

Researched & written by
MEDIAVOICES

THE ZERO-CLICK CONTENT SHIFT

In association with



Understanding your zero-click future

From the moment the World Wide Web went mainstream, search engines have been sending curious web users to third-party websites for the answers to their questions. Google - the 800-pound gorilla of the search world - has been re-directing people to publishers' web properties for almost 30 years.

Then, a couple of years ago, rather than guiding people elsewhere, Google started answering queries at the top of its own search results pages. Using AI, specifically its Gemini LLM, the search giant began synthesising content from around the web to create AI Overviews, neat little summaries that cut out the searcher's need to click.

Publishers immediately feared a zero-click future in which the decades-old deal of exchanging content for clicks was blown up. Google Zero - the absolute absence of referral traffic - quickly became an industry Bogeyman.

But does zero-click search as it exists today really pose an existential threat to the publishing business?

In this report, we'll gauge the impact of Google's AI Overviews on publisher traffic and try to get a sense of how big the threat really is. We'll take a closer look at the reality of zero-click search for the publishing business, from its effect on content discovery to brand visibility, referral traffic to revenue.

As with every MediaVoices report, we'll highlight the practical advice that publishers can follow to mitigate the downsides. We'll point to potential obstacles, but also highlight the opportunities that might lie in preparing properly for a future that will almost inevitably bring less search referrals to publisher content.

Peter Houston

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Something fundamental has changed

Search was supposed to be publishing's great distribution engine. But as WoodWing's John Fong put it when we began researching this project: "Something fundamental has changed."

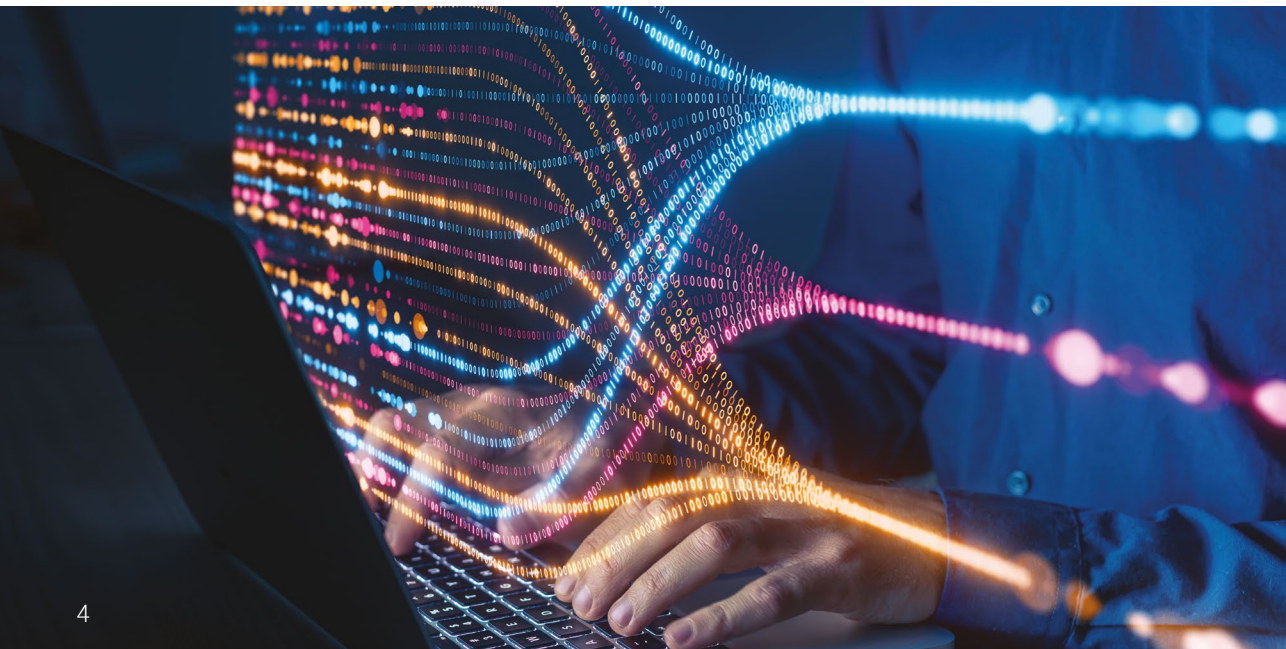
We didn't need the headlines to tell us that. It's a shift we've been tracking closely, in the questions publishers are asking, in the challenges surfacing across the content teams we work with every day, and in the conversations we're having with media organisations navigating this in real time. That's why we partnered with Media Voices to produce *The Zero-Click Content Shift*, an independent, rigorous look at how AI-driven search is reshaping content discovery, and what publishers can practically do about it.

The findings matter to us because they matter to our customers. Publishers and content teams are asking how to stay visible, how to protect traffic, and how to build businesses that don't depend entirely on Google's goodwill.

What this report confirms is something we recognise from our own work with publishers across the world: awareness of the zero-click challenge is high, but confidence in how to respond is low. Technology is part of the answer, but only part. The publishers best placed to weather this shift are those who invest equally in knowing their audiences, owning their content, and understanding the real value of the archives and content lakes they've spent decades building.

It's a conversation we're already deep in with many of our customers. We hope this report brings more publishers into it.

WoodWing



Has publishing's 'distribution engine' stalled?

There is no doubt that the era of AI Overviews has arrived and the rise of zero-click search has brought the potential to completely transform how content is discovered, consumed and monetised.

"Search was supposed to be the great distribution engine for publishers, but something fundamental has changed," WoodWing's John Fong told me when I was researching this report.

However, the industry panic that has blamed Google's AI Overviews for declining search referrals looks increasingly like a huge oversimplification. Google is still, by far, the single largest driver of referral traffic to the open web, processing more than 5 trillion searches annually - an average of 9.5 million every minute.

That said, the search landscape is changing and publishers have noticed.

So what are the 'fundamentals' that have changed? How bad are the reported declines in search referrals to publishers, and how much of that decline is actually down to AI summaries and zero-click searches?

Introducing AI Overviews

Unarguably the biggest recent shift in the search ecosystem, possibly the biggest shift ever, was Google's 2024 roll-out of AI Overviews.

If you use Google search - and 90% of the search market does - you are sure to have seen AI Overviews; they now appear in up to 200 countries and 40+ languages. The Overviews feature uses AI to generate answers directly on search engine results pages

(SERPs), providing a mashup of information from multiple web sources to provide users with instant summaries.

The problem for publishers is that the introduction of AI Overviews has turned the world's most popular search engine into an answer engine. Google has engineered itself the power to become a one-stop shop for information search and retrieval, locking users into its ecosystem and, potentially, locking the door on referral traffic.

Posting on LinkedIn, Danish media analyst Thomas Baekdal described Google before AI as a search engine that helped people go to places: "Now, it has fully become a lock-in destination that provides people with the information directly in such a way that they will never leave Google."

Reading the headlines since the AI Overviews roll-out began, it's easy to see why publishers have been spooked by their introduction. From the popular press to the trade press, the growth of zero-click search and the rapid erosion of referral traffic has been painted as an existential threat to the industry:

Is Google about to destroy the web?

The BBC, June 2025

AI summaries cause 'devastating' drop in audiences

The Guardian, July 2025

Publishers race against Google Zero doomsday clock

[Axios Media, July 2025](#)

Condé Nast CEO calls Google AI a death blow as search traffic collapses

[PPC Land, March 2026](#)

Evidence grows that Google's AI Overviews have eviscerated the media industry

[Futurism, March 2026](#)

Is zero-click as bad as the headlines suggest?

