

GOOGLE AND THE INTERNET SEARCH PHENOMENON

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A Paper

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By

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## Introduction

Spelling errors can have enduring effects. In the fall of 1997, Larry Page tapped out “g-o-o-g-l-e” into his workstation and registered it on the Internet. The next day he found out he had misspelled the word “googol,” a word which represents 1 followed by 100 zeros. His error stuck, and nine years later, Google, Inc. has become a multi-billion dollar company with a remarkable mission. The company plans to “collect and organize all of the world's information.” It is, as one author noticed, not far from William's Blake's famous line to “hold all eternity in the palm of your hand.”<sup>1</sup> What Blake never would have guessed was that his poetic image might be nearly realized by a Google-browser running on a PDA. As the information on the Internet continues to explode in size, Google seems well on their way to accomplishing this incredible task. From the humble beginnings of a hobby-project of several doctoral students, Google climbed to become a multi-billion dollar enterprise, even making Bill Gates worry about the future. Its future dreams are as big as its profits; and a growing army of software engineers and scientists are busy at Google Labs designing, developing and dreaming of what is next. If Google's inexhaustible collection of information is impressive, so in their growing influence in popular culture. Serving up 150 millions searches a day, the Google search engine wields a powerful influence over how people see the Internet; allowing one company to “eavesdrop” via a “clickstream” of millions keywords a day into the into the questions and intentions of popular culture. After exploring what Google is this essay will argue that Google functions as a tool, a teacher, and a temptation which combine together become an asset and a liability for followers of Christ. At the very least, Google embodies an old

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-Noël Jeanneney, *Google and the Myth of Universal Knowledge*, trans. Teresa Lavender Fagan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), vii.

metaphor in bright new colors: *searching*. As old as the Hebrew prophets, witnessed in the words of Jesus, and now a throbbing artery in the on-line world, *searching* points to the finitude of the human mind and its hunger for something that only a personal and transcendence God can ultimately fulfill.

### What is Google?

Google, Inc. is a company that runs an Internet search engine and a host of other search-related services from their website at [www.google.com](http://www.google.com). The company was founded by Larry Page and Sergey Brin in September of 1998 when they decided to take a “temporary leave” from their doctoral studies at Stanford University to turn one of their research projects into a business. Their project was the development of a new Internet search engine. Early computer scientists discovered that it was difficult to make computer programs that “crawled” the web understand how some webpages were more “relevant” than others. “I’ve always been interested in big, nasty problems. Search provided one of the nastiest,”<sup>2</sup> remarked the founder of AltaVista, one of the earliest Internet search engines. While studying Computer Science at Stanford University, Larry Page saw a parallel between hyperlinks on webpages and citations in academic literature. Citations in an academic paper, he knew, often are a clue to the importance and the caliber of the work. Could the same thing work on the Internet? Could he find a way to analyze the links on a page and “rank” their relevance for searches? In 1996, in the Stanford computer lab, Page and Brin began to try the new method. The results were impressive. Soon Google was getting results that made Altavista, the leading search

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<sup>2</sup> John Battelle, *The Search*, (New York: Portfolio, 2005), 45.

engine at the time, seem clumsy. They dubbed their new ranking algorithm “PageRank,”<sup>3</sup> and began spreading the word to friends and family about their new website. By 1998 they had outgrown their resources at Stanford, and they realized that they would need to launch out on their own to keep the project afloat. They incorporated in 1998 and since then Google, Inc. has experienced phenomenal market growth. On November 21, 2006 its stock topped \$500 per share, giving the company a market value of \$155 billion just after its eight birthday.

The main reason for this growth is that its technology could search the web faster, cheaper, and with more accuracy than anyone else. On top of this superior technology, Google gained the trust of millions around the world captured in its now-famous motto, “Don’t be evil.” The company attributes much of its success to its simple philosophy of “never settling for the best” and making their highest priority to “focus on the user.”<sup>4</sup> This includes a clean and simple design, fast-loading pages, a firm commitment never to sell search results, and relevant advertising that is not distracting. The tactful respect and well-oiled technology paid off. “No other brand,” writes David Vise, “has achieved global recognition faster than Google.” Today, Google is the world's most popular search engine.<sup>5</sup>

Looks can be deceiving. A simple webpage does not mean a simple search engine. Beneath Google’s cheerful homepage, consisting of little more than twenty-five words and a solitary search box, lies the most powerful computing grid in the world. Operating

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<sup>3</sup> PageRank has undergone major revisions since its early days, and now there are over one hundred different elements to the algorithm that judges and indexes webpages.

