

## *Gaga Over Google*

More than a Search Engine, Less than a Mind

**T**he tremendous success of Google is due largely to one brilliant realization: that the actual information on the Internet is less important than the links that hold it together. The Google search engine was designed around this insight, and its uncannily accurate results made it spectacularly popular—and eventually, indispensable.

Naturally, we have come to take Google for granted. It is the standard starting point for students, teachers, and writers

doing research. Anyone wanting to self-diagnose a mysterious medical condition, or check the spelling of a foreign leader's name, or settle a bet about a sports statistic, will use Google. Prospective employers depend on it for background checks—as do prospective soul mates. We google our friends, we google our families, we google ourselves.

It is difficult to remember just how bad Internet searching was before Google's debut. As two *Wall Street Journal* colum-

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nists put it: “Google washed all this muck away—we’ve never met anybody who didn’t adopt Google as their search engine the day they discovered it.”

To its basic search function—the everyday archive of four *billion* websites—Google has added an array of useful tools: an archive of cached websites, a spelling fixer, an automated news-sorting service, a pop-up blocker, a shopping service, and more. Google’s pages are available in dozens of languages (including Zulu, Xhosa, Esperanto, Klingon, and Pig Latin). The company owns one of the most popular blogging systems. A free Google e-mail service is in the works, offering users over a hundred times more storage space than other free e-mail services. And—very important in the post-dot-com-bust era—the company operates an immensely profitable ad-targeting service.

Now comes news that Google will make a public stock offering, expected to bring the company billions of dollars. The company’s filing with the government included grand statements of Google’s business philosophy—such as a commitment to the public interest (“Google therefore has a responsibility to the world”) and an intention to shield the company from the breezes of the market (“A management team distracted by a series of short-term targets is as pointless as a dieter stepping on a scale every half hour”).

The transformation of Google into a publicly-traded multi-billion-dollar company is not without hazards, even aside from the growing pains of an adolescent business. Other companies—including digital giants Microsoft, Yahoo, and Amazon—will notch up their competitive efforts. Google will increasingly have to deal with matters of regulation and politics; the company has already been criti-

cized for its outsourcing practices and its privacy policies. And there is always a risk that the company’s many new offerings might eventually bog it down, detracting from the charming simplicity that has been a Google hallmark, and alienating its base of support.

Google will also have to cope with the manipulation of its search results. The Google search engine is accurate because its programming fits the hyperlinked nature of the Internet; the top-ranking websites are well-known for their well-knownness, to borrow Daniel Boorstin’s phrase. This means that it’s possible to “game the system”: with some cleverness and a good number of like-minded linkers, Google’s search results can be artificially distorted. This phenomenon is called “Google-bombing.” Some Google-bombs are carried off in the spirit of political pranks—for example, if you type “miserable failure” into Google the first result is George W. Bush’s biography, while a search on the term “waffles” brings you to John Kerry’s homepage.

Other Google-bombs are less amusing. If you search for “Jew,” the top result is a virulently anti-Semitic website. Google received so many complaints about this Google-bomb that it posted an apology—but explained why it wouldn’t tinker with the search to eliminate the offensive result: “Our search results are generated completely objectively and are independent of the beliefs and preferences of those who work at Google.... The only sites we omit are those we are legally compelled to remove or those maliciously attempting to manipulate our results.” Other result-distorting Google-bombs have involved corporations, religious groups, and private individuals. As Google stated in the papers it filed with the government in preparation

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for its stock offering: “We take this problem very seriously,” because a failure to defeat Google-bombing could harm the company’s reputation and “damage our business.”

So Google isn’t perfect, but its results are still the best thing going. In fact, Google’s results are so good that many users rely on it reflexively and constantly. Some websites carry testimonials to the effect that Google “has become part of my brain.” When disconnected from Google, one blogger has written, “I was in agony. I was unable to write reports and actually felt rather stupid without it. I then realized I had effectively undergone a temporary

lobotomy: Google is a part of my brain.” Another writes, “When they come out with versions that plug directly into my brain, I’ll be standing in line.” Others have gone further still, speculating that Google will allow the Internet to evolve from a collection of facts into (to borrow Emerson’s phrase) “the great, the universal mind.”

Overwrought metaphysical twaddle, to be sure. Yet it’s true that Google is changing not only the ways that we acquire information, but also our expectations of how the world can be understood. We would do well to remember that facts are no substitute for wisdom, and Google no substitute for a mind.