There is no question that, through 2025, some publishers suffered a catastrophic drop in search referrals. Analysis by web data firm Chartbeat on a series of tech titles showed Wired losing 62% of its search traffic; the Verge 85%; and Digital Trends 97%.

[Chartbeat's data](#), published in the Reuters Institute's Journalism and Technology Trends and Predictions 2026 report, showed Google traffic to publishers globally down by a third, comparing 2024 to 2025. In the US, Chartbeat said referrals from organic Google search were down by 38% year on year.

The growth of zero-click search and the rapid erosion of referral traffic has been painted as an existential threat to the industry

US consultants Define Media Group reported similar findings. Across a 64-site portfolio, it reported that clicks from organic search were down 42%. SEO insights firm NewzDash found that Google web search traffic to news



publishers declined from 51% to 27% between 2023 and 2025.

Reported traffic drops appear to have hit smaller outlets hardest, with Chartbeat data showing publishers with under 10,000 daily page views suffered a 60% decline in traditional search traffic over the last two years. Medium sized publishers lost 47%; large publishers 22%.

Around the time of the AI Overviews rollout, Danielle Coffey, President & CEO of the US trade association News/Media Alliance, told CNN: "This will be catastrophic to our traffic, as marketed by Google to further satisfy user queries, leaving even less incentive to click through so that we can monetise our content... This is a perverse twist on 'innovation.'"

Less than two years later, Condé Nast CEO Roger Lynch told the Financial Times that Google search is "no longer a meaningful driver" of traffic to his company's websites, accounting for just 25% of visits in 2025. His counterpart at People Inc., Neil Vogel, reported in May 2026 that Google referrals to its brands had fallen by 63% over the past two years.

Beyond the bad news

If there's one thing the publishing industry does even better than pivot, it's panic.

While acknowledging the very real pain being felt by some publishers, analysts are increasingly arguing that broader referral data tells a more nuanced story than the headlines would suggest.

In a very comprehensive post on its Five Percent blog, growth agency Graphite set out to debunk the myth that search is dying. Partnering with web-data firm Similarweb, it looked outside of publishing at search traffic more broadly. Analysis of America's top 40,000 websites found that organic traffic from Google is only down 2.5% year-over-year. The top 10 US sites actually saw a 1.6% increase in search traffic.

Myth Busting

SEO traffic could soon decrease by 50%
SEO traffic is down slightly (-2.5%), not dramatically.

60% of people now use LLMs instead of search
Visitors to Google increased 1.4% comparing Q4 2025 to 2024

AI Overviews cause a dramatic reduction in CTRs
AI Overviews only appear about one-third of the time

Google is "stealing clicks" by shifting away from organic in favor of ads
Organic clicks are still 10x larger than clicks to ads.

Source: Debunking the myth that search is dying, Five Percent from graphite.io

A 2.5% drop doesn't square at all with the collapse of traffic being reported and the problem appears to be the data being analysed.

Barry Adams, SEO consultant and advisory partner to FT Strategies, wrote in his newsletter, SEO for Google News, that aggregated data, like that provided by Chartbeat's analysis, doesn't consider individual site sizes. That leaves findings open to distortion by data from a few of Chartbeat's largest clients who may have suffered from specific Google core algorithm updates or even "site reputation abuse" penalties, rather than any AI-driven decline.

Doom-laden headlines heralding traffic declines of up to 97% also fail to consider the extremely small sample sizes being considered in specific sectors. Graphite spotlights the reporting of a study that looked at SEO traffic declines on less than 20 sites: Some showed drops, some increases, but 'a major media site then published a story with

a headline about the one largest decreasing site’.

Unpacking the panic

AI has upset all the conventions of technology-related discourse. The pace of change in the sector has been staggering, and whether you believe AI is a wonder tool or it’s going to replace us all, the future is very uncertain.

In the face of all that uncertainty, it’s easy to see why publishers would be tempted to hang every fear they have about their long-term prospects for referral traffic on Google’s very visible introduction of AI Overviews.

To some extent, those fears are quantifiable: a [Pew Research Center study](#) tracking 68,000 search queries showed users click on a traditional search result 15% of the time, but just 8% when there is an AI Overview present.

However, that drop of more than 50% obscures the fact that, even without the presence of an AI Overview, the vast majority of searches did not end in a click.

The lack of a click could be because users decided to refine their search, or it could be because Google has been sending more traffic to itself, from Maps and Shopping to YouTube. The point is, clickthroughs have never been the norm.

And for the period that most traffic declines were reported, AI Overviews were not ubiquitous. A study by SEO and marketing intelligence platform [Ahrefs](#), looking at the appearance of specific SERPs features through 2024 until July 2025, found that AI Overviews showed up in about one-third of searches.

This aligns with findings from a study conducted in Spain in September 2025, when audience growth consultant Clara Soteras completed a research study looking at the impact of [AI overviews in Spanish media](#). Working with SEO agency Laika and a team

from the University of Barcelona, she found that AI Overviews are appearing in about one-third of the Google searches media companies would consider relevant to their content.

Zero-sum search

The scary truth for publishers, even without zero-click concerns, is that Google search growth has flatlined and there has been an industry-wide fall in search traffic acquisition. The introduction of AI Overviews also shines a light on the idea that Google’s growth plans are, possibly for the first time, somewhere other than old-school search.

Google’s shifting priorities, coupled with the proliferation of alternative information sources, from TikTok to ChatGPT, means publishers can’t expect to see the consistent increase in search clicks that have been the foundation of digital growth strategies for decades.

However, Barry Adams says that while traffic losses have been huge for some publishers, he worries that this has fueled an industry-wide panic rather than a considered assessment of publishing operations in an evolving ecosystem.

“Publishers, websites in general, have been used to an endless firehose of traffic. Google has kept sending more and more clicks to the web year after year after year.” He says that if you did anything ‘even half decently’, you could still get growth from Google.

Now, he says, search is a ‘flat-channel’ with websites having to work harder and harder for their share of referrals. “Search used to be

AI has upset all the conventions of technology-related discourse. The pace of change in the sector has been staggering.

an endless growth channel... You get a click, your competitor gets a click, everybody gets a click. Now it's a zero-sum channel. You get a click, your competitor does not. That's the new reality we have to get used to."

Clara Soteris agrees, saying that while Google Zero is not the new reality, "clicks are dropping and we need to understand that. We need to work in other KPIs, in other ways, to catch the audience and to attract new users."

The Google Zero bogeyman

Whatever the scale of the impact zero-click is having on publisher traffic, Google Zero is not a thing. At least, not yet.

People argue about who actually coined the term Google Zero, but it certainly came to prominence in the publishing community when The Verge editor in chief Nilay Patel wrote a post proclaiming that '[Google Zero is here](#)' in May 2024. He used the term to describe 'that

moment when Google Search simply stops sending traffic to third-party websites.'

Ignoring the absolutism of the idea, Patel made a valid point: "The entire web is Google's platform, and creators on the web are often building their entire businesses on that platform, just like any other."

Google Zero is a worst-case what-if scenario. From a publisher perspective, it completely destroys the bargain that publishers made at the dawn of digital publishing, to provide content in exchange for visitors. In the darkest of all timelines, Google's LLM will steal publisher content to feed its answer engine, but never refer a single visitor.