<sup>4</sup> “Our Philosophy” posted on corporate website [www.google.com](http://www.google.com), accessed November 15, 2006.

<sup>5</sup> And, needless to say, has recently become the most popular among Christians. See “Google beats Yahoo For Best Search Engine” PR Leap, <http://www.prleap.com/pr/55284/> Accessed December 7, 2006.

more than 450 *thousand* Linux-based servers<sup>6</sup> that collectively house over eight billion web pages, Google serves up over 150 million searches a day in over one hundred languages from thirty countries all over the world.<sup>7</sup> These servers hold over 200 *quadrillion* bytes (1,125,899,906,842,624) or 200 *petabytes* of data. Digital storage is a challenge and Google is constantly expanding. The company recently purchased a thirty acre plot in Dallas, Oregon where it is in the process of building a massive “server farm” the size of two football fields, complete with twin cooling towers to cool the thousands of high-powered servers soon to be installed.<sup>8</sup> Google's popularity spans the globe, and in some countries they claim seventy percent of the search market. To provide up-to-date information, Google's spiders crawl 150 million webpages daily, downloading them to their servers where they are sorted, cataloged and analyzed for searches. To keep its edge on the competition, Google is constantly expanding its offerings, and in addition to the search engine they provide a shopping cart, online email, book search, satellite maps, photo program, document editing tools, and many other secondary services.

Last year, at the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas, Larry Page stated that Google's goal was to “change the world” by “facilitating and organizing all [its] information.”<sup>9</sup> For some, such ambition sounds almost religious. Jeanneney calls Google's future plans “a messianic dream” of having “all the knowledge in the world freely accessible on planet earth.”<sup>10</sup> “I felt like I were in the company of missionaries” remarked

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<sup>6</sup> John Markoff and Saul Hansell call this figure one of the “lowest estimates.” “Google's quasi-secret power play” *San Diego Tribute*, June 14th, 2006. Available from [http://www.signonsandiego.com/uniontrib/20060614/news\\_1n14supercom.html](http://www.signonsandiego.com/uniontrib/20060614/news_1n14supercom.html), accessed December 6, 2006.

<sup>7</sup> Charles H. Ferguson, *What's Next for Google?* MIT Technology Review, January 2005, 38.

<sup>8</sup> “Hiding in Plain Sight, Google Seeks More Power” *New York Times*, Technology Section, June 14, 2006.

<sup>9</sup> St. Lawrence of Google *The Economist*, 1/14/2006, Vol. 378 Issue 8460, p66.

<sup>10</sup> Jeanneney, “Le Projet Google de Numérisation du Livre Le Monde,” Paris, January 23, 2005.

one visitor to Googleplex, the massive space-age headquarters in Mountain View, California.<sup>11</sup> Paul Saffo, a member of Silicon Valley's Institute for the Future, put it more bluntly: "Google is a religion posing as a company."<sup>12</sup> Perhaps this is far-fetched, but the Google founders themselves can sound more like apocalyptic prophets of technology rather than corporate executives. For example, during one interview Sergey Brin disclosed his goal with the statement, "Ultimately [we] want to have the entire world's knowledge connected directly to your mind."<sup>13</sup> David Vise describes Google's research in mapping the human gene to make searching even easier for people to find the information they are looking for. "Why not improve the brain?" Brin asked. "Perhaps in the future we can attach a little version of Google that you just plug into your brain. We'll have to develop a stylish version, but then you'd have all of the world's knowledge immediately available, which is pretty exciting."<sup>14</sup> Perhaps such comments are playful exaggerations. Nevertheless, many search engine engineers realize the vast horizons that are yet to be discovered and developed by search engines. Udi Manber, the CEO of Amazon's search engine A9.com, says that "the search problem is about five percent solved."<sup>15</sup> Today, if Google only represents five percent, what will the ninety-five look like?

### Google in Everyday Life

Though Google is only accomplishing a fraction of its dreams, this fraction is a significant "cultural text" with a good grip on everyday life in America. In a *New York Times* article entitled "Planet Google Wants You," reporter Alex Williams traced the impact of Google in the life of a law student in New York City. Every few hours his cell

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid

<sup>12</sup> Ibid

<sup>13</sup> Reprinted in the David Vise, *The Google Story*, (New York: Delacorte Press, 2005), 166f.

<sup>14</sup> *The Google Story*, 292.

