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In the beginning, the World Wide Web was exciting and open to the point of anarchy, a vast and intimidating repository of unindexed confusion. Into this creative chaos came Google with its dazzling mission—"To organize the world's information and make it universally accessible"—and its much-quoted motto, "Don't be evil." In this provocative book, Siva Vaidhyanathan examines the ways we have used and embraced Google—and the growing resistance to its expansion across the globe. He exposes the dark side of our Google fantasies, raising red flags about issues of intellectual property and the much-touted Google Book Search. He assesses Google's global impact, particularly in China, and explains the insidious effect of Googlization on the way we think. Finally, Vaidhyanathan proposes the construction of an Internet ecosystem designed to benefit the whole world and keep one brilliant and powerful company from falling into the "evil" it pledged to avoid.

The Googlization of Everything: (And Why We Should Worry) Details

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Robin says

This dude was not a good writer. Boring, boring writing. And it made me like Goggle that much more.

Colleen826 says

If you've ever been troubled by Google's seemingly omnipotent presence, its domination over the Internet, or just the sheer size of the behemoth company, then you might consider reading this book. I typically don't go for nonfiction because I prefer arguments and ideals to be subtly embedded within a fictional framework, but overall, I am glad that I took the time to read it.

Although Siva Vaidhyanathan is Professor of Media Studies and Law at the University of Virginia, The Googlization of Everything reads less like an academic text and more like a long-form article in Time. I say this largely because most of Vaidhyanathan's arguments are on the superficial side; there are both merits and drawbacks to his more casual approach. I wouldn't read The Googlization of Everything if you want a critical analysis of the way in which information itself has been re-defined in the digital age. Instead, I would consider this a primer on the history and founding of Google, as well as a broad overview of its business practices. It certainly doesn't hurt to know a bit more about one of the most important companies in operation today.

That caveat aside, Siva Vaidhyanathan has a refreshingly skeptical attitude toward Google. Most people I know don't think twice about typing terms into the search box. Vaidhyanathan examines this uncritical attitude and reveals how the general public's unquestioning acceptance of Google is made possible through the conceit of technofundamentalism. Technofundamentalism can be loosely defined as "the unquestioning embrace of all that technology has to offer, believing that it holds the answer to every problem" (source). Because of this almost mythological belief that technology is the key to human progress, everyone—from the U.S. government, to libraries, to consumers—has allowed Google's growth to proceed virtually unchecked. Granted, some of Google's intrusions have come with huge benefits, e.g. an ordered and searchable Internet. At the same time, Vaidhyanathan cautions us to be skeptical of Google's unofficial motto, "Don't be evil." At the end of the day, Google is a corporation that is motivated by profits, growth, and the market, something that, as Vaidhyanathan emphasizes, is all too easy to forget.

In my opinion, the most valuable argument that Vaidhyanathan makes has to do with the concept of "public failure." The privileging of private, corporate, and individual interests over the common good has allowed several crucial public institutions in the United States to fail—from schools to libraries to the prison system. Basically, what happens is that taxpayers are unwilling to shoulder the justifiably substantial costs of running these institutions. Budgets are slashed, but the institutions are held to increasingly higher standards. When the institutions finally (and predictably) fail, the public declares their existence unsustainable.

Public failure…occurs not necessarily because the state is the inappropriate agent to solve a particular problem; it may occur when the public sector has been intentionally dismantled, degraded, or underfunded, while expectations for its performance remain high…The public institutions that were supposed to provide services were prevented from doing so. Private actors filled the vacuum… In such circumstances, the failure

of public institutions gives rise to the circular logic that dominates political debate. Public institutions can fail; public institutions need tax revenue; therefore we must reduce the support for public institutions. The resulting failures then supply more anecdotes supporting the view that public institutions fail by design rather than by political choice. (p. 41)

It was in this atmosphere that Google stepped in and took on the monumental task of making sense of the Internet. Should this have been handled by a private corporation? Was Google given more trust than it deserved? Should libraries have attempted to tackle the vast expanse of the Internet? Should there have been intergovernmental treaties? The point that Vaidhyanathan makes is that while Google might have been a viable contender in this conversation, the conversation never happened. Google declared its interest, and Google has dominated the interwebs ever since.