My favourite comment on Patel's May 2024 post calls the notion of Google Zero 'Chicken Little-ish'. Everyone I spoke to for this report, and increasingly the industry coverage, agrees: The prospect of Google's referral traffic disappearing completely is wildly exaggerated.



However, while Google Zero is not seen as an imminent possibility, as much from embedded user behaviours as from Google's need to protect its established search advertising revenue, zero-click does pose a real and present danger to many, if not all, publishers.

There is broad industry agreement that AI Overviews at the top of Google's search results and increased usage of ChatGPT, Claude and Gemini, will have an impact on search referral traffic. And, even if the sky isn't falling in for everyone right now, publishers do need to understand what is really going on in the fast developing AI-driven search landscape and how they can be less dependent on Google's platform.

The AI Mode apocalypse

While Google Zero is really not a thing, Barry Adams worries that the damage AI Mode will cause to the publishing industry will be felt for decades to come.

He thinks the traffic losses caused by AI Overviews are survivable, especially for news-focused publishers. Features like Google Discover and Top Stories carousels give publishers the opportunity to maintain visibility on current news stories.

Google's AI Mode is another matter.

Barry explains that it does not exclude news the way AI Overviews do. You can ask for the latest news or a specific news topic in AI Mode, and get a solid summary or a detailed breakdown of the issues. And, he says, unlike some of the 'nonsense' served up in AI Overviews, the quality of the answers in AI Mode is excellent.

The big worry for Barry is that when Google figures out the monetisation angle for AI Mode, it will roll out globally and kill traffic to news. "While articles are shown as sources in AI Mode, we all know the clicks won't happen there," he explains.

Traffic from Google Discover will help soften the blow - that's why Google is rolling out Discover for desktop - and as a result will become the cornerstone of Google traffic for most publishers.

But for Barry, the message is clear: "Publishers need to focus on audience strategies that exclude Google as a reliable source. The emphasis needs to be on non-Google channels, multimedia content, and direct brand traffic.

The kicker is that the content served up in AI Mode has been built using publisher content. "The wholesale theft of content to build these LLMs is directly responsible for the loss of traffic publishers are now experiencing," says Barry.

Licensing might soften the blow in the short term. Litigation might eventually make a difference. But for Barry these types of resolutions won't save publishers. "The time to pivot to a post-Google environment is now," he says.

Three perspectives on zero-click search

Like every big story, the arc of the zero-click narrative varies depending on who is telling it. Each of the three sets of protagonists in this tale - search users, Google and content creators - think about zero-click very differently.

Understanding the different perspectives is important for publishers, both in helping them understand the forces shaping the search ecosystem and helping them decide which digital publishing strategies will best counter the zero-click threat.

The user perspective: utility

Google announced its AI Overviews search feature at its I/O developer conference in May 2024. About a week later, the company's CEO, [Sundar Pichai](#), sat down with The Verge's Nilay Patel to talk about all things search and the future of the web.

His line on introducing AI into Google Search was that it was all about creating value for users - 'letting Google do the Googling for you'. He said: "The summary we are providing clearly adds value and helps them look at things they may not have otherwise thought about."

The overall quality of information provided by AI Overviews is up for debate, but the presence of answers at the top of search results pages clearly adds convenience for users.

It's difficult to fault Google on their value-add logic. Many websites have become difficult to use with intrusive features from cookie consents to massive advertising banners and popups making it ever harder to access articles. As Barry Adams says, "There's a lot of friction interacting with the web, especially

websites you haven't visited before."

[Nic Newman](#), author of the Reuters Institute's Journalism and Technology Trends and Predictions report 2026 says: "Publishers face new competition from AI answer engines and next generation browsers that are able to summarise and remix content in a way that provides great utility for audiences."

The shift to answer engines is something Clara Soteras spotlights, noting that short search queries - one or two words - are less likely to spawn an AI Overview. People asking more complex, conversational questions: using four words and including interrogative terms like 'why' or 'how' increases the likelihood of AI Overviews being returned.

She points out that other chatbots like ChatGPT, Claude and Perplexity AI are serving a similar purpose for users, but that the percentage of referral traffic they are delivering is only 0.2%; tiny in comparison to Google Search.

Citations in AI Overviews are still driving traffic to publisher websites from searchers who want to see more information, but also from users fact-checking AI answers; a rise in search traffic correlates with the launch of ChatGPT. Google has also claimed that users who click through from AI Overviews are more engaged, but there is limited evidence to support this as yet.

The bottom line for users, and the perspective

that publishers need to pay attention to, is that improved utility is welcomed.

The Google perspective: users first, publishers second

From the outside, Google's perspective on zero-click is complicated, except that it's all about making money for Google.

On the one hand, Google just wants to keep people using its services. The days of 'Do no evil' are long gone and Google, under the Alphabet umbrella, is all about winning in an increasingly competitive AI race.

AI Overviews leverage the company's LLM models to keep users inside the Google advertising ecosystem as much as its search ecosystem.

"Google doesn't give a shit about your website," says Barry Adams. "It cares only about its users, and it will do whatever it can to keep users on Google. If that means throwing three quarters of websites into the meat grinder, so be it."

However, the search giant is walking a tightrope between keeping users happy by increasing utility with AI and avoiding killing

off the content creators that feed its new answer engine. In a September 2025 interview with [MediaVoices](#), People Inc. CEO Neil Vogel framed the problem Google is facing with publishers.

He said: "Google's job is to answer your query however they see fit... The issue that has to be solved for publishers is how do we get compensated for this?"

Sundar Pichai acknowledged this issue immediately after the AI Overviews rollout in his May 2024 interview with The Verge, saying: "If there isn't a rich ecosystem making unique and useful content, what are you putting together and organising?"

While it's very easy to question just how much Google cares about publisher content, the search giant is making some moves to deliver more clicks from users' AI search experience. In updates announced in May 2026, responses in both AI Overviews and AI Mode will highlight whether summaries include information from publications the user subscribes to.

According to a report from [NiemanLab](#), Google claims that in early testing, people were 'significantly more likely' to click through to a webpage that had its "Subscribed" label. It also said the new citation feature has



been designed to help users 'quickly access' content they trust and get more value from their subscriptions.

“Google doesn’t give a shit about your website...It cares only about its users, and it will do whatever it can to keep users on Google.”

The company is also piloting paid partnerships and licensing deals with major publishers, including Der Spiegel, The Guardian and The Washington Post; exploring opt-out controls that will allow publishers to opt out of AI Overviews without losing search visibility; and experimenting with personalisation that will identify users' preferred sources.

The balancing act for Google is to keep users happy, but try to avoid choking off the supply of quality content it needs to serve meaningful answers.

The publisher perspective: seeking clarity

The publisher perspective on zero-click search is, to say the least, polarised.

On team 'Chicken Little', there are publishers who genuinely see removing the need for users to click through to their content from search as a 'death blow'. Publishers heavily dependent on referral traffic and associated programmatic revenues have already seen the sky fall in.

Team 'Déjà Vu' sees the fall in referral traffic as the catalyst for just another exercise in managing decline, adding search to a list of shrinking distribution opportunities that already includes print and social media platforms.

There are few, if any, publishers that see the introduction of AI Overviews as a positive; even fewer who think anyone can put the genie back in the bottle. However, there is a consensus building around the idea that publishers will have to adapt to counter the inevitable decline of search referral traffic.

Adapting means different things to different publishers, but giving up on past click addiction is central. Moves to maximise referrals from AI Overviews are on the to-do list, but there is varying confidence in just how effective that will be; better to build direct relationships and revenue than rely on traffic from AI citations.

