Google

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The Honorable Roger Marshall, M.D.
479A Russelle Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20002

Dear Senator Marshall,

Thank you for your letter dated July 31, 2024 inquiring about the Search Autocomplete feature. We are committed to remaining a trustworthy and reliable source of information for users across the globe, and we welcome the opportunity to respond to your inquiry.

Please find below information about how ranking systems work in Search, the Autocomplete feature's intended purpose and related policies, and recent developments regarding Autocomplete on this topic. As described in additional detail below, it is important to note that Autocomplete is a tool to help our users complete a search quickly. Regardless of what predictions it shows at any given moment, users can always search for whatever they want and get easy access to results, images, and more.

Google Search Ranking

At Google, we know that our users have unique needs and interests, and our systems are designed to sort through vast amounts of online content to surface what is most useful and relevant. Depending on the tool, these systems take into account factors including words in a search query, the relevance of content, users' general location, and users' history within that product.

On Search, our ranking systems are designed to sort through hundreds of billions of webpages and other content in the Search index to present the most relevant and reliable results in a fraction of a second. To give users the most useful information, Search algorithms look at many factors and signals, including the words of a query, the relevance and usability of pages, the expertise of sources, and the user's location and settings. The weight applied to each factor varies depending on the nature of the query — with freshness of the content, for example, playing a bigger role in answering queries about current news topics than it does in answering requests for dictionary definitions. The key factors that help determine which results are returned for a query include: the meaning of, or intent behind, the query; the relevance of the content; informed by aggregated feedback; the usability of the content; and information about the query's context and user's settings. More information about how each of these factors work is available in [this post](). For details about how Google Search sorts through content and organizes information, please see [this explanation]().

We're constantly improving Search, and we put all possible changes to Search through a rigorous evaluation process to analyze metrics and decide whether to implement a proposed change.

Google Autocomplete Predictions

As noted above, the Autocomplete feature is designed simply to predict queries to save users time and help them complete their searches more quickly. Users can always enter whatever specific query they want and get easy access to results, images, and more.

Autocomplete predictions reflect real searches that have been done on Google. To determine what predictions to show, our systems look for common queries that match what someone starts to enter into the search box. In addition, they consider other factors such as the language of the query; the location a query is coming from; trending interest in a query; and an individual's past searches. These factors allow Autocomplete to show the most helpful predictions that are unique to a particular location or time. In addition to full search predictions, Autocomplete may also predict individual words and phrases that are based on both real searches as well as word patterns found across the web. More information about how Autocomplete predictions are generated is available here.

Autocomplete predictions are not perfect. For example, there is the potential for unexpected or shocking predictions to appear. To address issues such as these, Autocomplete has developed systems designed to prevent potentially unhelpful and policy-violating predictions from appearing. These systems try to identify predictions that are violent, sexually explicit, hateful, disparaging, or dangerous, or which can lead to such content. When these systems identify policy-violating shocking, unexpected, or unwanted content, our built-in protections prevent Autocomplete from showing related predictions. While Autocomplete may not speed up these particular searches, it does not in any way prevent users from typing out whatever search query they wish in its entirety, nor does it prevent Search from offering up-to-date information to those queries in support of public discourse.

Autocomplete also adheres to the following policies, which are outlined on our public help center:

- Elections-related predictions: We do not allow predictions that can be interpreted as:
  - A position for or against any political figure or party, or
  - A claim about the participation in or integrity of the electoral process.
- Health-related predictions: We do not allow predictions about potentially medically hazardous health claims.

- Sensitive and disparaging terms associated with named individuals: We do not allow predictions that associate potentially disparaging or sensitive terms with named individuals. This include predictions that:
  - May be related to harassment, bullying, threats, inappropriate sexualization, or
  - Expose private or sensitive information in a way that may cause harassment, identity theft or financial fraud.

- Serious malevolent acts: We do not allow predictions that can be interpreted as accusations against individuals or groups of serious malevolent acts, where there is a lack of well-established or expert supporting evidence.

We may make exceptions to these policies when the prediction has context related to artistic, educational, historical, documentary, or scientific content, or content that helps to further understanding and participation in current events and issues related to our society, politics, culture, and economy.