Indeed, why should the government have bothered with designing a sophisticated search algorithm when a private corporation could do it efficiently and, seemingly, for free? The problem, as Vaidhyanathan emphasizes again and again, is that privacy, both collective and individual, is the price that must be paid in order to access all of that "free" information. Google tracks every search you conduct, records information about your search preferences, your political beliefs, where you live, and how much money you earn. People are (hopefully still) disgusted when they discover that the government is spying on them, yet don't think twice about surrendering all of their personal information to a private company. Furthermore, as more and more information moves exclusively into the online domain, libraries and other public institutions no longer seem like necessary repositories of human knowledge. Why bother keeping the physical book when you can just scan it and put it online for everyone to read? Ignoring the tangle of copyright complications, of course.

The drawbacks of The Googlization of Everything are twofold. First, the book was published in 2011, meaning that it is simultaneously dated (several important court decisions have been handed down in the intervening years) as well as too little, too late. Conversations about the meaning of the Internet have circulated in academia since the technology's inception—yet Vaidhyanathan doesn't seem to acknowledge most of those conversations. Many of his reservations have been expressed elsewhere, time and time and time again, though perhaps not as comprehensively as in his book. Or perhaps I have misunderstood the issue. Perhaps there truly aren't many academics who are concerned about Google's omnipotence and the way the company both expands and curtails access to knowledge. It's not a sector of academia that I am terribly familiar with, so perhaps the oversight is my own, not Vaidhyanathan's. At any rate, Vadhyanathan began a conversation, but he didn't conclude it.

Second, Vaidhyanathan is a victim of the very technofundamentalism that he decries. I got the sense that he was never able to entirely separate his respect for Google from his criticism of the company, which is a shame, as I think it prevented him from delving into deeper critiques. His first chapter, entitled "The Gospel of Google," is an obvious allusion to Genesis and the creation of the world as we know it. This was undoubtedly a tongue-in-cheek decision, but it unwittingly revealed Vaidhyanathan's perception of Google as a company of Biblical proportions. Technofundamentalism is the unquestioning, almost mythological, belief in technology, yes, but it's also a broader form of myopia, in which people are unable to discuss technology in relation to the forces that shape its creation, distribution, and use. In other words, what is our contemporary, philosophical relationship with knowledge? How does this enable the concept of a "public failure?" How does the disconnect between individual privacy vs. individual consumption of "free" goods arise? What, besides apathy and inattention on behalf of the public, could explain Google's meteoric ascent? I don't believe that Vaidhyanathan provided satisfying answers to these questions, and perhaps that wasn't the task he set out to fulfill with his book. Overall, I don't think he wasn't critical enough.

That said, until Vaidhyanathan speculated as to what might happen to the billions, if not trillions, of

webpages that Google has copied & stored as cached pages if the company were ever to be sold, or, even more improbably, go bankrupt, I have to admit that I had never, in my entire life, imagined a world without Google. I never thought, at any point, that Google would ever, could ever, cease to exist. This reveals my own status as a technofundamentalist. Google is like Standard Oil, the massive, horizontal oil company that dominated the United States from 1870 to 1911, until the Supreme Court ruled that it violated anti-trust laws. That was oil. This is the history and intellectual output of a huge swath of the human population, from the late 1990s onward. When Standard Oil failed, other oil companies stepped in. But which company, government, or nonprofit will be able to take on the role that Google has assumed? Nobody, including myself, likes to think about that.

Heather says

This book provides some much needed critical review of the Google juggernaut - its current place in our culture; its displacement of civic, government, and public services; our own misperceptions of what Google actually is. Vaidhyanathan approaches the subject from a variety of angles and ties in many interesting ideas to his arguments. He does not roundly, thoroughly condemn Google, but rather critically examines the cultural, social and educational value it holds right now, while acknowledging what it does do well. In a climate where it often feels like everybody uses Google, everybody loves Google and Google can do everything, it is refreshing to see an alternative viewpoint on the subject.

Jacob says

One of the reasons I review books is so that, if they are like this one, you don't have to. You're welcome!

It wasn't a long book to start with, but it took a bit to fight through because it stays kind of abstract. Like the subtitle says, the author is trying to get you to be worried, and the need for the book is being pitched as a threat: if you don't think about how Google is changing your life, bad things will happen! That's kind of a tall order: I don't convince easily about alarmist threats, especially if they're vague, low intensity, and don't have a lot to back them up. This one also tries to have it both ways: there's alarm that Google is changing the world into one uniform way of doing things so we will lose local color, but in the second half it's worried that because Google changes its behavior slightly for different local conditions, we won't have the global common ground that Google might otherwise provide.