One other point that almost all publishers agree on is the unfairness of tech companies training their LLMs on their content without permission or compensation. Some of the biggest have done deals to license their content. But, regardless of size, the industry agrees that every AI company has a responsibility to compensate publishers for the content used to train their LLMs, or in Google's case, allow them to opt out of AI overviews without also opting out of search visibility.

In a March 2026 article for InPublishing, [Sajeeda Merali](#), chair of the UK publisher association, PPA, wrote that the deployment of generative AI has raised fundamentally different issues from previous waves of digital innovation because it relies on the “systematic theft and reuse of copyrighted works at scale.”

Sajeeda was very clear that the PPA's advocacy is not about resisting technological progress or limiting innovation. “The goal,” she wrote, “was to secure a predictable, pro-competition framework, one which creates growth for publishers and AI moving forward.”

The best bet for publishers is to campaign for a more level playing field, while abandoning any business model predicated on third-party traffic referrals.

Are you ready for your zero-click future?

Al Overviews are just one of several shifts in the search landscape adding to the angst felt by publishers around traffic acquisition. From featured snippets to fragmenting audiences using TikTok to search consumer trends, users have more ways than ever to find information than Google's blue links.

However, the fact that Google's search traffic isn't growing the way it once did doesn't mean individual publishers can't find their own path to traffic growth. "A tiny percentage of clicks from those 1 trillion is still worth optimising for," says Barry Adams.

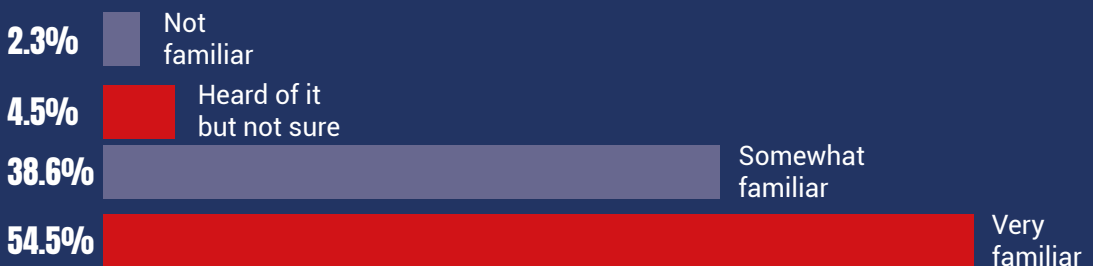
The starting point on that journey is to have a better understanding of the evolving search landscape, your own users' needs, and the business models you build to meet them. Armed with that knowledge, publishers can properly plan their response to the disruption driven by zero-click search.

Surveying the zero-click landscape

In March and April 2026, content management solutions provider WoodWing ran a survey to try to get a sense of what its customers know about zero-click search, what impact it was having on their businesses and what actions they were planning to take to mitigate any traffic losses.

With responses from almost 20 countries and the vast majority of respondents publishers, it is clear that zero-click is recognised globally within the publishing industry. Figure 1 shows that more than 90% of WoodWing's survey respondents said they were either 'somewhat' or very familiar with zero-click searches. Only 2.3% said they were not familiar.

How familiar are you with 'zero-click searches'?



92.9% of respondents are at least somewhat familiar with zero-click searches.

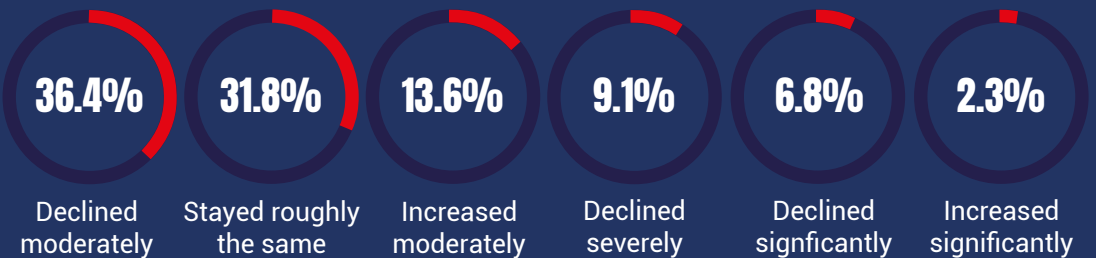
Figure 1

Traffic declines

Looking at organic search traffic specifically, the picture is mixed. Figure 2, showing the top 5 survey responses, indicates that almost 16% said their traffic was down between 20% and 50%, while just over a third of respondents reported traffic declines between 5% and 20%. A similar proportion said their traffic has stayed roughly the same, within plus-or-minus 5%, and 15% reported traffic increases with an outlying 2.3% reporting traffic up more than 20%.

Areas of greatest concern were traffic and audience reach, with almost 70% of respondents noting a negative impact. Advertising revenues followed with 43% of respondents seeing this as a particular pain point, followed by brand visibility, reader revenue conversions, audience engagement and lead generation, all seen as a problem for around 20% of respondents. A further 20% did not report any negative impact.

In the past 12 months, how has your organic search traffic changed?



52.3% report some level of decline. Only 15.9% saw growth.

Figure 2

Zero-click impact

Among respondents that reported a decline in traffic, there was a majority consensus around the idea that zero-click is a problem. Figure 3 indicates that 82% of respondents thought that zero-click was at least partially responsible for falling traffic.

Google's AI overviews and chatbots like ChatGPT, Copilot and Claude were identified as the biggest contributors to zero-click behaviours. Social media and news aggregators were acknowledged by a significant number of respondents, by 34% and 15.9% respectively, but not a majority.

To what extent do you attribute this decline to zero-click behavior?



82.6% of those who saw a decline attribute it at least partially to zero-click search behavior.

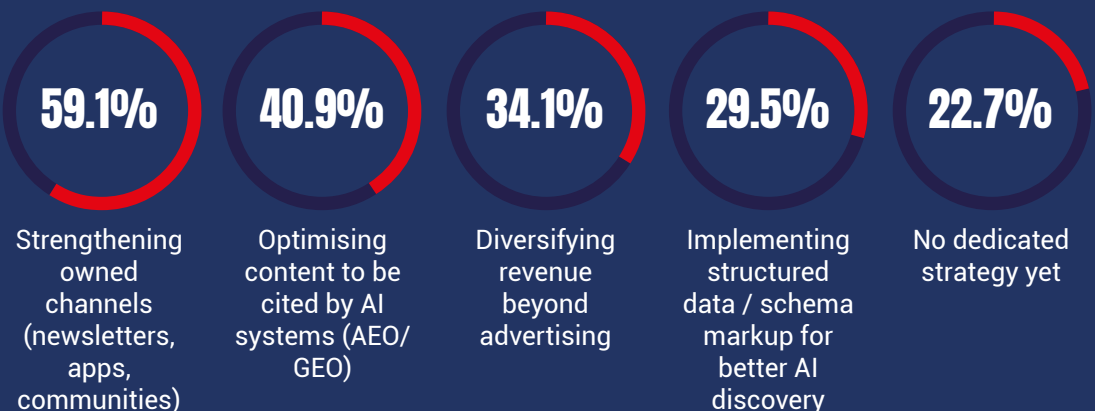
Figure 3

Planned responses

The biggest response pursued or planned to counter the zero-click threat was to strengthen owned channels, cited by almost 60% of respondents. These include newsletters, apps and communities. Next was answer-engine optimisation, with 40.9% of respondents looking to increase AI citations.

