



Is Google Evil?

Charles Petrie • Stanford University

Is Google the new “evil empire?” Microsoft has long held that title for many people, especially here in Silicon Valley. Google is arguably now more important for more people and invites a comparison because of its informal corporate slogan: “Don’t be evil.” Indeed, you can find many rants now on the Web that include the words “Google,” and “evil,” as well as curse words. *Wired* ran an article long ago on the topic of Google and evil.¹ Wikipedia devotes a page to criticisms of Google (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Criticism_of_Google). So, is it evil?

This topic has been the subject of a long and extensive Intelligence Squared (IQ²) debate among distinguished commentators (<http://tinyurl.com/yf5lkcp>), but I’ve found it to be lacking and believe I can offer at least a complementary perspective.

As this column’s readers know, I like to know the semantics of the words I’m discussing. Because Google refers to both a company and a technology, what we’re discussing is the behavior of the former in wielding the power of the latter.

It’s fair to note that Google’s motto only directly addresses a state of being rather than a behavior. This might limit you to judging Google’s intentions or general effect on society rather than individual acts. But this motto is interpreted behaviorally by at least Google’s own code of conduct (<http://investor.google.com/conduct.html>) as well as one of its explicit philosophies: “You can make money without doing evil” (www.google.com/corporate/tenthings.html).

What is good and what is evil depends on context and is often arguable. Is it evil to index (legal) hate sites or to censor expression on the Web? Eric Schmidt famously said that evil is whatever Sergey says it is.¹ That’s not quite good enough, so let’s think about it a bit more. We

need to put “evil” into a more specific context.

There’s a sense of “evil” in being immoral in a fundamentalist religious sense. Fundamental religions view sex with some caution, if not outright alarm. Pornography is considered evil in this sense. And Google allows porn advertisements¹ – so it’s evil. Presumably, it draws the line somewhere south of illegal child porn, so it’s not all bad.

But, of course, that’s not – for us *IEEE Internet Computing* and Slashdot readers – an interesting kind of evil. Our context is computer users and software. In particular, Google’s motto seems to apply primarily to users and perhaps only its users. So let’s look at the question of evil from that perspective.

Some of the Web concerns about Google in this sense seem overblown, such as a rant that Google is evil because Facebook emails started opening the Chrome browser for message alerts rather than the installed default browser (<http://tinyurl.com/yeuld3w>). Well, annoying maybe, but not quite evil. But as usual, this was labeled evil by calling it Microsoft-like behavior, just as opposing politicians often compare each other to Hitler. So it’s instructive to consider Microsoft’s case before considering Google.

Is Microsoft Evil because It’s a Technical Empire?

When I came to Silicon Valley in the early ’90s, the first joke I heard was: “How many Microsoft engineers does it take to change a lightbulb? None. Bill Gates just declares darkness to be a feature.” What Microsoft behavior generated such derision?

The joke really doesn’t get to the point. Yes, Microsoft software comes down from the Redmond mount written in stone (we can’t see the source), and it’s glitchy. But that’s not evil: that’s just software.

A lot of the motivation behind the joke is that

Microsoft gets so much say in our cyberlives. Personally, I try to avoid this software. I've begun almost every talk I've given in the last 20 years with the announcement, "No Microsoft products were used in the making of this presentation." I use straight handmade (with Emacs macros) HTML that's always readable on the Web, even 17 years later, unlike PowerPoint.

But I have to be able to read PowerPoint, Word, and Excel documents (with Open Office). I don't want to: I have a pointer to www.gnu.org/philosophy/no-word-attachments.html at the top of my home page. But I have to because so much of the world, including this magazine, runs on Microsoft Office. (I've given up trying to teach one person at a time to use Word to output PDFs, although ODF would be even better.) There's no escaping Microsoft's control, at least for a while.

Most vendors try to capture us with proprietary formats. Ever received a document in Apple BinHex? Or a Lotus Notes meeting invitation? But when Microsoft promotes a proprietary format, all of us, even Linux users, have to conform in some manner. Does that make Microsoft evil?

Though hegemony is a sufficient reason for resentment, it isn't necessarily evil. In a parallel universe, Pat Robertson is a warm-hearted, charitable Christian and Bill Gates is a benevolent dictator, while everyone derides Linus Torvalds for being too controlling.