As a threat this really doesn't work. The author himself is disappointed by the banality and the lack of evil cackling at Google Headquarters campus; possibly he should have tried visiting Apple instead. I think this book would have been much better as an exploration of the influence Google is having on the world, what the ramifications are likely to be, and how people might react or adapt from there. That third level is rarely present in the books I read, and this one is no exception. Also, such an approach may have made the book less marketable since it would no longer be trying to sell you on some pressing threat.

Vaidhyanathan also really has it out for Google Books. Google Books may have been a failure, but the author's suggestion that its function should have been undertaken by a public entity is kind of laughable. Yes, there is definitely a stronger need for quality control to produce truly archival quality scans of books, but I involuntarily LOLed when he suggested that a public effort would cost "millions". Technically he's right, but the sense of scale is skewed; it's like me telling you that I sleep for seconds each night. Good night!

Margaret Heller says

I'm sure I've read this before, but I was trying to check a reference and just decided to read the whole thing again.

Karlo Mikhail says

> To search for something on the Web using Google is not unlike confessing your desires to a mysterious power. — Siva Vaidhyanathan

In one of my national democratic youth activist friends online conversations with Simsimi, the free artificial intelligence conversation program, they were flattered to hear positive responses about the mass organizations of which they were active members.

When they asked about a pseudo-progressive group, my friends were surprised to read a very militant reply disparaging the said party. I tried asking Simsimi about the same group on a separate occasion and was astonished to see the same kind of response: "oportunista't repormista."

Simsimi, seemingly all-knowing with his capacity to answer in all languages and bring out replies closely mirroring our own opinions or alternatively poking fun at us, seems to stand-in for the kind of domination Google exercises over our lives.

Simsimi has become the personification of Google as described in Siva Vaidhyanathan's *The Googlization of Everything (And Why We Should Worry)*.

One of the worrying aspects of Google that the book describes is its tendency to tailor-fit its search engine to "fit your known locality, interests, obsessions, fetishes, and points of view" in order to give the user the "right" results faster.

It is indeed more efficient. However, this also means that "Your Web search experience will reinforce whatever affiliations, interests, opinions, and biases you already possess. And it is fraught, Vaidhyanathan warns, with even more insidious implications:

> As of late 2009, Google Maps users in China saw the area marked as part of Tibet; those in India still saw it designated as part of India. Google Maps applied the same treatment to disputed areas of the Indian states of Jammu and Kashmir, which have majority Muslim populations and have been claimed by Pakistan since the two nations were divided in 1947.

By organizing and putting together vast amounts of knowledge – from archives, libraries, government

records, company inventories, both offline and online markets, to the personal whereabouts of netizens, we seem to be seeing the Googlization of "everything."

Google has become the dominant way to navigate the web. But by using Google we are not only searching for things on the Internet, we are also giving away markers that allow Google to record information about us.

Its services' pervasiveness, Vaidhyanathan observes, has made it possible for Google to shape us: "we are not Google's customers: we are its product. We—our fancies, fetishes, predilections, and preferences—are what Google sells to advertisers."

> Its biases (valuing popularity over accuracy, established sites over new, and rough rankings over more fluid or multidimensional models of presentation) are built into its algorithms. And those biases affect how we value things, perceive things, and navigate the worlds of culture and ideas. In other words, we are folding the interface and structures of Google into our very perceptions. Does anything (or anyone) matter if it (or she) does not show up on the first page of a Google search? Here are some of the big questions facing us in the coming years: Who—if not Google—will control, judge, rank, filter, and deliver to us essential information?

We use Google for free. In return, we generate voluminous dossiers for Google's consumer profiling which is actually its core business. Through Google, especially through its adjunct services Google Maps, the world has become one big object for surveillance. And we are all too happy surrendering ourselves to this new Big Brother's whims.

One of the myths used counteract these fears of "infrastructural imperialism" is the mantra that the dissemination of technology automatically tends towards democratization, popular participation, and people empowerment by dispersing communicative methods to individuals.

Citing the mass upsurge that led to the fall of the Berlin Wall and the more recent popular uprisings in the Middle East and the rest of the world which featured massive use of new technologies, dot com corporations of course ride on this myth in order to cash in. But as Vaidhyanathan points out:

> The introduction of a powerful and efficient mode of communication such as the fax machine or the Internet can amplify or accelerate a movement, provided that the movement already has form, support, substance, and momentum. Technologies are far from neutral, but neither do they inherently support either freedom or oppression. The same technologies, as we have already seen, can be used both to monitor and oppress a group of people and to connect them in powerful ways.

