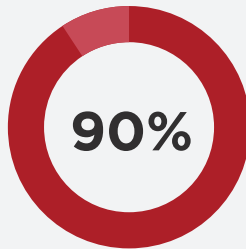




## IS BOUNCE RATE A RANKING FACTOR?

### HYPOTHESIS

Bounce rate is a ranking factor.



### BACKGROUND INFO

Bounce rate is a metric that measures user interaction with a page. If a user visits a webpage and then leaves that page without clicking something on the page, that user has 'bounced' from the page.

If every visitor to a page left the page without clicking on anything else, that page would have a bounce rate of 100%. If every visitor to a page clicked on something, that page would have a bounce rate of 0%. A broad assumption on user engagement is that if a user is interested in your content they will click further into your site. As a result a low bounce rate is often said to be desirable. However is a low bounce rate a positive ranking factor?

While just about every SEO that is in the trenches believes that bounce rate is a ranking factor, many of the experts disagree. From March of this year, an article from SEO Roundtable, written by Barry Schwartz, the founder of SEO Roundtable, discusses why bounce rate cannot be a ranking factor.

### The main reasons being:

- Google doesn't have the ability to get bounce rate data
- Google has said in the past that bounce rate can be spammed or manipulated
- For some sites or pages, a high bounce rate doesn't indicate poor user engagement. Said another way, users might search for an answer, get the answer they need and then leave a webpage without further engagement. They didn't have a poor experience, in fact they may have had the perfect experience, they simply didn't need to click anymore into the site. As a result, bounce rate can't be used because it would be unfair to some niches.

<https://www.seroundtable.com/bounce-rates-impact-google-rankings-21840.html>

## As a brief rebuttal to the points above

1. Google can extrapolate data obtained either from sites that have Google Analytics installed or possibly from Google's Safe Search technology. Google wouldn't need the bounce rates of every site to set standards. They would really only need the data from a subset of sites, similar to how polling works.
2. So what? So are links and they are ranking factor.
3. It seems very reasonable that the appropriate target for bounce rate would shift according to the search query. It would be illogical to set a single standard across the entire web.

*In my personal opinion, the reasons given against are rather disingenuous. Additionally, as any member of SIA can see in those reasons, none of them say, 'I have tested bounce rates and know that they aren't a ranking factor.'*

In an interview from this year for Search Engine Watch, Rand Fishkin, from MOZ, stated that in a few tests that he's run recently, he has seen that sometimes bounce rate is a ranking factor, but not all times. The control factor in the tests as described by Fishkin is a bit questionable at best and it's not discussed what niche the tests were conducted in. Nevertheless, we're definitely getting closer to a reasonable look at things (rather than Schwartz's anecdotal article).

<https://searchenginewatch.com/2016/05/04/do-bounce-rates-affect-a-sites-search-engine-ranking/>

**So this is where we come in. We'll set up a test to see if bounce rate is a ranking factor.**

## Test Setup

**Five identical test pages were created and indexed. The page in the #3 ranking position was chosen as the experiment page.**



I created five Mechanical Turk projects to create the traffic to these pages and to manipulate bounce rates. Mechanical Turk is a platform where you can pay real workers to complete online tasks. While not specifically an SEO program, such as Crowdsearch, Mechanical Turk seemed ideal for our purposes. Within the program, we could pay workers to click where we wanted them to click.

Here's a link for more information on Mechanical Turk:  
<https://www.mturk.com/mturk/help?helpPage=overview>

For the experiment page, users were instructed to go to the test page, wait 30 seconds, and then click the link on the page. By clicking a link on the experiment page, the goal is to reduce the bounce rate on the page to 0%, or as near as we could get it.

For the other test pages, users were instructed to go to the pages, wait 30 seconds, and then leave the pages. Without engaging in any other actions, the goal is to have the test pages as close to 100% as possible. We assume that some users will make mistakes and click on the wrongs.