Is Microsoft Too Aggressive?

Microsoft has long had aggressive business practices and been sued for antitrust violations in multiple countries. A lot of that can be excused as, well, successful aggressive business practices.

Many websites detail Microsoft's predatory business practices. But some make the good point that this is just business as usual. We don't

like that Microsoft does whatever it can to suppress its competitors, pushing the envelope of legality and sometimes beyond. We engineers (and some prosecutors) tend not to like this, but then we don't like many successful business practices. That's why we're engineers.

That said, Microsoft seems to have a corporate policy that's consistently exceptionally aggressive in pursuing its own interests rather than those of its users. Because of the new threat from Google, Microsoft seems to be working with some companies to "delist" them from Google search (<http://tinyurl.com/y9avxl4>). They're possibly going after Google with legal challenges by using "stalking horses" to disguise their intent.²

If true, this kind of behavior still might not rise to the level of evil, but it would certainly be business hardball that isn't in the best interest of Internet users. In contrast, Google's spokesman has at least proclaimed the policy: "We work hard to put our users' interests first and to compete fair and square in the market."²

Google might indeed be able to resist some of the worst practices — we'll see. But this is free market capitalism, held in check only by government laws and prosecutors. My own expectation of any public company being altruistic under shareholder pressure is low. But if you really believe in capitalism, none of this purely business behavior, by either Microsoft or Google, is truly evil. And remember that Google's motto is directed toward users, not competitors.

Why Silicon Valley Thinks Microsoft Is Evil

The Internet was around long before the Web became commercially popular, and some ethics sprang up around the technology. One of the earliest was trust. You didn't abuse the Internet, and you trusted users

not to do so. If someone sent out spam, the proper response was for all recipients to send the spam back to the sender. When the spam war first escalated by spoofing, we all forwarded the offending message to the postmaster of the domain requesting that the sender no longer be allowed to use that address. How quaint all that seems today.

But the ethic of trust never went away: we just stopped expecting good behavior of random users and non-Internet businesses, along about the time that AOL became popular. We still expect our major Internet service and platform providers to be trustworthy.

Part of that trust extends to another Internet engineering ethic: the best protocols and formats are adopted and made open to benefit everyone. Good engineers all see what's good, come to consensus on it, and adhere to those sometime de facto standards. If someone (say Sun) sets up a reference architecture, you learn from it and replicate it. Bad engineers do a poor job and screw up the implementations, creating bugs that need to be fixed. But no one does this deliberately. Except Microsoft.

Microsoft isn't evil because it imposes imperfect software on us, or because it suppresses its competitors. It's evil from the geek perspective because it acts (intentionally or not) to impede the progress of software, going so far as to pervert standards, so that it can keep its monopoly. This basis for judging evil seems obvious to me, but I don't see this written in any of the discussions of why Google might be evil, so I'm saying it here.

Microsoft has always played catch-up in the Internet world, starting with the development of a Mosaic-based Internet Explorer (IE) years after the world had discovered the World Wide Web. Its catch-up tactics really upset many engineers. It's one thing to capture the market by inventing something or even building upon that

invention. It's another to try to ignore standards or, worse, pervert someone else's invention so that Microsoft users and developers are locked into that changed technology, which lessens its widespread utility.

It isn't that Microsoft killed off Netscape with business tactics that the US courts found unlawful – it's the perception that it tried to suppress good technology by substituting perverted versions of useful Internet technology. A good example of this perception is the rant "Stealing the Internet" (www.kortexplores.com/node/59). There are in fact many examples of how Microsoft, with its IE product, has delayed or substituted its own non-compatible versions of Internet formats. The most famous

example is that the Java applet download page only worked on IE and the developers were too tied to Microsoft tools to think outside that particular box. You have your own experiences. Or just look at what cross-platform Web developers are still saying on the blogs (<http://blog.seattlepi.com/microsoft/archives/165664.asp>).

Microsoft's move to pervert Java, because the promise of testing once and running everywhere was perceived as a threat (rather than a joke) almost worked, too. Now to be fair, Sun (now Oracle) didn't offer Java as open source initially (they have now, as Eric Schmidt initially wanted), and they were criticized for this behavior as well.