Data-focused responses, from AI-friendly schema markup to investment in first-party data to drive subscriptions, were reported by between 20% and 30% of respondents. Partnerships with aggregators and licensing were listed by about a quarter of respondents. More than 20% said they had no strategy yet.

Which strategies is your organisation actively pursuing or planning?



Strengthening owned channels leads at 59.1%. 22.7% have no dedicated strategy yet.

Figure 4

Confidence to respond

Figure 5 shows that a significant minority of respondents, 13.6%, were not confident in their ability to adapt to the evolving content discovery landscape, while 45.5% were neither confident or not confident. Another 40.9% expressed confidence in their ability to adapt.

Factors seen as most valuable in supporting adaptation efforts included optimisation tools for AI discovery and better analytics and attribution tools, both highlighted by almost 60% of respondents. Citation tracking and monitoring tools were on the support list for almost half. Publishing automation, including multi-channel distribution capabilities and automated schema markup resonated for 34.1% and 22.7% of respondents respectively.

How confident are you that your organization can adapt to the changing discovery landscape?



(1 = NOT CONFIDENT, 5 = VERY CONFIDENT)

45.5% are neutral (3). 40.9% lean confident (4 or 5). 13.6% are not confident (1 or 2).

Figure 5

The picture painted by WoodWing's survey results chimes with general industry coverage of an industry that is broadly aware of the zero-click challenge and the need to act, but is uncertain of what to do next.

From awareness to action

Woodwing's survey responses show that almost 98% of respondents had heard of the zero-click phenomenon; 54% were very familiar. However, John Fong points out that being aware of something and acting upon it are two different things. "You need to be aware of it, but you need to be on top of it."

A call to action

For John, the rise of zero-click is an evolution of the search landscape, and he uses a sporting analogy to illustrate. He explains that in Malaysia, where he's based, pickleball is challenging tennis. "A lot of tennis courts have been converted to pickleball courts," he explains. "That doesn't mean that tennis is dead, just that people have more options."

He says the data around the impact of zero-click searches may have been "a little blown out of proportion," but that it is crucial for publishers to understand how the different

segments of their audience are discovering and accessing their content.

"Traditional, organic search is still the highest results there, but there is a decline, especially when you look at the APAC region where internet consumption is dominated by mobile devices."

He says when half of your phone screen is populated by agentic AI it is bound to reduce click throughs. "I don't think it will ever go to zero, but now there is this part that we need to account for. If publishers have heard of this, seen this or experienced this, they should act on it."



Start with your audience

Publishing's ultimate response to the rise of zero-click search will have to include some clever technical fixes around AI optimisation and automation. However, the starting point for any effective publishing strategy has to be meeting audience needs.

WoodWing's John Fong worries that some publishers, lost in an addiction to search-driven clicks, currently take their audiences for granted. He says: "They rely too much on search engines. As a publisher, a content producer, you need to own your audience. Whatever comes next, AI or AEO, you won't have to worry because you actually know your audience. You know what they want and you can serve them directly."

Clara Soteris agrees, questioning the effort publishers expend on drive-by traffic. "We try to catch so many clicks... only for one shot. We have users that only visit us [once]. They find this news or this content on the feed, but they don't know who the publisher is."

For her, developing brand awareness is every bit as important as SEO. The direct traffic enjoyed by a strong brand bypasses search engines completely, but is also increasingly important in maximising AI citations and overall authority.

Clara says a brand presence on social media will have a continuing role to play; despite declining direct referrals, Google has announced greater inclusion of social media metrics in deciding content authority. Clara says: "Google is using these sources, these signals, to understand the authority of the brand or the creator."

Brand awareness will be of vital importance if publishers are to be able to take advantage of Google's rollout of the [Preferred Sources](#) feature, which will allow users to select trusted media brands to appear more often in the AI Overviews they are served.

"As a publisher, a content producer, you need to own your audience... You know what they want and you can serve them directly"

Meet user needs

Clara also points to the user needs model developed by [Dmitry Shishkin](#) as a strong framework for building brand loyalty. "If we think of the user needs model, we understand that publishers and media can create a community, can offer the opportunity to be part of something, and share knowledge with people that have the same interests."

Barry Adams believes the current AI disruption should be seen as an opportunity for publishers to refocus on their audiences' needs. He tells publishers now is the perfect time to, "re-evaluate what their purpose is, what their value as a publisher actually is, and more importantly, understand what their audience wants."

He thinks too many publishers are confused over who their customers actually are. "They think advertisers are the customers," he says, "which I think is the most critical strategic mistake a publisher can make. Advertisers help make you money, absolutely, but they're not your customers. They're enablers."

Echoing Clara, Barry says the most successful publishers maintain a focus on what their audience needs from them. "Don't worry about the intermediaries. Don't worry about the channels. Make sure you deliver maximum value for the audience, and don't be afraid to let people know what you're doing."

"The big news brands out there - the ones that are actually doing quite well, even the ones who went behind hard paywalls - they seem to be doing all right because they've

never lost sight of what their purpose is for their audience."

Build a business beyond clicks

Barry Adams says he genuinely believes a lot of publishers don't actually understand their business model and what they should be doing to grow their audiences. They have fallen into the trap of chasing traffic, writing content to 'tick an algorithmic box' rather than actually adding value.

Too many doubled down on commodity content - product reviews, lifestyle content and how-to guides - because it performed well in Google. "That's now come tumbling down," he explains.

Barry believes these are the publishers that are 'terrified' of zero-click. "They don't realise why they got Google traffic in the first place. They don't know why what they have been doing worked or didn't work," he says.

The danger is that they compound their mistakes by stopping investment in search optimisation. "Those same publishers then go and put more money into Facebook or Instagram or ChatGPT optimisations, which send fractions of a percent of the traffic to their website that Google does."

"Advertisers can help make you money, absolutely, but they're not your customers. They're enablers."

Clara Soteras recognises the issue and says it is difficult to change the mindset of publishers who have worked for years with volume metrics as their lead KPIs.

She thinks this is driven largely by established advertising metrics - page views and unique users - and that it will be difficult for

publishers to change this on their own. "We need to work together to understand the system because obviously advertisements are sold on these metrics. We need to change it."

Clara says some of the larger companies that she works with are starting to understand that things are changing and they are starting to develop different kinds of partnerships and sponsorship deals. But, she says: "It is difficult for local publishers and the smallest publishers. This is something that we need to work on and we need to help them."

How to respond to the zero-click threat

Keeping up with the twists and turns of technology development, especially in the age of AI, is no simple task. And few of us, if any, have a say over when and how Big Tech rolls out, or rolls back, product features that directly impact publishing success.

However, we can shape our own publishing strategies and, if we accept that referral growth is no longer a given, acting to cut out that particular platform dependency is key.

Writing on [LinkedIn](#), Barry Adams said: "Publishers need to focus on audience strategies that exclude Google as a reliable source...the time to pivot to a post-Google environment is now."

Barry was writing specifically about AI Mode and its potential impact on news publishers, but the sentiment is overarching. When I spoke to him for this report he said publishers and content producers need to make 'better decisions'.

He acknowledges that, in the short term, those decisions might not lead to more traffic: "But in the long term, they help immunise you against Google's whims and fiddles, against what the LLMs are up to, against the next ketamine-fueled daydream of some Silicon Valley tech entrepreneur."