As Mao reminds us, while external causes (new communication techniques) are condition of change, it is the internal causes (contradictions between social forces) that are ultimately the basis of change, with the external causes becoming operative through the internal causes.

Another of the most enduring myths about the present conditions of the world is the so-called "post-industrial" turn and the emergence of "immaterial labor" as supposedly embodied by the meteoric rise of the

"virtual economy" amidst the slump in the real productive economy.

Google has always promoted itself as an example of how any small but innovative company with little capital can make it big by doing business on the Internet. This claim, Vaidhyanathan refutes, is easily belied by the reality that Internet companies are not all "weightless and virtual."

> It might be valid if Google were merely a collection of smart people and elegant computer code. Instead, Google is also a monumental collection of physical sites such as research labs, server farms, data networks, and sales offices. Replicating the vastness of Google's processing power and server space is unimaginable for any technology company except Microsoft.

This concentration of real material capital in Google, Vaidhyanathan continues, is the secret behind its services' maximizing of the "network effect": "The more users it attracts, the more value each user derives from using it, and thus the more users it continues to attract."

Knowledge, as accumulated in the Internet and in books (as uploaded online through Google Books), has become hostage to Google's interests: "the company's role as mediator, filter, and editor of culture and information grows even stronger."

There was a time when the ultimate proof of existence is our seeing something with our own two eyes. Now "It seems that if a town—or anyone or anything—can't be found with Google, it might as well not exist."

Desiree says

"We must build the sort of online ecosystem that can benefit the whole world over the long term, not one that serves the short-term interests of one powerful company, no matter how brilliant."

"The Google Books plan is a perfect example of public failure." If they are allowed to continue, Google will "own" the rights to all books! It's one thing to allow people to view books online that have expired copyright, however, Google would be the only place that these books would be available! Even copyright holders would not have a say in this! This is definitely NOT a good plan and we must stop this!

Google becomes our memory! Why bother to memorize anything, if you can look it up and find the answer instantaneously? Not to mention the privacy issues (the author argues that privacy no longer exists) when something you posted online years ago can come back to haunt you?

Personally, I have a love/hate relationship with Google. I love that I can find whatever I need, however, they have been working on blocking access to lots of sites, in particular, sites that aggregate news stories from other sites... It's never good to have a monopoly on anything and if Google is allowed to have that monopoly over our collective knowledge and past, that can not be a good thing!

Interesting read!

Ryan says

What if there was this magnanimous entity that took the internet and effectively organized it free of charge so that people could, with high frequency, find exactly what they're looking for on the sprawling, lawless worldwide web. Then what if this same entity undertook projects to map the entire world and scan millions of books, also free of charge. Wouldn't that be the most horrific fate you can imagine? Wouldn't it be better if some unwieldy coalition of public institutions put together an attempt 'for the good of the people'?

I characterize the author's argument, but the basic point remains: Google is doing unprecedented things. They have amassed a lot of power and potential monopolies doing these things and therefore should be wary. I get it and believe it, but I DON'T believe his point that public institutions doing these things are better. With every new technology, there is an implicit social pact that we are in fact experimenting with it. This technology is the same, even if it has potentially large unforeseen consequences.

The author's principle mistake, in my opinion, is to overestimate the threat of 'technofundamentalism' as he might call it.

Carey Gibbons says

A super rare time when I rate a book that I did not finish. Usually, I don't rate books I can't finish because that's not fair to the author.

But I'm genuinely annoyed enough with this author at 25% that I don't think the rest of the book can redeem the first quarter. There are moderately complex reasons that the author has for being disgruntled with the Googlization of everything, but what it boils down to is, "things change, technology changes, life changes, progress is made, and that change and progress is sometimes questionable so it's bad." Congratulations author, for being mad at the same thing every generation gets mad at - that the newest one isn't exactly like them.

Marie says

"We may see google as a Savior, but it rules like Caesar."

"We allow google to determine what is important, relevant and true on the Web and in the world."

"Google's real customers are advertisers who pay Google to compete in an auction to rise to the top of a list of "sponsored results.""The dynamic of consumer expectations has been running at such a high speed for so many years that we become frustrated with devices and services (such as slow computer processors and Internet access) that did not even exist a few years ago."