<sup>15</sup> *The Search*, 12.

phone buzzed with alerts from Google calendar, several times a day he used the search engine to hunt around the web, and he received all his email through Gmail, Google's fast-growing email service. "I find myself getting sucked down the Google wormhole," he stated. "It is all part of Google's benign dictatorship of your life." Oren Etzioni, a professor of computer science at the University of Washington said that "the idea is that Google wants to organize your life, not just your information."<sup>16</sup> The search earned its own verb; "to google" was added to the Oxford English dictionary in July of 2006. Statistics from the Pew Internet and American Life Project indicate that Google is most popular with young people and those with higher education, which means Google will keep growing as each generation becomes more familiar and comfortable with Internet technology.<sup>17</sup> Many educators and librarians are concerned about the wide ranging impact of Google on the next generation of students, scholars and researchers. Librarians talk about the "pre-Google days" and the "post-Google days", days marked by savvy search-oriented patrons that know more about PageRank than the Dewey Decimal System.<sup>18</sup> The best evidence of Google's growing grip on the culture is the sheer volume of searches: Americans log nearly three *billion* searches every month.<sup>19</sup>

Google's has a voice into the lives of everyday Americans that is strong and growing. Different than many other cultural texts, however, is that the "opposite" is also true. The culture speaks to Google. Google's influence is not like a bestseller or a blockbuster movie, one-way streets of information, where a message is passed from an

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<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Jeremy Caplin "Google's Growing Grasp" *Time* 168 no15, 41-2, October 9, 2006, 42.

<sup>17</sup> Stewart M. Hoover, et al, "Faith Online" report by the Pew Internet & American Life Project, April 7, 2004. Available online [http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/126/report\\_display.asp](http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/126/report_display.asp) accessed December 7, 2006.

<sup>18</sup> John Berry III, *Library Journal*, 10/15/2006, Vol. 131 Issue 17, p10.

<sup>19</sup> Danny Sullivan, Editor-In-Chief, Search Engine Watch. Available at <http://searchenginewatch.com/showPage.html?page=2156461>, accessed December 7, 2006.

author to readers. Google is a two-way street. Each search that takes place is permanently recorded on Google's servers giving Google direct information about the interests of billions of searchers. A tantalizing glimpse into this is revealed to the public on Google's Zeitgeist, a site that provides an overview of what are the most popular searches. John Battelle, in discovering Zeitgeist, found inspiration to write his book, *The Search: How Google and its Rivals Rewrote the Rules of Business and Transformed our Culture*. "I was transfixed," he writes. "Zeitgeist revealed to me that Google had more than its finger on the pulse of our culture; it was directly jacked into the culture's nervous system.... My God I thought, *Google know what our culture wants!*"<sup>20</sup> This recorded memory of searches, Battelle explains, is nothing less than a "database of intentions" representing a "massive clickstream of desires, needs, wants and preferences that can be discovered, subpoenaed, archived, tracked, and exploited for all sorts of ends."<sup>21</sup> All this information gives Google something that very few other companies have, a massive database of how people and information relate and how people find answers to questions.<sup>22</sup> This, combined with the fact that Google has one of the world largest computing platforms, has prompted many researchers to predict that Google is one of the few players capable of discovering the holy grail of computer science: artificial intelligence.<sup>23</sup> With its sprawling computing grid,

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<sup>20</sup> *The Search*, 2. Italics original.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 6.

<sup>22</sup> Naturally this has raised a fierce debate over privacy. Many are worried at the increasing liability of Google storing so much personal data. See *The Search*, 189-210 and *The Google Story*, 154-163. This essay will not deal with these questions of privacy, mostly because there is no hard evidence that Google has ever breached their firm commitment to personal privacy as stated on their website nor will in the future. See "Jefferson Graham," *Google promises all searches stay private* USA Today, 8/9/2006. Nevertheless, speculations abound, ranging from thoughtful concern to raging prophecies of Google as the ultimate Big Brother.

<sup>23</sup> "Artificial Intelligence" posted at <http://labs.google.com/papers.html> In the conclusion of their article, "Reasoning about Partially Observed Actions", Megan Nance, Adam Vogel, Eyal Amir explain that their algorithms are able to make new progress in "interpreting narratives" an interesting claim for a computer program. Article available at <http://reason.cs.uiuc.edu/vogel1/param-filter-aaai06.pdf>

and its constant human input, Google's system is starting to "know" more about how people think than any computer in history. Add this all up, and Google and its other sibling search engines are a cultural text to be reckoned with both today and in the future.

### Evaluating Google: Tool, Teacher, Temptation

Looking at Google as a tool, a teacher and a temptation helps evaluate Google's impact on popular culture. The metaphors progress from utility to liability that can both enable and jeopardize Christians and the cause of Christ. Predicting how new technologies will be used (and abused) by Christians is usually unclear during their infancy. Thoughtful Christians should be "innocent as doves and shrewd as serpents," becoming neither lambasting prophets, nor naïve optimists.

