time Search

Mass adoption of the micro-blogging service Twitter, coupled with the growth of Facebook, has drawn industry attention to *real-time search*: the ability to search content online that was created and published seconds (not minutes) ago. In the fourth quarter of 2009, Microsoft, Google and Yahoo all announced plans to launch real-time search through partnerships with Twitter and Facebook.

Over the course of the last year, the search marketing industry speculated feverishly on how real-time search would take form and change search behavior. While still the authority for site and content queries, search engines have fallen short when it comes to breaking news and topical trends. Though the changes are still in their infancy, we now have an initial answer to the question: How will search engines process real-time information?

Google, Yahoo and Bing are now delivering real-time results in a separate set of results pages, which are very similar to vertical searches for images, video and local. Search engines can now classify social chatter in a separate index, and the real-time results group can then be pulled into universal search results. This change allows search results to be fresh, comprehensive and relevant.

While Google, Yahoo and Bing are all using an API feed to incorporate Twitter results, each engine has its own approach to the organization and presentation of the real-time results. This document will discuss the unique methods by which each engine presents real-time search results, and explain how marketers can take advantage of this new search vertical.

The Bing Approach

When performing searches in Bing Twitter Search, the user is presented with segmented results, similar to how Bing provides natural search results. The top of the page lists the four most recent updates for a given subject. In the example below, you can see the four recent tweets about the movie “Avatar.”

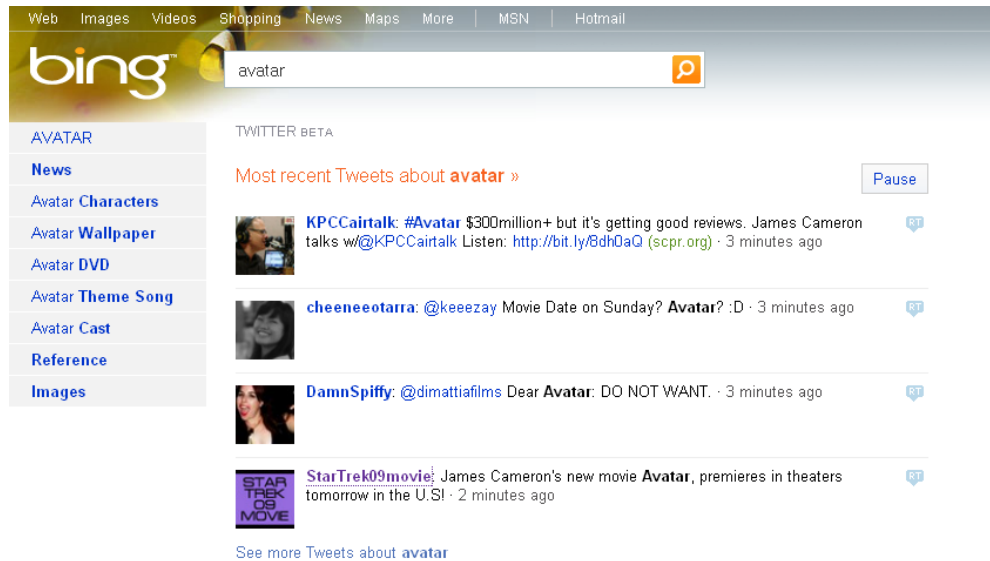


Figure 1: Bing Twitter Search presentation (<http://www.bing.com/twitter>)

In its sub-category results, Bing presents users with the “Top Links Shared.” This sub-category breaks down conversations based on a specific link. In many cases, multiple people link to the same news story, and Bing accounts for this behavior in its presentation layer. For example, *The Los Angeles Times* published an “Avatar” review, and multiple tweets referenced the article via a shortened bit.ly URL.



Figure 2: Bing Top Links Shared presentation for *Avatar*

Interestingly, the two tweets that appear within Top Links Shared on Bing Twitter Search are not the most recent, nor are they sequential. Bing appears to be using the user's Twitter follower count as a primary factor for determining the validity and authority of a tweet. In this case, the two tweets that appear on the first page are from users who have the most followers.


While Bing was the first to jump into real-time search, it treads lightly when moving real-time search or micro-blogging into the main search results. Currently, Bing only delivers tweets on Bing.com for celebrities that have Twitter feeds.

It's still unclear how Bing intends to grow real-time search over the next six months. Bing has an agreement with Facebook in place, but has not announced when it will begin integrating Facebook status updates into its search results. Bing has not announced plans to add additional information, such as blogs or news, into its real-time feed.