"Google guesses what you might want to see base don requests that you and others like you have already expressed."

"Google's privacy policy is pretty much a lack of privacy policy. It retains the right to make significant decisions about our data without regard for our interests. Google changes its privacy policies often and without warning."

"Much of human knowledge exists in the form of long arrays of text, what we call books. Most of the best expressions of deep human thinking still rest on paper, bound with glue, nestled and protected by cloth covers, on the shelves of libraries around the world."

"The problem with the Googlization of everything is that we count on google too much. We trust it too much. We have blind faith in its ability to solve grand problems with invisible technologies."

J.D. Lasica says

What an interesting premise for a book!: the notion of Google writ large as a metaphor for how the public is being enticed into a new set of online realities and cultural norms that happen to dovetail perfectly with the search giant's bottom line. Writes Siva (an old friend whom I've lost touch with): "Tracking Google was never my goal; instead, I seek to explain why and how Google tracks us."

It's a worthy effort, particularly in such public policy areas as Google Book Search, a byzantine legal case that is still winding its way through the courts. Vaidhyanathan, one of the giants of intellectual property law, makes a strong argument that we ought to be digitizing a universal library of knowledge, not a pay-as-you-go bookstore with Google as the gatekeeper — though he and others have never convincingly explained who exactly will pay for this effort and how it will be coordinated across the myriad myopic groves of academe. At a time when the House of Representatives wants to defund public broadcasting, it's unfathomable that funding could be found for a Human Knowledge Project, as praiseworthy as the idea of a global public sphere remains.

Other arguments are less convincing, as when he characterizes Google's pullout from China as "an empty and counterproductive gesture" (page 10), yet pages later argues that "Google has contributed to censorship in China" when it was operating there (page 74). And his suggestion that the Great Firewall of China does not exist (page 125) because many technically minded people can skirt it would strike many pro-democracy activists there as a startling claim. (This website, among countless others, is censored in China.) Siva, meet Rebecca MacKinnon.

"The Googlization of Everything'" is a welcome antidote to the spate of rah-rah cheerleading books about Google by authors who should know better. But a greater problem with this book's premise is the significant shift in the technology landscape that has taken place over the past year. To my mind, here on the edges of Silicon Valley, a more needed tome today would be one focusing on Apple's attempt to slip us a perfectly made mickey so that we prefer its walled garden of techno-fantastia over the open Web. This is how quickly things change in the Valley, where Apple is now the second most valuable company on the planet — and wants to exert much greater control over our lives.

Still, one doesn't pick up a book like "The Googlization of Everything" expecting to agree with everything in it. Rather, the value comes in having a big thinker poke at our lazy assumptions with elegance and

intellectual heft, challenging our "blind faith and worship" of all things Google.

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Tucker says

Siva Vaidhyanathan says in the afterword that his book was inspired by Veblen's writings, which is fitting for a company like Google which he describes as making most of its money off of advertisements, but I found that the book had unexpectedly spiritual overtones.

To be "Googlized" in his definition is to have one's daily living and one's life trajectory altered by Google. This happens because "Google has permeated our culture."

He observes that search engines have to copy content on the Internet so that they may find it. It is possible for content creators online to opt-out of search engines but they cannot pick and choose; they must opt out of all, or else allow all to copy, index, and thereby profit off their work. We obviously want our content to be found, so we almost always allow search engines to do this. "So although we get a pretty good deal out of the relationship, it is hardly a fairly negotiated arrangement," he writes.

Quoting:

> Google, for instance, makes money because it harvests, copies, aggregates, and ranks billions of Web contributions by millions of authors who tacitly grant Google the right to capitalize, or "free ride," on their work. So in this process of aggregation, who are you? Who are you to Google? Who are you to Amazon? Are you the sum of your consumer preferences and MySpace personas? What is your contribution worth?

Because of the way Google presents search results -- "a manageable set of choices--just enough to give me a sense of autonomy over my next move but not too many to paralyze me" -- it seems to be presenting us with meaning, not just with cold information. As a result:

> We all Google our various gods, no matter what we worship or how worthy those gods are of our devotion. And now we expect nothing less than a meaningful response. Google's success is a function of our collective cultural weaknesses, and it in turn encourages them by ratcheting up our expectations.