Start here

If every journey starts with the first step, the journey to reducing your dependency on Google's referral traffic is to understand where your business and your content sits in the search ecosystem.

WoodWing's John Fong told me before every house move his wife says, "Let's look at the storeroom. What do we have? What do

we need to throw out? What do we need to replace? What do we need to buy new? This is fundamental," he explains.

Clara Soteris agreed, saying her starting point when working with any publisher is to understand what sort of publisher they are - their resources, human and technical, and the types of content they have. "I always start with a little audit," she says, "The most important thing is to understand how they understand their different channels of traffic."

She notes that not every traffic problem is a zero-click problem. "Probably, you have some technical issues that you need to solve, blocking your index, and for this reason you can't rank."

Defending against AI

Thinking about your own content in a structured way, especially about how defensible your content is against AI, will become increasingly important.

In March 2026, MediaVoices hosted a Masterclass - 'Optimising for AI discovery' - led by Stuart Forrest, former Global Audience Director at Bauer Media and David Buttle, former AI lead at the Financial Times. During the session, they presented two frameworks to help publishers identify content under threat from AI and, alternatively, that which is less prone to disintermediation.

The first approach proposed matching the

growth or decline of Google referrals for particular types of content against its suitability for developing traffic sources other than Google. The model segments content into four areas, suggesting a strategic approach for each:

Growing Google referrals, high dependence on traffic from Google

Content in this segment is not at immediate threat from disintermediation, possibly because it is hard for AI to synthesise or because users seek expert content and are less open to AI Overviews. Longer term, it may be vulnerable as AI answers in SERPs get more sophisticated.

Recommendation: Exploit search success in the short term; avoid long-term investment.

Growing Google referrals, low dependence on traffic from Google

Content in this segment delivers mid-run resilience to changing consumer and platform environments. It is founded on strong editorial resources, proprietary information, strong brand awareness and trust and is well positioned to diversify distribution and audience acquisition.

Recommendation: Invest in content quality; pursue diversification efforts.

Declining Google referrals, low dependence on traffic from Google

Content in this segment is seeing referrals fall, but is well positioned to shift away from Google for discovery and distribution. Editorial positioning is distinctive, drawing a direct loyal audience on alternative platforms, including social media, apps, newsletters or podcasts.

Recommendation: Diversify audience and revenue; switch users to alternative platforms.

Declining Google referrals, high dependence on traffic from Google

It is not clear that there is a clear commercial model for this type of content. It is typically non-proprietary information, easily

substitutable, and gives consumers no incentive to click through from synthesised overviews for more information.

Recommendation: Discontinue; align costs with serving user needs.

A more subjective approach

Where the previous framework uses referral data as its starting point, a more subjective approach - proposed by David Buttle and adopted by Bauer - is more subjective. It focuses on scoring content against three defining characteristics:

Distinctiveness

- Low score - Generic content that is widely available across the open web
- High score - Original content providing insights unavailable elsewhere

Emotional resonance

- Low score - Factual content that evokes no emotional response from readers
- High score - Content that connects deeply with readers creating strong emotional impact

Accuracy

- Low score - Errors have minimal consequence for users
- High score - Inaccuracies have the potential to cause severe real-world consequences

The higher a particular type of content scores across the three characteristics, the more defensible it will be against AI overviews and the zero-click threat.

However you evaluate your content, the crucial point is that publishers need to start thinking carefully about the value they deliver. The only content strategies that will succeed are those that can deliver greater value than an AI synthesised answer at the top of a search page or provided by a chatbot.

AEO is an SEO evolution

Everyone I spoke to for this report said that AEO (answer engine optimisation) or GEO (generative engine optimisation) is simply an evolution of SEO and emphasised the continued importance of SEO best practice for publishers.

John Fong says the publishers he talks to are seeing a greater diversity in traffic sources. However, he says: "SEO is still there, the rankings are still there, the search results are still there. SEO is still very important. For most of the publishers I speak to, most of the traffic still comes from click throughs."

From a technical perspective, Clara Soteras says: "For me, there's not a lot of difference. I think that the basic things are the same. Publishers have a new challenge, but SEO, for me, it's important... It's the main channel of traffic and obviously we need to work on that. It's what is working now."

Barry Adams is a little more strident, responding angrily [on LinkedIn](#) to a Press Gazette article about Chartbeat's traffic 'collapse' data that included the line 'Most publishers who responded to the report now expect to put less effort into traditional Google search in 2026'.

"I understand the sentiments underlying these decisions," he wrote, "but it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Put less effort in, and you'll get less traffic out of it. And down and down the spiral goes."

Barry is equally frustrated by publishers switching investment to AEO. "I genuinely believe there is no value exchange in optimising for LLMs, because LLMs do not send meaningful traffic to the web," he explains. "No matter how many citations they have, no matter how elaborate they cite their sources, people who are on ChatGPT or Gemini or Claude, almost never click through."



He supports efforts to maximise visibility in AI generated answers, especially for brands with a transaction pipeline that need visibility at the top of the funnel and suggests that attaching KPIs to brand awareness in AI answers could be useful. But he points out, "If it doesn't actually drive traffic to your website, why are you doing that? Why are you putting all that effort in?"

Best practice is still best practice

There is also broad agreement around the idea that AEO best practise is little different than SEO best practise - Barry believes 99.9% of LLM optimisation aligns with proper SEO.

He says that when you actually look at the tactics and strategies that these AEO or GEO suppliers are trying to 'peddle', it's just SEO. "Everything LLMs do is founded on the exact same principles as classic search. It's information retrieval, and that's what SEO has been about for the last 25 years."

Stuart Forrest agrees, saying 'it's the Wild West' in relation to the AI 'snakeoil salesmen' offering one-stop metrics. Instead he suggests tracking with a mix of existing analytics tools and manual analysis:

- **Referral traffic** - analysing the volume of traffic arriving directly from AI platforms
- **Citation monitoring** - manually testing targeted queries across platforms
- **Crawl activities** - monitoring server logs for RAG (retrieval augmented generation)
- **Share of voice** - appearance in AI answers versus competitors

Stuart Forrest says that although the 'mechanics' of AI search have changed dramatically, the fundamentals haven't. He spotlights [Google's E-E-A-T guidelines](#). "Those are really important and things that we mustn't lose sight of in an AI world," he explains.

Freshness is also a factor, with AI systems likely to ignore outdated content. Stuart explains that Google QDF (query deserves

"Everything LLMs do is founded on the exact same principles as classic search. It's information retrieval, and that's what SEO has been about for the last 25 years."

freshness) system applies equally for AI and standard web searches.

He emphasises the continued importance of content relevance in returning AI-powered search results, but also notes a shift from matching declared keywords to matching assumed user intent.

Clarity is also a factor, with AI not only having to be able to find, parse and extract relevant text and images, but also understand content quickly with its natural language processing models. "The structure of content matters more now than ever," he says.

Query fan-out

One other area of AI optimisation that may move beyond traditional SEO considerations is query fan-out, used in Google's AI Overviews and AI Mode as well as other AI models, to answer 'longer, more complex queries' according to a June 2025 [Digiday explainer](#).

With query fan-out the AI model uses a broad range of information from the web related to the original query to generate a synthesised answer. "A user didn't ask for it in the query but [the AI model is] already predicting all of this information is going to be useful and gives it in a direct answer," Adithya Hemanth, SEO lead at marketing agency Incubeta, told Digiday.