### *A Swiss Army Knife for the Information Age*

The volume of information on the Internet is staggering. Without doubt it is the largest networked conglomeration of information in human history. Imagine entering a library a thousand times the size of the Library of Congress. Instead of seeing row after row of neatly shelved books, there are mountains of loose pages, millions of sheets of books, journals, ads, pornography, and diaries piled together.<sup>24</sup> Such is the condition of the Internet. The Internet archive has already catalogued fifty-five billion webpages, and is collects over a million new pages per day.<sup>25</sup> But this is a fraction of the Internet's output, and with the rise of blogging, it is estimated that nearly seven million new webpages are created everyday. Treasure and trash mingle freely in this ocean of data; a few clicks away from some of the world's richest deposits of learning are some of the world's richest

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<sup>24</sup> Metaphor taken from Gene Edwards Veith, Jr. and Christopher L. Stamper, *Christians in a .com world* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2000), 7.

<sup>25</sup> Available at <http://www.archive.org/>. Accesss December 7, 2006.

deposits of human depravity. Google does a valuable work of “ruling and subduing” this sprawling cyber-jungle of billions of random documents.<sup>26</sup> Inadvertently, the search engine is honoring part of the original creation mandate on a new frontier in 21<sup>st</sup> century. Those who remember using the Internet in the 1990's, know it was a tedious and frustrating process, a belabored trial of searching for a needle in a haystack made of millions of documents. Garry Trudeau, creator of *Doonesbury*, remarked that Google was his fast-response research assistant. “It is the Swiss Army knife of information retrieval.”<sup>27</sup> Google sorts, organizes, and enables fast, free and relatively clean access to the data on the Internet in a user-friendly format. Their “SafeSearch” has drastically cut down searches that accidentally load explicit sexual content, something common in the early days of the Internet. Accurate statistics are difficult to pin down, but it is commonly shown that around 10% of the Internet consists of pornographic material.<sup>28</sup> According to a 2006 government study, however, only one percent of Google's index, contains content that is “sexually explicit.”<sup>29</sup>

Not only filtering out the bad; Google provides access to the good. The Christian Classics Ethereal Library, for example, offers hundreds of Christians classic books available to searchers. Receiving 30,000 visitors a day, most find the site through a search engine and download over a million books every month.<sup>30</sup> The project began when Harry

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<sup>26</sup> “Ruling and subduing” are perhaps not the best terms to describe the Google role. “Organizing and analyzing” is a better rubric, but the search engine is certainly bringing order out of chaos, and by doing so providing a blessing to millions of users by making the vast data on the Internet accessible and “findable.”

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in David Vise, *The Google Story*, 144.

<sup>28</sup> Accurate statistics are difficult to obtain because of the fluidity and the way some count pornography on the Internet. These are from <http://Internet-filter-review.toptenreviews.com/Internet-pornography-statistics.htm>.

<sup>29</sup> Elise Ackerman, “Study: About 1 percent of Web pages have sexually explicit material,” *San Jose Mercury News* Monday November 13<sup>th</sup>, 2006.

<sup>30</sup> “Access Statistics?” from Christian Classics Ethereal Library, <http://www.ccel.org/info/faq.html> Accessed November 23, 2006.

Plantinga found “The Imitation of Christ” while using a search engine and decided to offer more classics on the web. More than that, the search engine is a tool that has changed people's lives. One searcher wrote in to thank Google for helping him find his father after thirty-four years of not knowing who he was.<sup>31</sup> Another even claimed the tool had saved her life.<sup>32</sup> Still others have discovered the Gospel via Google. “Each day, over 1 million searches are done on the Internet for spiritual terms. 'I need God'...'Who is Jesus'...'prayer'... People are searching around the world,”<sup>33</sup> states Global Media Outreach, the “Internet Evangelism” arm of Campus Crusade for Christ. The group reaches twenty million visitors every year from 121 different countries with an exposure to the Gospel.<sup>34</sup> With over 350 million Internet users in Asia alone,<sup>35</sup> Google is able to go where the cross-cultural missionary cannot. With a team of several hundred volunteers, the Global Media Outreach is able to connect seekers with qualified Christian counselors that will contact them and provide counsel and truth about the Gospel. In the States, the Pew Internet and American Life Project reported that “64% of wired Americans have used the Internet for spiritual or religious purposes.”<sup>36</sup> The report continues, “Evangelicals are among the most fervent users for religious and spiritual purposes.”<sup>37</sup> Because of the anonymous nature of the Internet, people feel safe looking on the Internet for the answers to life's hardest questions, questions that they are afraid to ask their parents, or even a pastor, they will ask Google. LeaderU.com, a site targeting younger generations,

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<sup>31</sup> <http://www.google.com/press/testimonials.html> Accessed December 8, 2006.