Searching for "God" from a computer located in West Virginia, he observes, brings up mostly results for "evangelical Protestant Christianity" and a few for atheism, but the first page of results contains nothing whatsoever for Catholicism, Islam, Hinduism or Judaism. Google makes assumptions about what results would be relevant for a person in West Virginia.

Furthermore, he points out, searching for "Jew" in the United States may turn up anti-Semitic content, but searching for "Juden" in Germany does not. "The results, in other words, are clearly within Google's control. Google just chooses not to intervene so directly for searches done in the United States." Accordingly, in May 2007, Google changed its "Explanation of Our Search Results" page from "A site's ranking in Google's search results is automatically determined by computer algorithms" to "A site's ranking in Google's search results relies heavily on computer algorithms".

He says that 68 percent of people who use Internet search engines believe them to be "fair and unbiased," yet only 38 percent knew that some links are sponsored advertisements, and only one in six users claimed they could always recognize an advertisement. He also points out that because Google's results privilege "highly organized, technologically savvy groups," the company's work "disrupts the prospects of building a global public sphere."

Quoting:

> our faith in Google leaves us vulnerable to other flaws: the tendency to believe what we want to believe...and belief itself, the credulity that makes us functioning social beings and that sometimes can betray us... When we choose to rely blindly on a pervasive, powerful gatekeeper that we do not understand, we are destined to make monumental mistakes.

He talks at length about privacy and points out that "privacy" has no concrete definition. "When we complain about infringements of privacy, what we really demand is some measure of control over our reputations," he writes. This leads to discussions about "choice architecture," as described by Thaler and Sunstein in their book Nudge, i.e. a company's conscious design of its available options so that consumers will tend to pick one more often than another. This blows a hole in the consumers' typical perception that we are the ones making the choices; rather, the choices have already been designed for us, and the probability of our choice has already been calculated. "We are conditioned to believe that having more choices--empty though they may be--is the very essence of human freedom. But meaningful freedom," he objects, "implies real control over the conditions of one's life. Merely setting up a menu with switches does not serve the interests of any but the most adept, engaged, and well-informed."

Emma Sea says

Ok, so firstly, thank you Siva Vaidhyanathan for picking a book title that gave me *Zoolander* flashbacks for three days straight /sarcasm.

Vaidhyanathan's general argument is that information is too important for us to rely on a monolithic corporate entity to manage our access to it.

"We should not trust Google to be the custodian of our most precious cultural and scientific resources" (p. 202).

He sees information as being better managed by public service non-profit bodies, in the same way as the Human Genome Project was run, with free access across international borders, for the betterment of all humankind.

In theory, this idea seems fine. In practice, it ignores that we are humans; delightfully heterogeneous humans. Vaidhyanathan is working from a modernist paradigm where there is *a* truth that can be rationally determined and prioritized, under a Western, individualistic framing.

In Vaidhyanathan's world all knowledge is equal, and free unfiltered access must be maintained. His example is a Google search for Jew/Juden in Germany vs the US, and he frames the varying search results that are generated as problematic. Because Google filters, orders, and sorts information for us it is, to him,

fundamentally flawed.

However, *all systems* for organizing information *must* determine a way of sorting and classifying it. This includes the Human Genone Project.

At the most basic level, all those involved in the HGP were in agreement that the human genome could and *should* be mapped. The views of those who interrogated the ethical implications of the HGP sat *outside* of the project. They were certainly prominant in the academy in general, however the HGP itself consisted of the collection of 'scientific' empirical data. The group saw ethical concerns as unrelated to the basic key task of mapping the human genome. Opinions which sat outside of these specific concerns of the HGP were sorted, classified, and filtered by being excluded completely.

Ethical considerations of the HGP are not nebulous or theoretical: in 1995 the genome of a Papuan man was patented without his knowledge. The limitless potential uses of this patent cannot be foreseen, but we can make some broad educated guesses, because this situation is not new: since the 1950s it's been possible to buy the cultured human cells of Henrietta Lack, who died in 1951. Twenty TONS of Henrietta's cells have been grown so far, and *11,000* biomedical patents have been developed using her tissue. You could order some of Henrietta Lack online right now, if you want. She did not consent to this use of her body: she was never offered the opportunity to do so. Her family did not know any of this until the 1970s. They have received no material benefits from the vast profits generated by these patents.

Framing the HGP as a benificent and objective group of people working together for no personal gain is either fundamentally naive or egregiously misleading.

