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# The Googlization of Everything

(AND WHY WE SHOULD WORRY)

Updated Edition

Siva Vaidhyanathan



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69. John Letzing, "Tribune Blames Google for Damaging News Story," Marketwatch.com, September 10, 2008.

70. Cass Sunstein, *Going to Extremes: How Like Minds Unite and Divide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

71. For a long time I was a Google evangelist. Back in 1999 and 2000 I must have told more than a hundred people, including my closest friends and family, that Google was the best possible way to find stuff on the Web. When I first encountered Google in early 1999, I was teaching history at Wesleyan University. Mostly, I was scrambling to finish my dissertation—which became my first book. Because most of my research drew on sources available on microfilm, search engines had not yet become an integral part of my professional life. I was aware of the techno-utopian conversations about electronic archives and the global delivery of knowledge, but I didn't think very hard about them. I had a book to write and sell. The Web, for me, was a platform for self-promotion. And existing search engines, like Yahoo, were not helping in that effort.

Since about 1995 I had been using Yahoo and AltaVista for my Web navigation. I had a brief and passionate involvement with a much better and faster Web search service, Northern Light, until, facing a revenue shortage, it became a specialized portal for corporate clients (and remains so today). I first learned

about Google from an e-mail list called Red Rock Eater, written and edited by Phil Agre, a professor of information studies at UCLA. Like many Web geeks of the late 1990s, I read Agre's newsletter religiously. If he liked Google, chances were good that I would as well.

Unlike everything else on the Web at that time, Google lacked clutter. It was simple, fast, and effective. Before Google essentially solved the problem of managing and filtering the Web for us, we relied on the pages we liked and trusted to provide links to other pages we might like and trust. But Google was aggregating all of that linking and clicking, making it a general process of ranking and linking. It was brilliant.

And then, within hours of using Google for the first time, I started thinking through the consequences of Google becoming the institution that governs the Web. I had no idea how quickly that notion would grow into an obsession.

While composing this book I often used my blog, *Googlization of Everything*, to solicit feedback and comments from Web users. Back in July 2008 I posted a simple query: "Do you remember the first time you used Google? When was it? How did you hear about Google? What was your first impression?" The response was overwhelming: 216 people posted their stories to my blog, and 36 more posted comments to *BoingBoing*, the most popular blog in the world, after it linked to my query.

From the website developer and critic Waldo Jaquith:

It's difficult to properly emphasize how truly terrible search engines were in 1998. AltaVista and HotBot were as good as it got, and that's saying very little. Results were basically sorted randomly. Choosing a search engine was really based on faith more than anything else. . . . And then along came Google.

From the author Clay Shirky:

Late 90s—I'd been the CTO of a web shop in Manhattan, and we'd always spend a lot of time with new clients on the "nav bar issue"—what was the best set of links to put in the home page navigation? . . . we spent a *lot* of time studying Yahoo's front-page taxonomy—the whole Web, broken down into 14 top-level categories. And then I saw Google, which had no taxonomy at all, just search. I . . . switched immediately, as many of us did in those days, but I didn't realize what a big deal it was until 2000. I was at a geek dinner of two dozen people, hosted by Tim O'Reilly, on a completely different subject. . . . At that dinner, Tim said "I know this doesn't have anything to do with the matter at hand, but out of curiosity, how many people here use Google?" Every hand went up.

From library consultant Karen Coyle:

I was chatting with the brother of one of the Google founders. He told me that his brother was working on a new search engine that would be better than

reality of the full-text search. I probably looked at Google when it was first made available, and I was pretty un-impressed. Just more keyword searching. Today I use it constantly, but I'm very aware of the fact that it works quite well for nouns and proper nouns (people, companies, named things), and less well for concepts. . . . I think of it as a giant phone book for the Internet, not as a classification of knowledge.

Many of the people who responded to my query were information or Web professionals. They were certainly the earliest to embrace Google and recognize its value. They quickly spread the word to their immediate friends and family. From there, it grew to span the world within five years. We were so thrilled to find so much, so easily, that we hardly stopped to ask questions. We became true believers.

### CHAPTER 3. THE GOOGLIZATION OF US

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