<sup>32</sup> One Googlers sent in a message to the company headquarters describing how she began to feel symptoms that she vaguely associated with a heart attack. Within a few minutes she found a computer and googled, “heart attack.” The symptoms were real, and within five minutes she made it to a near by fire station where firemen took her immediately to the hospital. Today she has no residual effects from her heart failure

<sup>33</sup> [http://www.globalmediaoutreach.com/about\\_us/about\\_us.html](http://www.globalmediaoutreach.com/about_us/about_us.html), Accessed December 8, 2006.

<sup>34</sup> [http://www.globalmediaoutreach.com/about\\_us/statistics.html](http://www.globalmediaoutreach.com/about_us/statistics.html), Accessed December 8, 2006

<sup>35</sup> <http://www.Internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>, Accessed December 8, 2006

<sup>36</sup> [http://www.pewInternet.org/pdfs/PIP\\_Faith\\_Online\\_2004.pdf](http://www.pewInternet.org/pdfs/PIP_Faith_Online_2004.pdf), Accessed December 8, 2006

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. ii

provided 1.25 million copies of free, biblically-based articles to 636,000 visitors just in the month of November of 2005. Seventy percent of its traffic came from search engines like Google and Yahoo.<sup>38</sup>

The more powerful the tool, the more dangerous, and Google is no exception. Search engine make it easy to find anything from software cracks, to plagiarized term papers, to bomb recipes. According to one statistic, it is “the largest single gateways on the Internet for pornography,”<sup>39</sup> serving up millions of pornographic searches every day. Another researcher found that illicit sexual content makes up one out of every four search requests.<sup>40</sup> On its website Google states it “generally allows ads containing adult themes, such as explicit sexual content.”<sup>41</sup> Although they do not report its profits from pornography related ads, statistics reveal it to be substantial.<sup>42</sup> Sex sells, and high profits are one reason there is little incentive for Google to restrict pornographic searches. Such company policies cast ambiguous shadows on the motto of “Don't be evil,” and demonstrate that concept of “evil” is fairly malleable when it comes to harmonizing the motto with corporate interests. Like Swiss Army knives, search engines are both useful and dangerous. Some click their way to a knowledge of Christ; others to bondage, depravity, and destruction. The Apostle Paul's advice is a fitting code-of-conduct for Googlers: “I want you to be wise in what is good and innocent in what is evil.”<sup>43</sup>

#### *Teacher: Google, PhD?*

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<sup>38</sup> The webmaster of LeaderU.com, Byron Barlowe commented that “The Internet works like an ocean running through filters (mainly popular search engines). To reach intended audiences, you must stretch your reach through these search engines.” “Six Lessons from Leadership University” in *Lausanne World Pulse*, available at <http://www.lausanneworldpulse.com/perspectives/308/04-2006> Accessed December 8, 2006.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid

<sup>40</sup> David Vise, *The Google Story*, 165

<sup>41</sup> <https://adwords.google.com/select/guidelines.html> Accessed December 10, 2006.

<sup>42</sup> David Vise, *The Google Story*, 166

<sup>43</sup> Romans 16:19, NASB.

By directing answers to searchers, Google replaces ignorance with knowledge, and thus *educates*. Or does it? After all, information does not equal education. A critic might reply that Google is “only a search engine” and is not involved in education in the formal sense. Within a strict definition of education this is true, but on another level it is naïve. After all, millions of searches are pumped through Google every day; questions of incredible scope, ranging from trivial to sacred. Google is a teacher in precisely the way it organizes, ranks, and catalogues searchable information. Strictly speaking, the Internet does not teach; it is just a massive inter-network of documents, the “raw data.” But as soon as a tool is used to make judgments about the data, such as which pages should appear before others and what the pages *mean*, it takes an “educating” function. “To search through this chaos, we need smart tools, programs that find resources for us.”<sup>44</sup> Google is one of the Internet’s best antidotes to what Niel Postman calls the AIDS syndrome: Anti-Information Deficiency Syndrome, a situation where there is massive amounts of information but little coherence, order, and understanding.<sup>45</sup> To provide meaningful results from a search an index must have some level of coherence, order and understanding. The danger is that Google’s understanding is minimal and emphasizes facts over coherent understanding. Tyron Edwards once remarked, “the great end of education is to discipline rather than to furnish the mind; to train it to the use of its own powers rather than to fill it with the accumulation of others.” Google, however, cares little for training or discipline: its god is efficiency and speed, its “educational goal” is

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<sup>44</sup> Clifford Stoll, *Silicon Snake Oil* (New York: 1995), 195.