Vaidhyanathan's proposal is a Human Knowledge Project (in the same vein as the HGP) which he sees being based around universities and public libraries. I see a problem in that he misleads the reader about the historical and contemporary role and structure of universities. He states that Google is a company of 15-years standing, while his employer, the University of Virginia, "has been succeeding at its mission since Thomas Jefferson founded it in 1819" (p. 185). The UofVa. is therefore far better suited to make decisions about how information is ordered and accessed.

Really? What then, is the mission of the UofVa? According to their website "*The central purpose of the University of Virginia is to enrich the mind by stimulating and sustaining a spirit of free inquiry directed to understanding the nature of the universe and the role of mankind in it.*"

Only, the UofVa is famous as the site of the 1950 NAACP fight to gain admission to the law school for Gregory Swanson. Despite knowing their actions were illegal the UofVa. decided to deny Swanson the right to enrol because of the colour of his skin. Women were not fully admitted until 1943, and were not allowed to matriculate until 1970, after a lawsuit. So, no, the university has not been fulfilling its mission since 1819. Unless "a spirit of free enquiry" means "a spirit of free white male enquiry". It's been fulfilling its mission for 43 years, and only then after legal intervention. It's interesting to consider if education as a purely free-market service would have been available earlier to women and people of colour.

But at least it's fulfilling its mission now, right? At least for those who can afford tuition, or who are willing to mortgage their future earnings. I mean, as Vaidhyanathan states, universities have "overwhelming endorsement from their market: the best of them turn away four to ten times the number of applicants they admit". And a university education "succeeds in the sense of propelling many graduates and their families into the middle class or higher" (p. 185). Right?

Only maybe not. While it is still better to be a college graduate than not, graduates are notably underemployed and finding the job market not the cakewalk it used to be for those with degrees. At the same time universities are likely to take graduate success as a result of the efficacy of a university education, rather than of the qualities inherent in the graduate themselves. This has lead to ongoing discussion among academics and economists about the purpose, structure, and future of universities. A contributing factor is the fact that the middle class is declining in America and other Western nations.

But is a white-collar job truly the *purpose* of a university? Does propelling graduates into the middle-classes mean we should give universities control of our information systems, instead of Google? If the purpose of a university is taking tuition money in return for a piece of paper that gives the holder a better CV, does that not make a university just a different kind of corporate entity?

The very concept of a university as being a non-profit public service is outmoded. Academics and administrators are under more pressure than ever before to bring in external funding to secure their jobs. Vaidhyanathan's own University of Virginia boasts a Corporate and Foundation Relations office which "seeks to maximize contributions and other support to the University of Virginia from corporations and foundations, by creating, maintaining and enhancing mutually beneficial relationships between these entities and university units". In 2012 the Uof Va. raised US$323 million in external funding. UofVa. is not, of course, unique: numbers of internally funded academics are fast decreasing worldwide, with a matching rise in casual staff. Teaching is increasingly carried out by grad students, freeing tenured staff for profit-making activities.

Vaidhyanathan draws a distinction between a for-profit, Google, and a not-for-profit, the university system, that is unwarranted: it is a difference of degree, not kind, and a difference that is rapidly disappearing.

And even assuming Vaidhyanathan's view of universities as non-profit utopias was correct Vaidhyanathan fails to suggest a different *way* of approaching information sorting; he only suggests someone other than Google should be doing it. Vaidhyanathan sees the idea of personalized results as inherently flawed. He complains that "*each place in the world will have a different list of what is important, true, or 'relevant', in response to any query*" (p. 138). Vaidhyanathan assumes we have a world where there is one universal truth to be discovered, rather than seeing 'truth' as subjective, local, and malleable. In any information system which reflects the panoply of human experience how would it ever be possible *not* to sort and order information relating to any topic, accepting that there are many truths? If I search for "Jew", at some point someone/s has to decide if the most relevant result for me is the creation of Israel as a homeland for Jews who escaped the Holocaust, or the expulsion of Palestinians from their land. Both of these are 'truth'.

Google's system for doing this, narrowcasting based on demographics and previous search data, is not perfect because the algorithms drive us towards the "familiar and comfortable" rather than guiding us towards the "unexpected, the unknown, the unfamiliar, and the uncomfortable" (p. 183). The solution for this is not for universities to have control of information sources, but rather for humans to be educated about *how* information is categorized and sorted in different systems, to develop a joy in learning and an ability to think critically, and for kids to learn effective searching techniques as a basic life skill, in the same way they learn how to cook and change a car tyre. And yes, the fact that so many parents teach neither is part of the problem, but this is outside of the scope of either Vaidhyanathan's or my argument.

