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AltaVista, Google and least effort: a requiem

The news of the demise of AltaVista, a venerable search system, in Web terms at least, it having been around since 1995, will not cause much upset; it had too few remaining active users for that. But it may be worth considering why it, and almost all the other early web search engines, have gone, superseded by Google, whose name is now a synonym for online searching.

One explanation in the poor support provided by its succession of owners, lack of development of the initially highly original product, poor marketing, confused vision of its purpose; for a detailed analysis, see Sullivan (2013). But perhaps the answer is more to do with what users want from information systems.

When it first appeared, AltaVista was undeniably the best of the web search engines. It had a dramatically larger coverage of web material then the others, at least for the days when we thought two million web pages was a lot. It also had facilities for quite advanced and sensitive searching, allowing precise specification of information need; but only if used to best effect. And therein lies the problem. Because at that time there were a number of search engines beside AltaVista: Lycos, Excite, Yahoo, Infoseek, Hotbot and more. They all had different searching functions, and were better for different types of material (Glossbrenner and Glossbrenner 1998). And even this situation was a great advance over what when before, when Internet searching involved a variety of ingenious search tools for different kinds of format: WAIS, Veronica, Gopher and the rest, as well as the emergent Web search engines (Gilster 1994, Morville, Rosenfeld and Janes 1996).

Google changed everything. Not because it was evidently a 'better' system; it wasn't necessarily so at the start. But it covered all kinds of web material, and gave a reasonably good result most of the time. And crucially, it was quick to learn and easy to use. While it took several days of study and practice to get best use out of complex search engines, like AltaVista, and similar databases and catalogues, for Google, it took only a few hours (see, for example, Brophy and Bawden 2005). And, crucially, improving searching expertise was essential for getting acceptably good results from sources with more complex interfaces and search facilities, but not from Google. This is not to say that there are not clever tricks to Google searching; there are, and in some special cases knowing them can be essential for getting good results. But most of the time they are unnecessary And one of the few things that we know with certainty about the use of information systems and services is that those which perform reasonably well all the time, and is quick and easy to use, will always be preferred to something objectively 'better'; the phenomenon referred to under such labels as 'principle of least effort' and 'satisficing' (Case 2012). So Google was always going to do well. And when people starting calling any search box a 'Google box', the competition was over.

So AltaVista was ultimately a victim of the least effort/satisficing principle. And its initial success and demise an example of the results of the perpetual contest between 'best possible' and 'easy and good enough' in the use of information systems and services.

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