<sup>45</sup> *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology*. ( New York: Vintage Books, 1992). Interestingly, the book was published before the advent of the Internet, giving Postman an event more prophetic voice into our day.

providing what has been dubbed the “any<sup>3</sup>” anything, anywhere, anytime.<sup>46</sup> “We are searching ourselves to stupidity,” Postman’s ghost whispers.

Good teachers treat their subjects objectively and bias-free. Under the heading “Integrity” on their corporate website, Google posts the following statement:

“Google's complex, automated methods make human tampering with our results extremely difficult..... A Google search is an easy, honest and objective way to find high-quality websites with information relevant to your search.”

Notice that Google claims to be objective because its system is constructed on “complex, automated methods.” An algorithm, unlike a person, is immune to the virus of greed or preference. But does a good program really mean that Google is “honest and objective”? In fact, giving a machine moral qualities, like honesty, is a curious anthropomorphism. If a search engine is “honest,” does it mean that it always tells the truth?

Even if a search engine is free from specific intervention into their algorithm,<sup>47</sup> its is still only as objective as the algorithms it uses (designed by human engineers) to rank data. PageRank, Google's breakthrough concept, factors in the number of links to a particular site in deciding how “important” the page is. Using this system, Google works because it is able to find what people are looking for. But here is the catch: does providing people with the answer they want mean that the search is “objective and honest?” The question is tricky, because for certain kinds of data it is. Search: “What is the capital of

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<sup>46</sup> Tony Glover, “All human life is indexed on the web” The Business Online, available <http://www.thebusinessonline.com/Document.aspx?id=33D07AB8-C4A6-40FF-9D9E-7A8215113C32> Accessed November 14, 2006.

<sup>47</sup> Such as deliberately ranking one result higher than another, or purposely deleting a sight from their index. For example, due to a court ordering Google eliminated several pages from their database. A heated example is when Google removed Xenu.net, a site dedicated to refuting scientology. At the bottom of the results page for “Xenu” they list the following notice: “*In response to a complaint we received under the [US Digital Millennium Copyright Act](#), we have removed 1 result(s) from this page*”

Iowa?” and Google has an easy time serving up an honest, objective answer. Many searches fall into this realm of objectivity and are usually specific, even trivial questions that can easily be verified. However, not all searches are so simple and as the web continue to expand, people are asking different kinds of questions. “Is George Bush a good president?” or “What is love” or “How do I know God?” are of a different nature. Here, Google’s “objectivity” is highly questionable.<sup>48</sup>

Consider several examples. A search on “Jesus” comes up first with a Wikipedia entry which anyone can edit. Second is an online game where a viewer can dress up a cartoon of Jesus on the cross with clothes fitting for the season. Currently there is a Santa Claus outfit, Grinch costume, and an immodest elf dress to clothe the crucified cartoon.<sup>49</sup> Is it “honest and objective” that this site ranks second out of 169,000,000 sites that mention one of the most influential figures of history? Search on “love” and you get the “lovecalculator,” an online program complete with blinking banner ads that will “compute” your success at finding lasting romance.<sup>50</sup> Search on “truth” and you get “thetruth.com,” a Flash powered cartoon game run by an anti-tobacco activist groups. Try something longer, “Can I have hope?” and you get an article by an MTV employee ranting about a US Senator titled, “I Hope Your Wife Gets Raped and Can’t Get an Abortion!”<sup>51</sup> Yet Jesus, truth, love, and hope are a few of the themes that humanity’s greatest thinkers, poets, teachers, and writers have wrestled with and illumined

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<sup>48</sup> Surprisingly, some authors merely claim that the billions of pages crawled by search engines “are not organized in any way (nor are they evaluated for content)...” J.R. Okin, *The Information Revolution* (Winter Harbor, ME: Ironbound Press, 2005), 148. This seems a good example a naive understand of search engines. In order to return meaningful results from billions of similar pages, a search engine *must* organize and *evaluate* webpages for content.

<sup>49</sup> [www.jesusedressup.com](http://www.jesusedressup.com) . Accessed December 9, 2006.

<sup>50</sup> [www.lovecalculator.com](http://www.lovecalculator.com), Accessed December 9, 2006.