Recent Issues Regarding Autocomplete

As you note in your letter, Autocomplete was not initially providing predictions for queries about the assassination attempt against former President Donald Trump. This is because, as noted above and shared publicly, our systems are designed to prohibit Autocomplete predictions for hypothetical political violence against current figures (as opposed to against historical figures such as President Truman, whom you asked about). As discussed, these protections are not event-specific but rather applied to categories of possible searches. As a result, prior to July 13, 2024, it would have been inappropriate for our systems to offer any predictions involving possible assassination attempts on President Trump. In the immediate aftermath of the horrific events in Butler, PA, these systems were still in place and predictions related to the assassination attempt failed to appear. We recognize that these out-of-date systems led to an inadequate user experience. Once the issue was brought to our attention, we began working on improvements that have already started rolling out. To be clear, these were systematic improvements – not manual fixes – that affected a range of Autocomplete predictions. You can see many relevant predictions now, as the illustrative example below demonstrates:
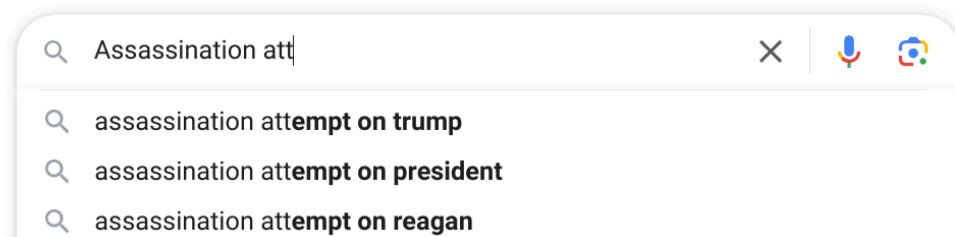
Individuals also shared concerns that Autocomplete was not showing relevant predictions for "President Donald." This particular issue stemmed from a bug that spanned the political spectrum – also affecting queries for several other past presidents from both political parties, including former President Barack Obama, as you can see in the image below. Typing "vice president k" was similarly showing no predictions. We have made an update that has improved these predictions across the board.
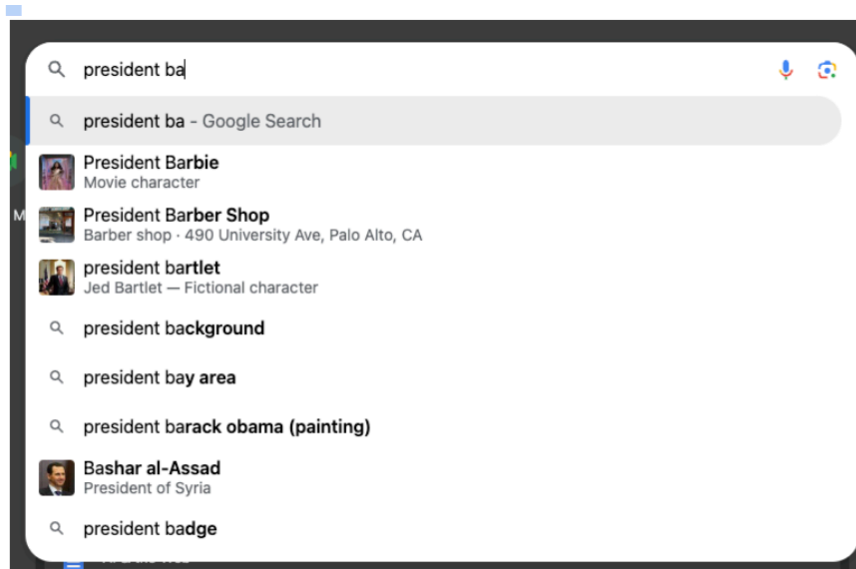
With billions of predictions happening each day, we know that even with our improvements, users may not always see every Autocomplete prediction that they might anticipate or may see unwanted predictions that violate our policies. When issues come to our attention, however, we will work to make improvements so that our users can find what they're looking for quickly and easily.

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Thank you, again, for the opportunity to respond to your inquiries. We look forward to continuing to work with you and your staff on these important issues.

Sincerely,

Mark Isakowitz
Vice President
Government Affairs and Public Policy, US and Canada