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Discussion piece presented at Symposium "Is Google Enough - What is beyond, behind and after 'Don't be Evil'"

Haider, Jutta

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Jutta Haider

Information Studies, Department of Arts and Cultural Sciences, Lund University

Before I start, I need to make a disclaimer. I am not a Google researcher; I am not even a search engine researcher in the more traditional sense. But I am an information researcher and all my research with very few exceptions has been on various aspects of digital cultures, and specifically digital cultures' changing conditions for production, use and distribution of information. This ranges from scholarly communication, to social media and to Wikipedia and traditional encyclopaedias.

And wherever I look, whichever project I am involved in recently – there it is - Google. Sometimes, the elephant in the room, but sometimes much more than that it is the room itself. You don't really see it, you move in it. You are bound by its walls. And these walls do something with how you place your furniture.

I am probably stating the obvious but it is remarkable how more and work cultures, information cultures and even problem areas, politics and policy making, civil engagement, processes of issue making are structured by Google with into their core.

They orient themselves towards Google, are shaped by the affordances of Google, what Google makes possible and not, and obviously they are seen through the lense of Google.

I am not just thinking Google search, the search engine, but also the rest of the Google universe.

- Think Google scholar, which now comes with profile pages providing you with your h-index and its being used for recruiting, - it structures my work.
- think of Google analytics, which is the central tool for anyone structuring work in knowledge intense environments,

think Google drive, where you coordinate work, together with Google calendar, Google hangout, Google books, Google maps, chrome in your phone, youtube, Google play music and movies … you name it, Google is there and it does something. And I haven't even mentioned Google glass and the robot projects that are in the pipeline.

We change how we do things and things change with it. Values change. What we see and how we see it changes and what we trust changes. We orient ourselves towards Google. And Google works really well, but we shouldn't forget it works really well because we all work for it in many ways.

In a project on encyclopaedias in transition, Olof Sundin and I have studied professional encyclopaedias work practices and specifically how these traditional knowledge institutions work with the creation of trust. We didn't go into this project with a focus on Google at all, but we came out of it by analysing how precisely Google analytics shapes the editorial processes and through this the way in which knowledge is organised and information created. We even had to re-think our starting point, the rivalry with Wikipedia. It exits of course and Wikipedia has profoundly changed the world of encyclopaedias, but it's through Google this happens. It's a fight for positions in the Google ranking.

Seeing that I am now going into a project with Google in mind, a project which actually had Google as its starting point. And who knows. probably I will leave it with Google at its edges. I am starting out with a project called Green Search, which which studies how Google (and other digital tools for information retrieval) structures specific everyday life environmental problems, also in the light of localisation, and how people makes sense of this, how they create meaning, how they attribute trust. I really look at how Google search – in tandem with other digital tools - contributes to shaping environmental information, and with this problem spaces which require real urgent solutions in real life, so to speak.

It's very easy to end up with a position close to technological determinism. And that's an ugly word as we all know… and as an information studies person in a cultural sciences environment it is really the last thing I want to be called. It's important to remember that Google is a product of our culture, of our society and of our time and it also shapes our culture. It goes both ways. We make Google and Google makes us and then we continue making Google.

I want to draw a comparison that probably shows the extent of this. All our writing for instance since a long time is profoundly shaped by Microsoft Word and the office package. Yet there is no "office research". Maybe there should be. But you get the idea of how enormous Google is, how successful, that it doesn't even sound strange to have a symposium like this one and to talk of Google research.

Is Word enough? What is beyond, behind and after "be what's next?" not so good…

And now I am coming to my point or what I want to discuss more:

How can we articulate a critique of Google that takes into account that it has become almost impossible to speak from the outside. This has to do with how we do research, but also with how we work, consume, buy, read, find out, communicate, plan, and so forth.

I think what we need is a way to talk about Google, without just talking about Google. We need a way to challenge Google when researching it, which does not just not confirm that Google is important and really big – we know that – but ways in which it does that, what it means and how it is challenged. I don't mean a critique in the sense of showing what is wrong, what is commercial, what is not commercial enough (don't forget Google is attacked by other corporations for its against anti-competitive actions, not least Microsoft) although that's a start - but just a critique in the more academic meaning, but lived in everyday life – of having alternatives, real alternatives, not imagined ones, like they are now. Entering a conversation on how to be aware without being cynical or resigned, without being techno-phobic but also without being overenthusiastic.

Google has internalised its critique. Maybe just making it visible is a way, I am not sure. It's a point for discussion.