<sup>51</sup> <http://politics.netscape.com/story/2006/11/23/mtv-employee-i-hope-your-wife-gets-raped-and-cant-have-an-abortion/> preformed December 8, 2006.

throughout history. All this is lost, filtered away beneath the blind eyes of PageRank, a machine only as “objective” as the way algorithms compute links and metadata. Google is proof that “knowing” a billion facts does not translate into understanding and often does not even come close to true wisdom.

But is Google to blame for this? After all, the problem may be with the Internet, not the search engines. Some have heralded that the Internet has brought a tremendous advance in the “democratization of information.” David Weinberger argues that the Web “breaks the traditional publishing model” by allowing everyone and anyone to have their say.<sup>52</sup> Is Google's objectivity simply the offspring of a free market of information? No, because hierarchization intrinsically takes place in a search mechanism, and such ranking means there is a *value system* that ranks and judges the data.<sup>53</sup> This value system is *not* an untainted commitment to “free speech,” an open forum where “everyone is a pamphleteer.” Computer scientist Albert-László Barabási has carefully challenged this utopian ideal:

“Cyberspace embodies the ultimate freedom of speech. Some may be offended, others may love it, but the content of a Webpage is hard to censor...This unparalleled license of expression, coupled with diminished publishing costs, makes the Web the ultimate forum of democracy; everybody's voice can be heard with equal opportunity....But it is not. The most intriguing result of our Web-mapping project was the *complete* absence of democracy, fairness, and egalitarian values on the Web. We learned that the topology of the Web prevents us from seeing anything but a mere handful of the billion documents out there.”<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> *Small Pieces Loosely Joined*, (Cambridge, Mass: Perseus Books Group , 2002) Xi,

<sup>53</sup> Jeanneney, *Google and the Myth of Universal knowledge*, 6, worries that Anglophone (specifically American) values will take precedence in controlling and organizing the web.

<sup>54</sup> Barabási, Albert-László, *Linked, How Everything Is Connected to Everything Else and What It means for Business, Science, and Everyday Life*, Plume Penguin, 2003. P. 56, italics original.

What controls these “mere handful” of documents? Algorithms. “If Google is a religion,” speculates the *Economist*, “what is its God? It would have to be The Algorithm. Faith in the possibility of an omniscient and omnipotent algorithm appears to be what Page and Brin have in common.”<sup>55</sup> But what kind of faith is this? The algorithms serve a simple goal: make the greatest number of people satisfied with the best answers to their search. The idea that the “cream rises” is undercut by the “bread and circus” reality.<sup>56</sup> This means that what is *popular* often ranks higher than what is true, drowning good questions in pop-culture answers.<sup>57</sup> Might made right in the days of a dictator; *links* make right in the days of Google.

A final problem for Google as a guide is that the structure and format of a search engine can numb searchers to the quality of answers. McLuhan's famous adage, “The medium is the message” finds a new echo in Internet searching. For example, will a searcher who is struggling with the problem of evil ever get at hearing from Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Dostoevsky's *Brother's Karamazov*, or the book of Job?<sup>58</sup> Sure, they can locate a digital copy of the literature in a click,<sup>59</sup> but this may be precisely the problem. Does the format of a .0016 second keyword search cater to such sustained, complex and demanding

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<sup>55</sup> “St. Lawrence of Google,” 66.

<sup>56</sup> Peter L. Shillingsburg worries that in a day when electronic texts begin to leave behind the “age of print” there will be serious question of how data is reliably preserved and prioritized. “Web browsers regardless of sophistication of their prioritizing processes, have no scholarly refereeing system to vouch for the quality of information and disinformation accessed in a search.” It is the search engines themselves, like Google, who become the new scholarly brokers of information. *From Gutenberg to Google* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 2.

<sup>57</sup> Deborah Johnson points out the “power” of knowledge comes only from information that is “accurate, reliable, and relevant.” *Reading in CyberEthics*, ed. Richard A. Spinello and Herman T. Tavani, (Boston: Jones and Bartlett Publishers, 2003), 88.

<sup>58</sup> Shillingsburg asking something similar: If one could display the full text of *A Communist Manifesto* at the push of a button, “would that change your experience of the world? ...What would be lost?” *From Gutenberg to Google*, 19

<sup>59</sup> Assuming key word searches led them there, which seems unlikely. For example, searches like “If God loves me why is life so hard?” or “Why do good people suffer?” would not likely find such literary works.

answers? The *process* of gaining knowledge is often just as important than the knowledge gained, in which case Google may be a dangerous “short-circuit” between good questions and enduring answers. By nature of its inherit mechanism, Google favors searches that lead to popular and “easy” answers, encouraging surfing and browsing, not thinking and wrestling.