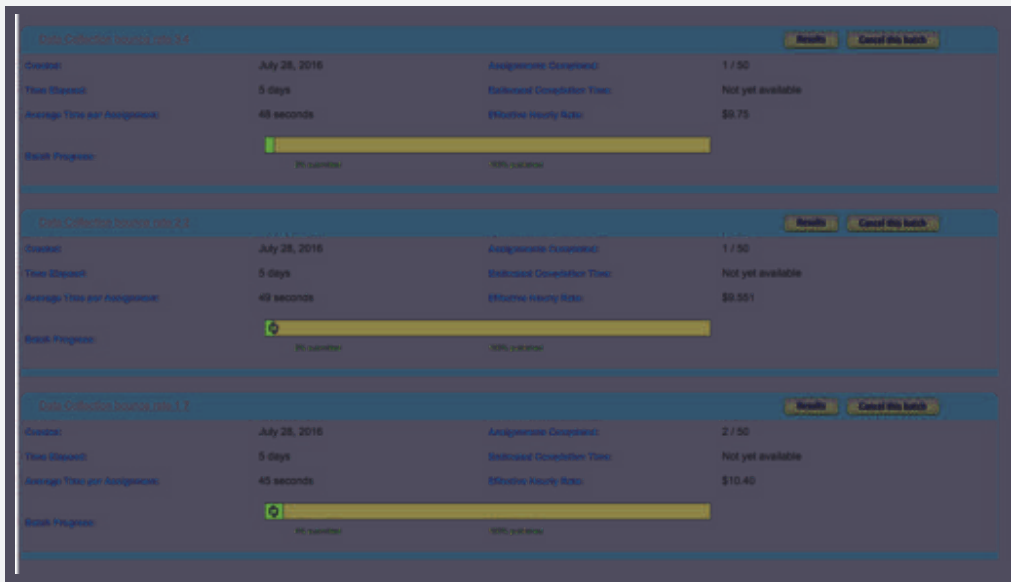
We also assume that any tool used to monitor traffic will be an imperfect measuring tool and may miss some of the data. However, if we have an experiment page that is close as possible to 0% bounce rate and other test pages as close as possible to 100% bounce rate we anticipate the page with a 0% bounce rate will move up in rankings if bounce rate is a ranking factor.

The screenshot shows the Mechanical Turk project management interface for a project titled "Data Collection bounce rate 3.4". The interface includes a progress bar showing the project is "In Progress" with a yellow bar. Key statistics include: 1 / 50 assignments completed, an average time per assignment of 48 seconds, and an average hourly rate of \$0.75. The project was created on July 28, 2016, at 8:01 AM PDT. The estimated completion time is "Not yet available".

The "Assignment" section provides details: Description: "Go to a web page, wait 30 seconds and look up a word"; Keywords: "data collection, SEO, view pages, view a website"; Qualification Requirement: "Masters has been granted"; Number of Assignments per HIT: 50; Reward per Assignment: \$0.13; HIT expires on: August 02, 2016 8:01 AM PDT (TODAY); Assignment duration: 1 minute; Auto Approval Delay: 8 hours.

The "Results" section shows: Assignments pending review: 0; Assignments approved: 1; Assignments rejected: 0.

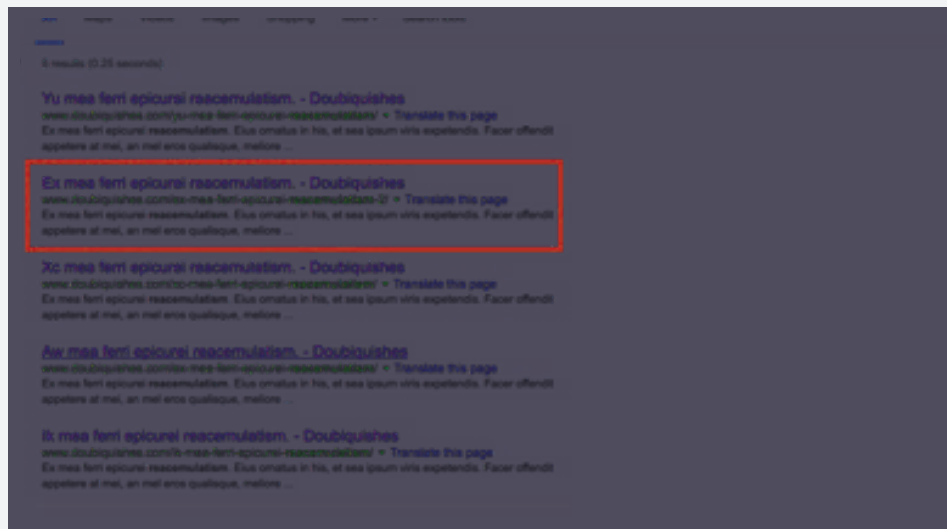
The "Cost Summary" section shows: Estimated Total Reward: \$6.50; Estimated Fees to Mechanical Turk: \$3.00 (30% (fixed)); Estimated Total Cost: \$9.50. A note states: "These costs are only an estimate until all of the assignments have been submitted and reviewed."



