

Augmenting Brains: Google Turns Twenty. The Google Search Engine Commodifies and Controls Choice

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“Eventually you’ll have the implant, where if you think about a fact, it will just tell you an answer.” – Larry Page, co-founder of Google

The Verge [starts](#) with a statement that has become commonplace, the compulsory nod to power one has come to expect when engaged with that whole mammoth enterprise known as Google. “No technology company is arguably more responsible for shaping the modern internet, the modern life, than Google.”

The story of Google is all minted Silicon Valley: the modest research project birthed in computer lingo and networking, the serendipitous meeting of graduate students, and the finding of auspicious and enormously productive garage locations. The names tell a story: fresh, childish but hopeful. Alphabet spawned Google, and so forth. These were the products of, [scorned](#) Jonathan Taplin in his sharp *Move Fast and Break Things*, spoiled, ignorant brats.

In a sense, the Google experiment is all homage to behavioural tendencies writ large, an attempt on the part of the founders less to control than predict. (This distinction, it must be said, has been lost.) How do people search for what is important? Who tells them? The PageRank algorithm of Google is moderate blessing and heavily laden curse, reducing the conduct of human searches to a dimension of repetition and faux enlargement of knowledge. But the paradox of such behaviour is not so much a broadening of mind as a reconfirmation of its narrowing. You are fed results you expect; in time, you are delivered the results you expect. Variety is stifled within the very system that supposedly promotes a world of seamless access.

But there it is. The Google search engine commodifies and controls choice, thereby leaving you with little. The impression of a world with abundance is essential, and draws out the curse of plenty: your choice is pre-empted, and typing in a search term generates terms you might wish to pursue. Even the traditional library is hard to retreat to in certain respects given that librarians are becoming allergic to matters of paper, covers and book spines, a catalogue outsourced beyond its walls. The modern library has become the product of such market management fetish as knowledge centres, which is far more in line with Google speak.

Google has also reduced us to phone-reaching idiocy, an impulsive dive into the creature of all knowing answers that lies in the pocket and is procured at a moment’s notice. Few conversations go by these days without that nasty God of the search engine making its celebrated entry to dispel doubts and right wrongs. Not knowing a “fact” is intrinsically

linked to the rescue of finding out what Google will tell you.

Larry Page has made little secret of its all-conquering, cerebral mission manifested through the all-powerful search engine. It verges on the creepily totalitarian, but more in the fashion of Brave New World seductiveness than 1984 torture and stomping.

“It will be included in people’s brains,” [he explained](#) to a veteran observer of the company, Steven Levy. “When you think about something and don’t really know much about it, you will automatically get information.”

Similarly for fellow founder Sergey Brin, Google is viewed “as a way to augment your brain with the knowledge of the world.”

There is the other side: company concentration, exquisitely vast power that has wooed critics, and a self-assumed omniscience that crushes competition. It is such characteristics that determine Google as a sovereign exception that seems to trounce the prerogative of many states: there are regulations made by elected officials, but these can, and will be subverted, if needed. But there is another side of the Google phenomenon: calculated compliance, and collaboration verging on the obsequious. Business remains business, and having such a concentrated entity exerting dominion over the Internet and the market is the very thing that should trouble anti-trust specialists.

This very fact struck the Louisiana Attorney General Jeff Landry as relevant. If Google was to be dealt with in any feasible way, it would have to be through the traditional weaponry of the anti-trust suit (think, he reminds us, of Standard Oil 1910).

“This can’t be fixed legislatively,” [suggested](#) Landry to Baton Rouge’s The Advocate. “We need to go to court with an antitrust suit.”

The European Union has already taken up the matter, [fining](#) Google \$5 billion for antitrust violations relating to its Android market dominance, notably its bundling of the search engine and Chrome apps into the operating system while also making “payments to certain large manufacturers and mobile network operators” to exclusively bundle the Google search app on handsets.

The suggestion for some form of antitrust action against Google and other technological giants in the US itself is now being lost in the political opportunism of the Trump Whitehouse. On Tuesday, US Attorney General Jeff Sessions [convened](#) a gathering of various officials to consider “a growing concern” about how certain companies might “be hurting competition an intentionally stifling the free exchange of ideas on their platforms”.

The problem here is not the premise Sessions is pursuing. What matters is the reason he is taking such an interest, pressed by the sledgehammer approach advocated by President Donald J. Trump. That ever sensitive leader of the confused free world claims that the search engine has developed a bias *against* him, yet another [rigged](#) entity in action.

Trump’s critics also have issues with social media sites and Google’s search engine. Like Hillary Rodham Clinton, they argue, conversely, that such entities promoted the forces of reaction. Had they not been so easily susceptible to those wicked Russians in spreading

misinformation during the 2016 presidential campaign, Trump would never have gotten the keys to the White House. That proposition has been given some academic ballast with Kathleen Hall Jamieson's [*Cyberwar: How Russian Hackers and Trolls Helped Elect a President – What We Don't, Can't, and Do Know*](#), though it remains qualified at best.

Reaching the age of 20 has certainly brought Google to the summit of criticism and a certain pervasive idolatry. There are those who feel erroneously slighted (Trump and Clinton); there are those who wish their records erased from the search engine in an effort to make their lives anew (the right to forget the foolish error); and then there are those who simply could not be bothered to do a bit more digging for something that is so effortlessly available. "Google is the oracle of redirection," [claims](#) James Gleick. In due course, its own influence will, in time, require redirection, and the brats may have to be disciplined accordingly.

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