

# CLIVE THOMPSON

## Live in the Moment

As a new generation of search engines mine the signals of the here and now, Google remains stuck in the past.



WHEN MICHAEL JACKSON DIED On June 25, millions of people flooded onto Google News to find the latest information about what had happened. The spike in traffic was so massive that Google suspected a malware attack and began blocking anyone searching for "Michael Jackson." It's a funny story, but it illustrates how the Web is changing. People increasingly turn to the Internet for up-to-the-minute

information about, well, everything—blog postings about celebrity antics, status updates from friends, and pictures and videos of political events as they unfold, like the protests over the Iranian election. Studies have shown that these types of search requests are on the rise. \*1 Pundits call it the real-time Web. It's upending the Internet as we've known it, and it's not something that Google can easily dominate. 1 For more than 10 years, Google has organized the Web by figuring out who has authority. The company measures which sites have the most links pointing to them—crucial votes of confidence—and checks to see whether a site grew to prominence slowly and organically, which tends to be a marker of quality. If a site amasses a zillion links overnight, it's almost certainly spam. 1 But the real-time Web behaves in the opposite fashion. It's all about "trending topics"—zOMG a plane crash!—which by their very nature generate a massive number of links and postings within minutes. And a search engine can't spend days deciding what is the most crucial site or posting; people want to know immediately. 1 So a new generation of search engines like Tweetmeme, OneRiot, Topsy, Scoopler, and Collecta are trying to redefine what makes a piece of information important.



Some of these sites offer a Digg-like indexed front page that displays hot topics, while others just include a simple search field. But most of them rely heavily on Twitter. When a burst of tweets citing a particular subject or URL emerges, it's a "signaling event," as Rishab Ghosh of Topsy puts it. To make sure they're not just getting hoodwinked by spammers, these new search engines employ some clever tricks, like crawling tweeted URLs and discarding those that land on sites containing spamlike language. Most disregard Twitter users who behave like spambots—for example, ones that follow thousands of people but have very few followers themselves.

Other ploys abound. OneRiot has a toolbar that lets users flag an interesting post immediately. Collecta actively imports blog posts and tweets so they appear in search results less than a second after they go live, rather than the hours it can take regular search engines to catalog the same info. "We want to be limited only by the speed of light," Collecta CTO Jack Moffitt jokes.

The result is something curiously different from regular searching. If you hunt for "Michael Jackson" on a traditional engine like Ask.com or Bing, the vast majority of the links remain the same day to day. Authority changes slowly on the "old" Web. But real-time search engines deliver different, updated results almost every time.

The creators of these new engines argue that their goal isn't to answer questions—à la Google—but to organize experience into a keyhole glimpse of what the world is doing at

this very moment. "It's exactly what your friends are going to be talking about when you get to the bar tonight," OneRiot executive Tobias Peggs says. "That's what we're finding." Google settles arguments; real-time search starts them.

Edo Segal, a pioneer in real-time search, thinks the field is going to explode as updates become more automatic, with our devices autoreporting where we are, how we're feeling, and what we're doing and seeing. Old-school search will never vanish, but real-time news will create a society where we have an omnipresent sense of the moment. "Google organized our memory," Segal says. "Real-time search organizes our consciousness."