



Investigating Search: A Hands-on Workshop with the Investigating Search Toolkit

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1. Purpose

This workshop invites participants to install, test, and contribute to the Investigating Search Interface, a Chrome browser extension developed at the University of Birmingham that overlays research-led prompts onto Google search results and asks users to think critically about search as they search. The 2025 SEASON workshop introduced the project and gathered design feedback through discussion. This session puts the tool into participants' hands. Attendees will run the Interface on their own devices, generate new content for its database and help shape The Investigating Search Companion, the collaboratively authored reference resource that the Interface draws from. The session welcomes those encountering the project for the first time, as well as returning participants who wish to engage with the latest prototype and contribute to the project's next steps.

2. Abstract

Search engines mediate how people encounter contested public questions, from health and politics to migration and climate, and the interpretive choices encoded in their rankings remain, in most cases, illegible to the people whose queries they answer (Benjamin, 2019; Haider & Sundin, 2019; Mager, 2012; Noble, 2018). Academic research on these dynamics is well established. What remains underdeveloped is the infrastructure for translating that research into forms non-academic users can engage with at the moment of searching.

The Investigating Search Toolkit addresses this gap. Two components sit under the Toolkit umbrella. The Investigating Search Interface is the user-facing tool: a Chrome browser extension that overlays research-led prompts onto Google search results as users search. The prompts highlight relevant research questions and evidence from scholarship, and explain a mechanism at work in the page a user is looking at: how results are ranked, how they are personalised, how an answer has been composed. Each explanation is grounded in the relevant research, turning a search result into something to examine rather than accept. In doing so, the Interface makes the algorithmically opaque layer of search visible and interrogable, operationalising the scholarly argument that the choices embedded in search design carry ethical consequences and that users deserve the means to examine them (Graham, 2023). The approach sits within a wider landscape of user-centred intervention research (Hartwig et al., 2024; Smith & Rieh, 2019), distinguished by placing its explanations on the live results page at the moment of use. That page is itself changing: an AI-composed answer now often sits above the results a prompt discusses, arriving before a user has had the chance to ask questions of their own.

The Investigating Search Companion is the project's open-access reference resource, currently in early-access scaffolding: specialist-authored, peer-reviewed entries written in language accessible to a general reader, each providing the longer argument behind a prompt for those who want to follow it

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further. Its structure, scope, and editorial priorities are still open. Participants in this session contribute directly to those decisions.

Where the 2025 session gathered design feedback through discussion, this workshop gives participants the tool to use and evaluate firsthand. A structured evaluation placement in summer 2026 mapped the tool's coverage across everyday search domains, and the demand-and-gap map it produced now directs content development. The session generates user-testing observations, new topic and trigger suggestions, and ideas for Companion entries, feeding directly into a planned user study and the first round of editorial commissioning.

3. Format (180 minutes)

Introduction and project update (15 minutes). A brief orientation for newcomers, paired with a summary of what has changed since 2025 for returning participants.

Hands-on testing: install and search (30 minutes). Participants install the Interface on their own devices, with a pre-circulated installation guide and live troubleshooting support (and paired working as a fallback), and carry out guided search tasks designed to surface the Interface's strengths and limitations in practice: queries where prompts fire effectively, queries where triggers misfire or are absent, and queries that present particular challenges for the tool's design.

Coverage sweep (30 minutes). Working in pairs, participants extend the summer coverage map with real searches across everyday domains, logging what the tool matched, how strongly, and whether the match makes sense: the same method the summer evaluation used, applied by a room of search researchers to areas it has not yet reached.

Content generation workshop (45 minutes). Working in small groups formed around shared topical interests, participants shift from testing to making. Each group takes a topic area where the coverage evidence shows a gap and produces two outputs. The first is a set of new or improved triggers and prompt text for the Interface. The second is a one-page outline for a Companion entry on that topic: what claims does a general reader need, what sources support them, and what format would be most engaging? Groups draw on their own research expertise to populate areas the current database does not yet cover. Contributions are captured through the project's editorial review process rather than entering the live database directly: nothing reaches users unreviewed.

Design feedback and discussion (40 minutes). Groups share their outputs, and the session opens into a facilitated discussion of three design questions that matter for the project's next phase. First, which topic areas should the Companion prioritise for its first commissioned entries, and what criteria should guide that prioritisation? Second, what editorial governance does the Companion need to be credible and sustainable as a collaboratively authored resource? Third, where are the strongest opportunities for classroom or public deployment of the Toolkit?

Synthesis and next steps (20 minutes). The session closes with a structured summary of what has been produced, how it will be used, and what the project's next milestones are. That includes the planned user study: its protocol is fixed separately under ethics approval, but the queries and gaps this room produces shape its materials.

4. Outcomes

Participants leave with hands-on experience of a research tool in active development, at a stage when their searches, findings, and contributions will help shape what the tool becomes. The session also offers a close encounter with a live design challenge: how academic knowledge about search reaches the people whose searches it describes. I am especially interested in what colleagues find when they search outside the project's existing topic areas, and what questions the current framing hasn't yet thought to ask: that kind of critical attention is exactly what SEASON brings.



5. References

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