A widespread perception that Microsoft is reluctant to support

say that Microsoft changes and proposals are just functional improvements for Microsoft users. My own view is that this is a limited perspective that ignores the effect of locking users into the Microsoft world and limiting the utility of the technology to the wider world of users.

Microsoft has recently moved toward open standards, possibly because of the EU's criticism and antitrust fine, but even that move isn't without criticism, such as the suspicion around the new ISO standard of OOXML (<http://tinyurl.com/yamgf5u>). There also seems to be an effort by Microsoft now to redefine "open source" (<http://tinyurl.com/y9j9fmc>).

Microsoft's behavior just doesn't engender trust among engineers.

Enough Microsoft bashing (we could go on for pages, and many have); now we have a perspective on why many Silicon Valley engineers might say that Microsoft is evil. Let's look at Google from that same perspective of evil.

For Google to succeed, it has to continue to be so good that you decide to use it — that's an engineering ethic.

perhaps is simply the replacement of HTML with "htm."

Ever look at this code? Remember WMA music, now that you've had to repurchase everything in MP3? Ever tried to run the US Naval Observatory's animated gif clocks in IE (<http://tycho.usno.navy.mil/gifclocks.html>)? How long did it take IE to support HTML 4.0 (www.alanwood.net/demos/ent4_frame.html), PNG, and SVC as well as other technologies not invented by Microsoft that might allow use of new Internet-based functionality across platforms? Still today, there are several Web technologies (such as JavaScript) that just don't work properly in IE when they work on all other major browsers because Microsoft has done something weird somewhere in order to imprison its users. I recently couldn't even register for a conference because the registra-

tion page only worked on IE and the developers were too tied to Microsoft tools to think outside that particular box. You have your own experiences. Or just look at what cross-platform Web developers are still saying on the blogs (<http://blog.seattlepi.com/microsoft/archives/165664.asp>).

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Why Google Isn't Evil

If you don't like to use Google search, there are plenty of alternatives. I would recommend www.alltheweb.com for one; otherwise I don't use Yahoo for much. I haven't tried Bing, but I'm sure it works well. For Google to succeed, it has to continue to be so good that you decide to use it — that's an engineering ethic.

OK, branding plays a part in this. Google was the first really, really good search engine. As noted in a previous edition of this column³ (and many other places), the Web hasn't ended up as the engineer's dream in which the best offer of products or technology always wins. People often just vote based on habit rather than merit. Oh well. So, all Google has to do is to stay at least as good as anyone else. That's still hardly evil.

Google is also keeping me as a user because they keep bringing out

other useful tools, for free. I love free. (Thank you Google for free Wi-Fi in Mountain View, too, which I used to write this piece, along with Ubuntu.) And I could do without any one of these tools right now if I wanted to use something else, and I frequently use alternatives.

There might be cases in which I can only get a certain functionality, even a kind of search result from Google, perhaps because of some business deal. That's not evil: that's progress. It's arguable that there would be some cause to worry, if for instance, no other search engine could search Flash. But that's not the case.

Here's the really good thing about Google: it depends on Internet open standards. Its business model depends on their openness, rather than capturing them. Google is built on top of those standards. It isn't in Google's interest to engender the kind of mistrust that Microsoft has among Silicon Valley engineers. No evil here. Nor is there likely to be, because Google makes money by not being evil in this way.

And Google tends, so far, to do things like issue the Linux-based Android on an unlocked cell phone that's completely open. Any developer can dig into the phone software and develop an app – unlike Apple, which carefully controls app development and blocks Google Voice (<http://tinyurl.com/yb9fen2>). Engineers like openness, and ultimately, this kind of openness tends to benefit users in the same way that breaking up the Bell phone system did.

But wait, aren't there other kinds of ways in which Google could be evil for geeks concerned with Internet technology? Yes.

Why Google Could Become Evil

There are at least five potentials for evil at Google, because Google has become so pervasive and important to us.

One is easily disposed of: misrepresenting search results. This is a trust issue that Google addressed early on. It's very careful to show the sponsored links versus the ones that its search algorithms select. Google's business model depends on the trustworthiness of its search results.