I set up Google Analytics on the test pages to monitor the traffic and bounce rates.

## Results

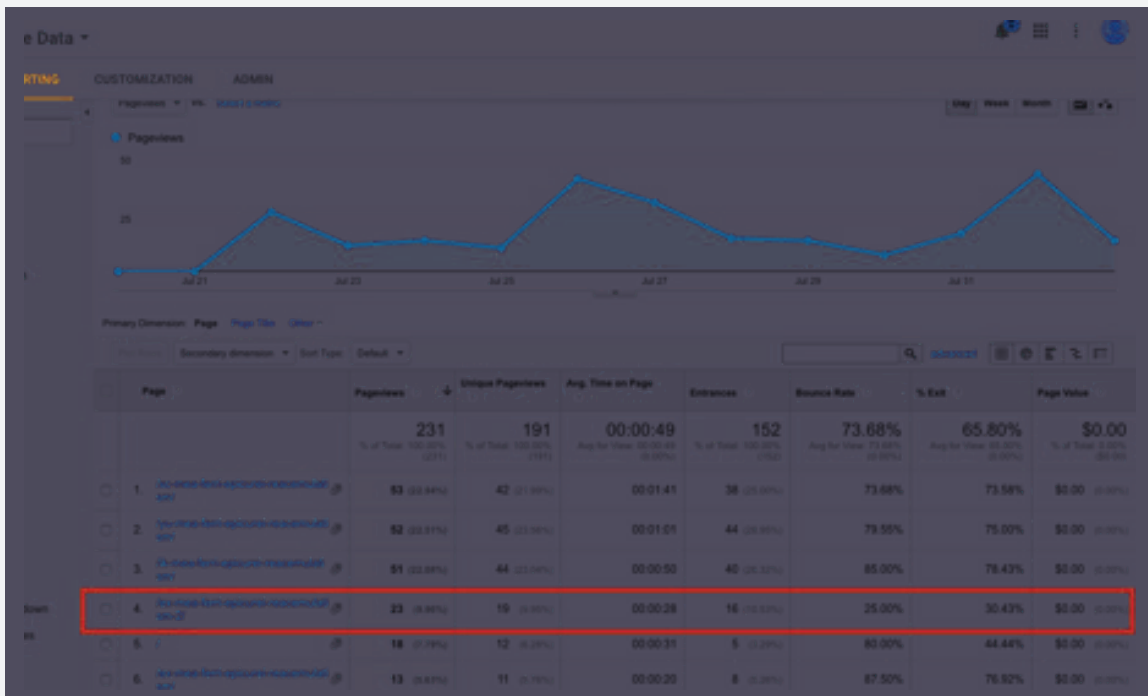
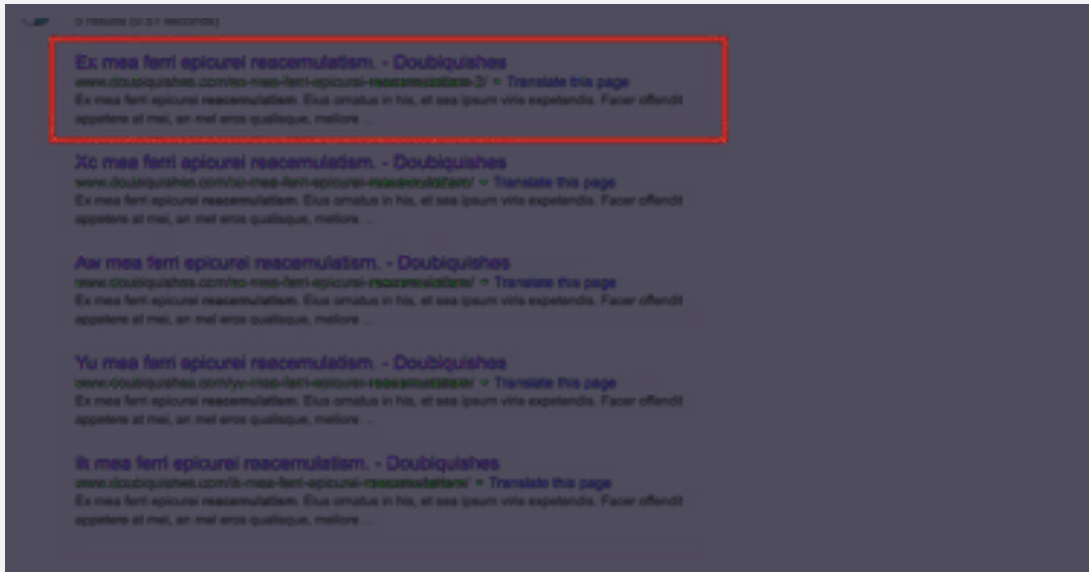
After 2 days and just a few visits we already have movement.