The Google Approach

Shortly following the launch of Bing's Twitter search, Google launched real-time search that aggressively feeds real-time content to the first page of the engine's search results. The example below shows how Google incorporates Latest Results for a search on Toys"R"Us.

[News results for toys r us](#)

 [Duo tries to loot truck stolen from Toys R Us](#) - 8 hours ago
 BY MARK KONKOL Gotta love the holiday spirit displayed by two guys who spotted and tried to loot a loaded **Toys R Us** semi-trailer that was ditched on the Far ...
[Chicago Sun-Times](#) - [3 related articles »](#)

[Latest results for toys r us](#) - [Pause](#)

Wow. Come to **Toys R Us** and the stuff I wanna get Amy is just, no.
[_kkatie](#) - [twitter.com](#) - 3 minutes ago

Ironing my husband's shirts. **Toys r us** later for a bday pres for a baby. Planning dinner. Did you know I'm unemployed? Kellykubik.com
[kakypants](#) - [twitter.com](#) - 4 minutes ago

[@Bran_Bran](#) my lil sis bday is today so imma prob bring her 2 **toys r us** and waste my money.


[Toys "R" Us](#) - [Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia](#)
Toys "R" Us is a toy store chain based in the United States. The chain also has locations in Europe, Asia, Oceania, Africa, and Canada. ...
[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Toys_%22R%22_Us](#) - [Cached](#) - [Similar](#) - 

Figure 3: Google Latest Results presentation within organic search

Titled Latest Results, Google's approach to real-time search is similar to how it presents other Universal Search results. At first glance, one might mistake Latest Results for News Results, but this feature distinguishes itself as the only animated listing – scrolling new updates as they are created. By clicking the Latest Results link, the user can drill down to view multiple updates for a specific topic.

Google is pulling in more than just Twitter results. Content appearing in Google Product Search and blogs is also appearing in the real-time feed. Google claims to be pulling data from sources including:

- Google News
- Google Blog Search
- Newly created web pages
- Freshly updated web pages
- FriendFeed updates
- Jaiku updates
- Identi.ca updates
- TwitArmy updates
- Craigslist

Like Bing, Google has an agreement in place to receive Facebook updates. Google, however, will only receive fan page updates, whereas Bing can index all status updates.

Google's leap into real-time search seems more in line with what the industry anticipated: a variety of social and news content with a real-time view of items as they are created and indexed.

HOW REAL IS GOOGLE'S REAL-TIME SEARCH?

Razorfish found the following article from the Courier Post Online in Latest Results and the main Google index at the same time:

[Black Friday | courierpostonline.com](#)

Dec 17, 2009 ... Some Black Friday shoppers found that they had been charged double for purchases when they went to **Toys "R" Us** early in the morning
[topics.gannett.com/black+friday/?template=courierpostonline](#) - 20 minutes ago

Real Time Search Result

[Black Friday | courierpostonline.com](#)

Dec 17, 2009 ... **Topic: Black Friday** ... December 06, 2009 | **CourierPostOnline** ...
 November 28, 2009 | **CourierPostOnline**. **Black Friday** may be over, but it
[topics.gannett.com/black+friday/?template=courierpostonline](#) - 35 minutes ago
 Cached -   

Natural Search Result

Figure 4: Comparison of Google's Real-Time Result & main indexed result for the same listing

The article appeared in natural results before it appeared in real-time results, calling into question the freshness of Google real-time search.

The difference is in the ranking. While this article appears to have been indexed more quickly by natural search, it likely hasn't gone through the rigors of the Google algorithm to determine its keyword rankings. The Latest Results bucket gives the article an opportunity to appear for a keyword more promptly, and gain readership it may not have been able to secure during algorithmic keyword evaluation.

Though Google's offering may seem more robust than its Bing counterpart, many in the industry are critical of the quality of Google's real-time results. Some feel that Google rushed its version of real-time search to market in response to Bing's early entrance. Google has stated that it is still working through some early issues.

Early results show holes in Google's real-time search that leave it susceptible to spam, and the filters in place to combat unrelated content leave something to be desired. However within a week of launch, Razorfish noted that spam-heavy keywords such as Viagra no longer triggered real-time results on Google.