Stuart Forrest says understanding query fan-out is critical to understanding the difference between AI search and traditional search. He explains that, rather than look for a single matching page, the AI breaks the question

apart and 'fans it out' across multiple retrieval pathways.

"It's looking for data, it's looking for reviews, it's looking for news to synthesise a complete answer," he says. "The question is no longer just about matching keywords. It's actually used to trigger a wide search across many different types of sources."

The point for publishers is that they can no longer rely on one content format to win visibility in AI answers. "We need to try and have a presence in every branch of this fan-out query," Stuart says. "If you're present in four or five or more, then obviously your probability increases dramatically."

The technology defence

AI is driving the biggest disruption in publishing since the digital transformation began at the turn of the century. In this context, a strong, agile tech stack is one of the best defences against the threats posed by AI, from channel-neutral workflows to headless architectures.

WoodWing's John Fong sees the emergence of a three-pillar framework for responding to AI threats, resting on AI readiness, audience relationships and revenue diversification. In each of these areas a responsive technology infrastructure is the key to managing the cost and complexity of repurposing content across an expanding array of platforms.

He says one of the things that distinguishes sophisticated publisher responses is the investment they're making in structured data. Acknowledging that click throughs from AI answer citations are currently low, he expects them to rise and notes a four-times greater conversion premium on citation traffic versus organic search results.

"You need to understand how these machines are taking your content and then you have to speak the same language. Your tech stack [needs] the same language as the machine so they can easily pick [your content] up."

As diversification into multimodal, omnichannel content becomes the norm, streamlined cross-platform workflows are increasingly important and John says it's crucial to run technologies that communicate with each other. "The perfect stack will be an integrated technology stack, right? So that you don't have a silo system, you have a system that is able to be multi-directional."

Infrastructure investment is always a challenge, but especially in the age of AI. "In any business, it is always about the budget and the money," John says, "but we all have to be smart where we put our money. In this case, I think before we even talk about budget, let's take the mirror out and look at ourselves."

He suggests investing in an independent consultant to come in and scan your business, looking at your technology, but also culture, business models and content to determine investment priorities. "These are things that I think we need to look at as fundamentals. From there, we look at, if I have \$10, where am I going to spend it?"

The right stuff

The zero-click content shift suggests that commodity content is doomed. The lifestyle content, product reviews and PR re-writes that used to guarantee traffic through clever SEO are disappearing into the answer engines, never to be clicked on again.

Barry Adams says: "Publishers chasing after clicks, doing product reviews, writing lifestyle content because it does well in Google... that's now come tumbling down."

Barry expects many commodity content mills to disappear and says he will not shed a tear for them. "I will shed a tear for the publishers who have long and colourful brands, who've been around for a very long time, but have fallen into this trap of chasing after clicks, chasing after traffic, and now don't really have a way of getting out."

He is quoted in a [May 2026 Press Gazette](#)

report on how analysis by visibility index Sistrix reinforces the idea that long-tail content is particularly susceptible to inclusion in AI Overviews. Analysis for Q1 2026 shows health information hardest hit; health and wellness site Healthline is noted as losing 48% of its audience year on year, according to data from Ipsos iris.

Other heavily affected verticals include tech, with AI Overviews appearing in 47% of searches; travel, 39%; lifestyle, 37%; and money, 35%.

Barry told Press Gazette: "This enforces the notion that publishers should move away from producing content that merely reflects established consensus, and instead focus on content that provides new information. Reporting the latest news and providing insightful analysis on it, regardless of category, appears mostly immune to AI summarisation."

Trend-driven content

One of the least affected verticals in the Sistrix research was sport, with AI Overviews appearing in about 15% of searches.

In '[The impact of AI Overviews on Spanish media](#)' study, Clara Soteras also highlights sports as one of the areas Google is limiting the appearance of overviews. The study concludes that Google is doing this to 'mitigate the risk of hallucinations in topics...where the need for second-by-second updated sources outweighs the current synthesis capacity of LLMs'.

The report advises that current events remain a safe haven against AI and that strengthening real-time coverage helps presence in Google's Top Stories and Discover. "The main conclusion is that, obviously, if we work on breaking news, for now, we can try to catch search traffic," Clara explains.



Have you discovered Discover?

Publishers are mitigating zero-click losses by targeting Google Discover as a channel to push content directly to user feeds, leveraging the breaking news limits on AI overviews.

To maximise Discover traffic, publishers need to pivot from keywords to engagement; success depends on high-interest or trending topics with compelling, curiosity-driven headlines. Crucially, articles must feature high-resolution preview images to capture visual attention, while content maintains strong E.E.A.T. signals to build the algorithmic trust needed for frequent feed placement.

The downside is Discover's algorithm is volatile and unpredictable. Ultimately, publishers should use these tools to complement a resilient audience-first strategy rather than depending on them entirely.

Not every publisher is a news publisher, however, and a focus on breaking topics can be a challenge for specialist or lifestyle publishers. "We have a problem with niche sites," Clara says, "The technology sites have a huge problem, because they are losing all their evergreen traffic. They need to change formats."

She thinks product reviews or 'how-to' content should probably 'disappear' from publishing strategies focused on traffic acquisition. "Reviews or content that explains how to do something, probably doesn't work now."

Instead, Clara is working with non-news publishers to find an approach that echoes breaking news coverage. She recommends that they change their perspective on product or lifestyle content, away from keywords towards placing within a trend-of-the-day context.

"You need to catch the trend of the day with your core products," she explains. "So, for example, [mention] it's St Patrick's Day [when] talking about our products and technology, or or 'how to take the best photos for this marathon'."

She says a publisher covering restaurants and bars in Spain could talk about the best place to get an octopus sandwich while watching that evening's match between Madrid and Barcelona. Or, for publishers working in the fashion niche while the Eurovision song content is on, talk about the best outfit of the contest.

The human-made premium

Clara sees the zero-click content shift strengthening traditional journalistic values. "I try to evangelise in all the newsrooms, we have the opportunity now to put journalism [first], to put the audience in focus, and recover the opportunity of being editorially run."

John Fong agrees: "I think this is where hardcore journalism thrives. Nobody can do investigative journalism like a human being.

AI wouldn't be able to do that." He notes the accuracy warnings on every AI search interface. "Every single AI engine that you go to, there will be a caution to 'please check the facts'. This is where storytelling, traditional journalism, really, really comes out [strong]."

This echoes the consensus on a panel discussing [AI and the future of trusted media](#) at Flashes & Flames' 'Definitive AI Forum' held in London at the end of 2025. While AI was seen as a huge win behind the scenes, keeping a 'human in the loop' was crucial to ensure the accuracy of published material.

PA Media Group CEO Emily Shelley said: "We've looked at a number of tools and run a number of experiments; they're just not accurate enough for us at the moment."

"Every single AI engine that you go to, there will be a caution to 'please check the facts.' "

Beyond the ability to report from the real world and work to established norms of editorial integrity and accuracy, people-led platforms are also a strong engagement driver.

Barry Adams suggests that if publishers have 'good, strong journalistic voices' in their organisations, they should be promoting them. "People like talking to people. People like listening to people. If they trust a certain journalist, trust a certain voice, they will follow that voice... from the written word to podcasts and videos. If you start doing events and put that personality on stage, you'll sell more tickets."

Audience-first publishing

Whether you are selling tickets or subscriptions or just trying to capture clicks, putting the audience front and centre in your publishing

strategy is a key tenet of commercially sustainable publishing today.