Looking at Google Analytics, you can see the experiment page has a bounce rate of 0% while the other test pages have bounce rates of 66%-83%.



After several more days, rankings stayed the same with the experiment page in the #1 position.



## Analysis

**I was very happy with the results of this test seeing bounce rate as a clear ranking factor. As expected, we couldn't get the experiment page at 0% and the test pages at 100% but there is a clear margin between the bounce rate of the experiment page at 25% and the test pages at 73% to 87%.**

A very interesting outcome is that the experiment page recorded fewer visits in Google Analytics than 3 of the 4 test pages. It's extremely interesting that the quality of the visit would be more important than the quantity.

**As the test environment uses a keyword that is not in Google's database it stands to reason that an appropriate niche targeted bounce rate hasn't been established for that term yet.**

As such, the lowest bounce rate will be seen as the best. As Google gathers more data on a particular term, such as the search tendencies for users searching for that term, it would be reasonable to assume that what is the appropriate bounce rate, the rate that Google would use as a positive ranking factor, would shift.

**Another point to consider relating to Fishkin's experiment is that it seems he tried to manipulate bounce rate by a mass number of searches at one time.**

A spike in metrics that appears to be an anomaly can be easily ignored by the algorithm. I would not be surprised if the large surge in unexpected traffic is an explanation for why he obtained some positive results, but not every time. If you decide to work on your bounce rates, I would make sure that you take a long term approach to decrease bounce rate over the space of weeks or even months, rather than a large, sudden drop.

**Determining a 'good' or target bounce rate is probably more tricky than determining if bounce rate is a ranking factor.**

It seems unlikely that if you call to the top 10 sites for a particular search term they will happily share their bounce rate data with you. I would start with identifying the type of site that you have and then do some searches for industry standards. Compare those standards to your current metrics and make a plan of action, if necessary.

**Here is a post from Kissmetrics to get you started:**

**<https://blog.kissmetrics.com/bounce-rate/>**

**This is by no means an endorsement of Kissmetric's numbers, but should just be used as a reasonable starting point.**

A note on Mechanical Turk if you try to use it to run your own tests. After this bounce rate test was completed, I then went on to set up tests for page views, time on site, and Google Analytics conversions, however, Mechanical Turk started shutting down my projects. One of the terms of use for Mechanical Turk is to not use the program to manipulate search results. I'm working now on the language of the projects to see if I can sneak it passed the SEO filters that they have put into place. I'm also looking into other platforms.



## DOES A PAGE THAT USES THE SECURE PROTOCOL, HTTPS, BEAT AN UNSECURE PAGE THAT IS USING HTTP?

### HYPOTHESIS

**HTTPS is a ranking factor**

`https://yourwebsitesitelink.com`

`http://yourwebsitesitelink.com`

### BACKGROUND INFO

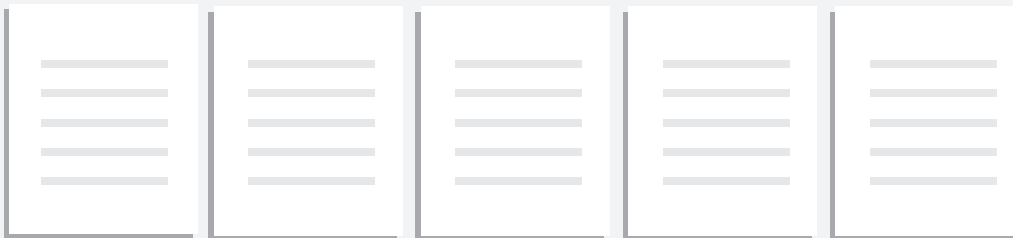
**According to Google, you should always use https, even if your site does not handle any sensitive data. Google states this maxim in their developer's guide as part of a 'web fundamental'**

<https://developers.google.com/web/fundamentals/security/encrypt-in-transit/why-https?hl=en>

If Google states that all websites should use https, does that mean they also use it as a ranking factor? That's what we want to find out.

### Test Setup

https



5 identical pages were indexed. The page in the #3 ranking position was secured using a standard ssl certificate. As such the protocol for that page changed to https, whereas all the other test pages remained http.