Google claims that the following factors affect the likelihood of Twitter posts appearing in real-time search: the number of followers, age of a Twitter account, posting frequency and focus of the tweet. These criteria align with Google's approach to organic ranking. Age of domain plays a large factor in how Google determines a site's authority, and content focus determines what keywords a site should rank for in search results. With Twitter, this becomes difficult, because tweets often vary in subject. The frequency and subject focus would need to lie somewhere in a normal range in order to appear. Frequent tweets revolving around the same subject could cause a profile to be viewed as a content spammer.

Over the next six months, Google will need to validate its aggressive jump into real-time search with an improved offering.

The Yahoo Approach

Yahoo was the final entrant into real-time search, announcing their capabilities on December 10, 2009. Currently, Yahoo is only using Twitter results in its real-time search results. As with Bing and Google, Yahoo appears to be limiting its presentation of real-time search to prevalent query trends.

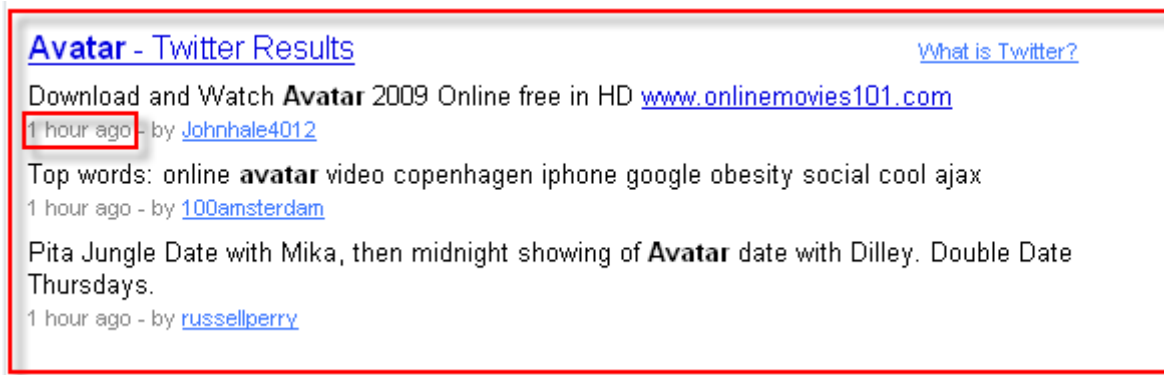


Figure 5: Yahoo Twitter Results presentation

As shown by the age of posts in its Twitter Results, the speed at which Yahoo delivers updates lags behind Google and Bing. For the keyword "Avatar," the most recent Twitter post is over an hour old, though performing the same search in Twitter shows up-to-the-minute posts.

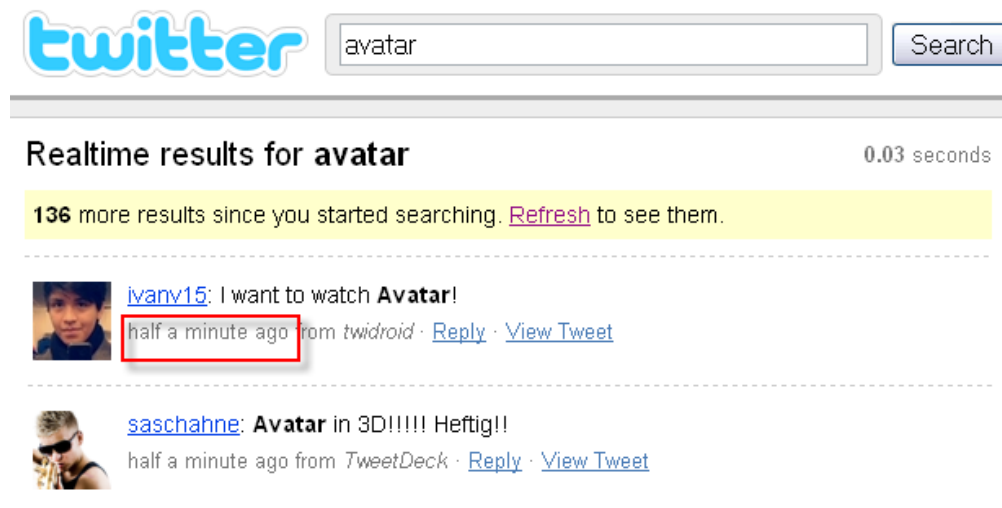


Figure 6: Twitter search results for Avatar

Though some in the industry have accused Yahoo of incompetence, Razorfish views this as simply a more cautious approach. Yahoo has been upfront in stating that this is only a beta test of the final offering. The lag time in delivery may be due to sensitivity to potential spammers as Yahoo works through what gets pushed live and what gets ignored.

