Transcript: Google for academic research – Personalisation in Google

Your search will be personalised based on:

- Location
- Past search history (from your Google account)
- Past browsing history (from local cookies)
- Activity in other areas of Google (e.g. YouTube)

The device you are using (e.g. phone v. laptop) [more than half of Google's searches happen on mobile and it is not always presenting the same content as it would on a laptop or desktop.]

Also note that Google ranks mobile friendly sites higher in results whichever device you are using for your search

Search history of your contacts

Why? Ostensibly to present you with a more personally relevant set of results but it isn't just for your benefit – it is so they can target advertising more successfully. And this works, they make incredible amounts of money and most (90%) of this profit comes from their successful use of advertising.

As we are on academic network Google recognises this and actually strips out some of the ads so you'll see less ads here than on a home or in a café.

You can see this very clearly when you do a non-academic search, for instance

Cinema

You can see it is showing me a map of my local area and listing local cinemas.

Could be useful for ordinary searching, up to you how much you use and appreciate the personalisation, or find it creepy and avoid it.

It is unsettling though to think that academics in different places and with different hobbies could do a literature search for a project they are working on together and get different results, or at least differently ranked results – which given the sheer numbers we are talking about pretty much amount to the same thing.

Even if you have no Google account, if someone has sent you an email ever from their gmail, then Google will know about you…

You can un-personalise your search:

- Switch off web/search history
- Clear cookies
- Log out of your Google account

Or simply use **private/incognito browsing**

Firefox ; Internet Explorer: Ctrl+Shift+P

Chrome: Ctrl+Shift+N ; Safari: Cmnd+Shift+N

Private browsing will not remove country personalisation and will not hide your IP address.

One approach that I see many academic colleagues adopting, is to deliberately separate your normal and academic searches and to open a separate window for academic searching which has no personalisation going on.

Chrome helpfully explains what is going on:

You've gone incognito. Pages you view in incognito tabs won't stick around in your browser's history, cookie store, or search history after you've closed **all** of your incognito tabs. Any files you download or bookmarks you create will be kept.

However, you aren't invisible. Going incognito doesn't hide your browsing from your employer, your internet service provider, or the websites you visit.

i.e. Incognito browsing doesn't use cookies or search history (so is good because it gives you a neutral search and doesn't save any history) However it will not remove country personalisation and will not hide your IP address from anyone (the university/employer will still know!)