Second, what if Google's products were no longer free and Google had used its pervasiveness and programmer talent pool to drive out all alternatives? Well, that might be evil, but it would require completely destroying all alternatives, such as Microsoft, Apple, and various versions of Unix and Linux. Yes, a world according to Google is imaginable but not plausible, even were Google to want to sell software products. Google just needs to be pervasive enough to sell most of the advertising.

Start-Up Suppression

A more reasonable issue is that Google has the power to suppress some start-ups because of its public thin affiliate policy (<http://tinyurl.com/28bn7v>). If a company is trying to be an aggregator, but doesn't yet have added content, Google will low-rank them, or even exclude them from the index altogether. Google is, in effect, judging that a site is evil. It might be that Google itself is being inadvertently evil in this case.

This policy means that some start-ups have trouble attracting users to generate new content (which would overcome the policy) and might never get traction. There are two problems with how Google handles these cases: Google might not be responsive to individual appeals (I know of one case in which it wasn't), and sites established prior to this policy were "grandfathered." The effect is that Google suppresses new sites in favor of old ones. This difficult but important issue hasn't been sufficiently well-addressed by Google, or anyone else.

Microsoft-Like Integration

Google isn't just a search engine company any more, as everyone is aware. And, when it starts integrating its products, as Microsoft did, it raises suspicions.

Mostly, Google products aren't integrated. Just because I want to use Google Earth, Google Maps, Picasa, the Chrome browser, the Chrome OS, or Wave, I don't have to use Google search. Some Google products, such as Gmail, use Google search, but I don't have to. All was well. And then Google introduced Buzz. Oops.

This was an integrated product. It doesn't seem like you can use Buzz unless you use Gmail. This is different from Buzz using Google Maps or working with Android because I don't have to use Google Maps, and it works with MS and Apple products. But if I do have to use Gmail (even if only to forward my email to my real email server) in order to use Buzz, this is dangerously Microsoft-like behavior. If Google were to bring out a product I really wanted (unlike Buzz), it could perhaps make me use Gmail. But if we trust Google not to do things like that, then this would still be OK. Oops again.

Privacy

Recently, Eric Schmidt (in)famously said, "If you have something that you don't want anyone to know, maybe you shouldn't be doing it in the first place" (<http://tinyurl.com/yl7dwh7>). I actually agree with this. I decided in 1993 that privacy was over when I first saw the World Wide Web, so I created my own Web pages with lots of information about me so that most searches would go to them, and at least I would control the site. Furthermore, at least US users seem to value convenience over privacy. But Schmidt's remark doesn't engender trust in Google.

And Google's actions with Buzz don't either. You've probably already read all about this. If you haven't,

just check http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Google_Buzz for a summary. But here's the bottom line. Google took the information Gmail users had supplied for their own email use and used it again to try to create a competitive advantage for their social networking technology. Can we trust Google now with our information?

In Google's favor, it addressed this breach of faith by retracting the automatic use of Gmail information in Buzz. And maybe it just made a mistake because of its culture of beta testing. It was a small thing except for those individuals possibly affected (<http://tinyurl.com/yje8474>). And it could have been useful for Gmail users. Still, everyone was concerned because Google had the potential to misuse our information, and it did use some of this information (not mine because I don't use Gmail) for its own advantage. What a boneheaded move.

Google obviously realizes how powerful it is now and that it needs our trust for its motto not to be ironic.

I like all of the top management at Google. I interviewed Eric Schmidt pre-Google (www.computer.org/portal/web/computingthen/interviews/ericshmidt) and found him to be an engineer's type of CEO. One of the top managers (privacy prevents me from naming him) regularly goes to Burning Man and insists on being just another guy on a bicycle when he's there. I love its products, especially because it always makes an effort to run (eventually) on Linux. I appreciate the fine line it's been walking with respect to censorship in countries such as China, and its final decision as this article goes to press.

I still like Google as a company and, like everyone else, find its search engine as addictively useful as cell phones. Google has vastly improved our lives in many ways, and it does a lot of good. Finally, every company should have Google's motto.

But in its success, Google now has the potential to be evil. In fact, it has so much data, that it's very likely to be inadvertently evil sooner or later. Management is going to have to take


extra care to show us that it isn't.

I invite you to login to Computing Now and comment on this subject. ☐

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