The rise of reader-revenue models over the last five years reintroduced the idea that quality pays and previous pressures on programmatic advertising returns sealed the deal. John Fong says increased instances of zero-click have simply accelerated the trend for publishers to shift from traffic-first to audience-first business models.

For him, making that change successfully is inherently about creating content that squares with user needs, but also about the development of owned-audience channels. He contrasts the value of 500,000 engaged newsletter subscribers with 5 million monthly uniques from search referral.

"I think [traffic] is something that some publishers take for granted," he explains. "They rely too much on search engines and this is where I think, as a publisher or a content producer, you need to own your audience."

By owning the audience - building direct relationships through newsletters, podcasts and apps or subscription and membership programmes - publishers can insulate themselves from the biggest changes in the search landscape.

Barry Adams acknowledged that adopting an audience-first strategy can be 'quite uncomfortable' for publishers more used to broadcasting. "Listening to your audience is a very scary prospect, because they might say something you don't like," he explains.

Ironically, he says, the answer to zero-click search is to produce the type of content that Google rewards - unique, added-value for users. "Content that AI can't replicate. That users actively want to reach out for," he says. "If you do that, if you really focus on that at the expense of everything else, you will find yourself not relying on Google anymore, because your readers will go directly to you."

Barry thinks some publishers have always had an audience-first vision, delivering value around

"Listening to your audience is a very scary prospect, because they might say something you don't like"

audience needs. "The big news brands out there, the ones that are actually doing quite well, even the ones who went behind hard paywalls... they've never lost sight of what their purpose is for their audience."

He explains that, although these publishers see Google as a powerful channel, it is only as a means to an end - making sure their content gets the audience it deserves. "Rather than putting the algorithm first, they put the audience first and then see how they can maximise visibility."

In a Press Gazette article reporting that SEO leaders were urging against 'Google Zero' fatalism, the Daily Mail's director of SEO, [Carly Steven](#), spotlighted the value of content that audiences want. She told Press Gazette: "Google's systems are increasingly focused on rewarding genuine quality content... I think this has to be the main focus - create content that truly satisfies users, and the algorithms generally follow."

Is your zero-click glass half empty or half full?

Almost every digital disruption that the publishing industry has faced can be seen as a glass-half-empty challenge or as a glass-half-full opportunity. Zero-click search is no exception.

On the surface, the arrival of AI Overviews and answer engines poses a triple threat to discoverability, site traffic and ultimately revenue. However, in acting to counter lost visibility, publishers have the opportunity to build a robust post-Google future.

Cure your click addiction

Challenge - Moving on from referral traffic will require big shifts in publishing strategy, away from commodity content optimised for referrals to value-added content, distribution, marketing and sales efforts that address highly specific user and advertiser needs.

Opportunity - Delivering targeted value to consumers and brands positions publishers to take back control of their own audiences and revenue growth, weakening reliance on unpredictable third-party referrals and programmatic revenue.

Become an audience-first publisher

Challenge - Adopting an audience-first strategy takes effort. Publishers need to move beyond the 'broadcast' approach that so much search-optimised content has rested on, and develop the 'listening' skills and product development methodologies needed to truly meet user needs.

Opportunity - Developing a deep understanding of user needs enables publishers to deliver unique added-value for users and build the foundations for direct relationships through owned audience channels, but also rank well in traditional and emerging search channels.

Emphasise people-led content

Challenge - The only way to produce people-led content is to invest in human resources. In an age of AI-powered automation, this can seem counter intuitive and securing investment to develop and promote human-made journalism will require careful persuasion.

Opportunity - Personalities expressing unique opinions and strong expertise drive engagement and cannot be synthesised in AI-generated content. People follow people and promoting human talent is a powerful defence against AI disintermediation.

Diversify everything

Challenge - Shifting from a single platform for audience acquisition and revenue requires investment in content, product development and marketing. Experimentation takes time and not every effort to build new acquisition channels or revenue streams will succeed.

Opportunity - The era of relying on a single business driver is over. Transitioning to a diversified model, with multiple channels for content distribution and revenue generation, protects publishers from third-party shocks and positions them to create value in new ways.

Deploy an agile tech stack

Challenge - The rapid pace of AI development has made infrastructure investment more complex. Fixing priorities in a publishing ecosystem that is constantly changing, requires publishers to have a firm understanding of their own business as well as available solutions.

Opportunity - Tested technologies that integrate emerging AI techniques position publishers to meet the ever-changing demands of multimodal, omnichannel content. Agility and integration remove the need to retool operations with every algorithmic shift or change in audience behaviours.

Prepare for the rise of AI

Challenge - Keeping up with the twists and turns of AI developments and the technology's impact on publishing operations is a full-time job. Certainty is impossible and knowing where to place the best bets can feel more like gambling than strategic management.

Opportunity - Back office efficiencies are letting publishers double down on value-added publishing practices, from SEO evolutions to journalistic accuracy and integrity. Invest AI-driven operational savings in AI-friendly content aligned with user needs to bolster long-term visibility in answer-engines.



The zero-click catalyst

As we began to wrap up the design for this report, Google made the biggest change to its search box in about a quarter of a century. It's getting bigger so that people can ask longer questions, and on searches that deliver AI Overviews, people can ask follow-up questions in AI Mode.

The Rebooting's [Brian Morrissey](#) wrote: "Google rolled out a new AI search experience that will shift its approach to an agentic experience that will further erode traffic to publishers. The open web has gone from getting its affairs in order to calling for the priest."

No one I spoke to for this report, and not a lot I read, supported the notion that Google Zero is imminent, but maybe it just crept a little closer. And seeing the threat as a driver for change is crucial.

At the PPA Festival in London in May 2026, Future Publishing's SVP for Content Strategy & Audience Development, Simon Collis, said: "People use Google Zero without meaning the same thing... but it's a really good antagonistic term that helps drive change."

Google Zero may still be a way off, but zero-click search is real and it is having a direct impact on publisher traffic around the world now. While the scale of the impact is still up for debate, the fact that a growing percentage of clicks will be lost to answer engines is not.

Evolve, adapt, survive

It's clearer than ever that publishers can't rely on renting audiences from Google any more than they could any other third-party platform. Long-term success calls for an audience-first approach, one that prioritises direct relationships on owned channels. Premium subscription products, newsletters, podcasts and apps will all become increasingly important.

Generic product reviews, lifestyle articles,

and how-to guides are suffering the biggest traffic declines as AI Overviews synthesise widely available facts into SERP summaries. Publishers should instead focus on building 'trending topic frameworks' for their content and leaning into people-led formats and platforms that trade on the 'human-made' premium.

AEO is not a new dark art; it is an evolution of established SEO best practices. With traditional Google search still delivering the vast majority of referral traffic, publishers should be tweaking their SEO efforts to adapt to specific answer-engine requirements. They should not give up on SEO frameworks that work: Experience - Expertise - Authority - Trust.

Agile, integrated technology stacks are a key weapon in combating the zero-click threat. The flexibility of headless architectures enables publishers to decouple content and presentation layers to facilitate omnichannel distribution; automations will support emerging schemas to improve discoverability across established and emerging search interfaces.

Zero-click search is disrupting long established business models - the era of traffic-maxxing in pursuit of programmatic revenue is collapsing. However, it will only become an existential threat for publishers that don't act to lessen their dependence on Google's referral traffic, trading volume for value, drive-by clicks for engagement and loyalty.

In the long term, the zero-click content shift might just be the catalyst for making your publishing business more self reliant, sustainable and commercially resilient.

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