One of Vaidhyanathan's points completely resonated with me: that *"'Search' as a general concept of intellectual query has mutated into a process of 'browsing' for goods and services"* (p. 202). However, I'm unconvinced that this is Google's fault. Google gives us more of what we want. The fact that we *want* to consume is problematic, but I don't believe it is the task of an information categorizing system to persuade us

of this. In a perfect world would I search for Nike running shoes and get an article about forced child labour, rather than a local stockist? How would we determine what a searcher *should* see? Who would make the call about what is the 'best' result for us?

I think this is a book that people should read, because information is power. It is important to make ourselves informed consumers of information; to able to judge the quality of our access and of the information itself. The alternatives to Google's free-market system scare me. If Vaidhyanathan's book makes us more aware of the way Google shapes our knowledge sources and world-view, and enables us to engage in debate about how we access and rank information, then yay.

Ste Pic says

Nemico pubblico N.1

Regalo natalizio di un amico con cui avevo discusso a lungo, visto che io sono un po' integralista sull'argomento privacy e soffro di grandissimi mal di pancia ogni volta che mi dicono: "si si è gratuito, basta compilare un modulo con i suoi dati (sottoscrivendo la possibilità che vengano usati e venduti a terzi)" oppure "cliccando qui accetti termini e condizioni".
Che ormai internet sia (anche) un formidabile strumento di raccolta, aggregazione e commercializzazione dei nostri dati è, credo, chiaro a tutti e che google sia l'azienda che ha meglio sfruttato questa opportunità è altrettanto evidente. Volevo capire meglio, anche dopo quello che è successo di recente con fb (http://www.corriere.it/tecnologia/soc...), e questo libro prometteva di chiarire tutti i meccanismi, anche quelli nascosti e maliziosamente venduti come aumento di libertà e di possibilità di scelta. "Mentre noi usiamo google, google usa noi" recita la quarta di copertina. Mi aspettavo, trattandosi di un libro scritto in inglese da un professore di origine indiana dell'Università della Virginia, un testo lineare, chiaro e ben documentato, come solo gli anglosassoni sanno scrivere. Invece purtroppo è fin troppo verboso e filosofico, un po' involuto, e inutilmente elegante nella scrittura, quasi che fosse stato redatto da uno dei nostri anziani e autoreferenziali docenti universitari italiani (non me ne vogliano gli anziani e autoreferenziali docenti universitari italiani). Una menzione d'onore va però al titolista dei paragrafi che è fenomenale. Ecco alcuni esempi: "la cecità dell'orgoglio", "il tecno-fondamentalismo e il bene pubblico" "sorveglianza universale e imperialismo delle infrastrutture", "il pregiudizio della fiducia" "ricordare senza dimenticare"….
Il libro comunque, una volta inquadrato correttamente, è godibile e ben documentato e anche se non affronta molte questioni di petto, ma ci gira intorno due o tre volte, aiuta certo a capire o almeno a renderci consapevoli della nostra googlizzazione (google, youtube, streetview, gmail, google maps, google libri, chrome, google playstore, google traduttore…), e della necessità di regolamentare e forse anche di indirizzare azioni e comportamenti che finora si sono potuti sviluppare in assenza di regole, soprattutto etiche. Aiuta a capire anche la non-neutralità delle aziende che gestiscono o operano sul web su molte e importanti questioni.

_____
Giudizi in un haiku

google, google
take me out of trouble
('cause) you are my bible

Heather says

This was a very interesting book. It had a pretty negative tone, especially starting out and obviously it's a book written by someone that is wary of the power and monopoly of Google, but I think he does make a few interesting and important points that we should think about in this quickly changing world of technology. Technology really is affecting the way we live and is changing our culture.

I think it's important to understand how things that we use every day affect us. We should remember that we need to make choices and not let ourselves be controlled by things or others without our consent. Four of the main issues I think we need to think about with respect to the power of Google in our lives is how it affects the world of security and privacy, how it affects and creates the global public sphere, how it gathers and stores information creating a knowledge management system.

Google has revolutionalized the way we learn and communicate and think. I think it's an amazing tool and am very grateful for Google and the easy access it gives us to information, but this book did remind me of the importance of understanding what we are basing our decisions on. We need to control the technology and not let it control us. We need to be responsible for our learning.