The Pitfalls of Real-Time

Providing a useful way for users to receive real-time information alongside older search results will be a big win for the engine that can successfully execute the task. Though the current offerings from the three largest engines are still in development, it is apparent that there are considerable hurdles to presenting real-time content. Success may hinge on overcoming the following factors:

SPAM FILTERING

Any new incarnation of search attracts droves of black-hat marketers looking for a way to game the system. If a search engine fails to successfully identify and filter out spam, it runs the risk of irrelevant, potentially malicious results and negative press. Creating strong algorithmic factors that catch spam in real-time is mandatory.

RELEVANCY

Search engines must continue to deliver relevant results – a major challenge when instant gratification and timeliness enter the equation. Google and Bing seem to be employing search trend spikes to identify searches within the current zeitgeist. Whether or not they expand this to generic searches, such as *shoes* or *travel* remains to be seen.

In addition to relevant real-time keywords, the engines must also identify relevant content to deliver within real-time results. Irrelevant content dilutes the value of real-time information, no matter how timely it is.

INDEX EXPANSION

As of now, all three engines are receiving the Twitter feed and displaying it in some fashion. While Google has begun to push other items into their feed to make it more robust, Bing seems to have the upper hand in the social space with the agreement to receive full feeds of information from sites such as Facebook. Successful expansion will not only hinge on volume but also relevance.

Marketing Real-Time

For online marketers, real-time search represents a significant opportunity to increase search visibility. For highly competitive keywords, marketers may be able to gain exposure through real-time results that they couldn't secure through ranking. It is important for marketers to think about social strategies that enable brands to monitor and participate in these real-time conversations. As these brainstorming sessions begin, consider the following tactics:

MONITOR BRAND CONVERSATIONS

Real-time search emphasizes the importance of managing a brand reputation online. Bad brand experiences can spread rapidly through real-time search, and it's important to monitor brand conversations and prepare for timely responses if needed.

BUILD AN AUDIENCE OF EVANGELISTS

Brand evangelists boost brand reputations. With the onset of real-time search, these brand evangelists can help distribute positive, real-time information about a brand. Even with a social strategy in place, marketers should also develop an engagement strategy for fostering relationships with different audience segments and user types.

UNDERSTAND AND DEVELOP SOCIAL CONTENT

The real-time feed is constantly changing. In order to maintain visibility, create brand content that will generate viral conversations or brand content that is timely and useful for a brand's audience. By consistently and continually delivering content that is engaging and relevant, marketers can help engage brand evangelists, create additional awareness and increase the number of positive real-time posts about a brand.

MONITOR ANY REFINEMENTS TO REAL-TIME DISTRIBUTION

Currently Twitter and Facebook are the major sources of real-time information, but Google is pulling in other sources of content. As the landscape changes, marketers must keep abreast of new content pieces entering real-time search and adjust their distribution strategy accordingly.

Beyond Real-time Search

Real-time search represents a movement to greater consumer control of content online. The growth of social networking sites underscores the importance of social influence and access to information as it happens. This type of “snackable” content is attractive to users, and search engines by definition must aid users in their hunt for desired information. Nielsen recently reported that users spend four times longer on Facebook than on Google. Capturing real-time information snapshots may help search engines retain some of this on-page time.

As real-time information becomes more prominent in search results, the influence of aggregated individual voices will have more influence on searchers and marketers. People will be able to easily access common opinions and sentiments of the moment. One can imagine how empowering that might be for those researching topics that require subjective judgments or timely facts.

Following its introduction at the end of 2009, real-time search will likely be subjected to a great deal of experimentation and refinement in 2010. While the possibilities are endless for the direction real-time search can take, relevancy will be the determining factor for adoption. Successful marketing will hinge on the development of content strategies that engage audiences that evangelize brand messages. As search engines refine their real-time search presentations, marketers must adapt and develop social search strategies accordingly.

About the Authors

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Prior to joining Razorfish, Ray was an Internet Marketing Analyst with Drexel E-Learning, where he managed both paid and organic search programs. Before Drexel, Ray was an Internet Marketing Supervisor with Aon Affinity Insurance Programs managing web development, usability, SEO, web analytics and e-mail marketing for seven websites. Ray began his career in 1997 as an online marketer at VerticalNet Inc., where he later became a Product Marketing Manager for VerticalNet's job search engines. Ray holds a B.B.A. in Marketing and a B.B.A. in Strategic Management from Temple University.

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