*An Infinite Trivial Pursuit: Google the Tempter*

If “information is power,” Google offers high octane satisfaction. The temptation to increase in knowledge is more subtle than the lust for power and more innocent in the mouth of the Tempter. After all, the first sinful words ever uttered struck the chord of *knowledge*: “You will be like God, *knowing* good and evil.” The serpent’s whisper is not silent today, dressed not as a beautiful creature but as a playful white search box. In an interesting editorial in the New York Times, author Thomas Friedman mused about the day when wireless Internet access and Google are joined together. He quotes from Alen Cohen, a V.P. of a wireless company:

“If I can operate Google, I can find anything. And with wireless, it means I will be able to find anything, anywhere, anytime. Which is why I say that Google, combined with Wi-Fi, is a little bit like God. God is wireless, God is everywhere and God sees and knows everything. Throughout history, people connected to God without wires. Now, for many questions in the world, you ask Google, and increasingly, you can do it without wires, too.”<sup>60</sup>

What if Google Labs accomplishes its far-reaching goal? What if its researchers find a way to read brain waves with a portable search engine worn behind the ear that gives access to all of recorded information in human history? Would this not provide a particularly seductive substitute for prayer? Consider the contrast: Google gives immediate answer, prayer does not. Google offers personal answers with impersonal

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<sup>60</sup> “Is Google God?” *New York Times*, Sunday, June 29, 2003.

demands, God demands personal relationship with (usually) mediated answers. Google panders to curiosity; prayer plies character. Google takes a click, prayer is a process. Google gives man's collective wisdom, God gives wisdom that “confounds” the scribes, debaters and PageRank of this age.

Here we see Google’s ironic secret. Our problem is not that we search too much but too little. We settle for web searches that itch our brains when we are offered truth that would burn in our hearts. Technology disguises old idols. Americans can quickly worship information, control, predictability. In a moment, a Google search becomes nothing more than a Baal ritual in new clothes, exploring the heart of the Internet instead of the liver of a sheep.<sup>61</sup>

#### Searching for what Satisfied: Google meets Theology

Searching is an important metaphor in scripture. “Seek and you will find,” Jesus says. Loaded on millions of computer monitors all over the world, Google reminds us the metaphor is not dead in modern times. In fact, the billions of searches point to the fact that humans, created in the image of God yet dead in sin, are nevertheless looking for the map back to Eden. The proof is specific; the millions of searches for “Who is God?” and general; why do we search in the first place? “Our hearts are googling” to modernize Augustine, “until they find their answer in Thee.” Google capitalizes on good theology: man is ultimately searching for God.

If Google's global popularity reveals the hunger of people always to know more, does it not also point us back to the overwhelming sufficiency of Jesus Christ? After all, as an idol, Google performs compared to a block of wood. It can answer more specific

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<sup>61</sup> The technical name is *Hepatoscopy*, the ancient practice of studying the liver to discern the will of the gods. See Bruce Waltke, *Finding the Will of God: A Pagan Notion?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 29-30.

questions, the Web swells with more “practical advice” than all of Scripture. So pause and remember: in Christ “are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.”<sup>62</sup> If Google can index and organize a billion pages, Christ knows every thought of the billion webmasters. If Google can provide satellite photographs to every corner of the world, Christ knows every atom of every galaxy. If Google knows our IP address and phone number, Christ knows the number of hairs on our head. Christ has more breadth, and Christ has more depth. He offers purpose, meaning, wisdom. Of course, his service is not like Google, and his goal is certainly *not* efficiency. He wants no carefree searchers, he demands all-out disciples. He does not sell so cheaply as a click; but to those who hunger and thirst after truth. And unlike Google, He is not limited to just the “online community.” An poor farmer in rural China, who has never seen a computer monitor in his life, may have more access to wisdom than all of the engineers at Googleplex. No, the two systems do not “work” the same way, and of course they are not mutually incomputable. But for all that Google is, Christ is more. He does not spit back data mined by an algorithm, but he gives us knowledge that transforms, enlivens, and humbles. His is the “data” of eternal life. And for this, Christ will have no substitutes. After all, the Bible tells us Google will be wrong. “High is the PageRank that leads to error, and low is the PageRank that leads to truth and few there are that find it.” But the Bible’s message gets even more surprising: If we find God through the Internet, or any other part of the modern hubris of technology, it is because God, not Google, is the ultimate “Search Engine.” He found our page before the dawn of time, the Hound of Heaven who will stop at nothing until He has received His Bride. And He has a better algorithm: not the PageRank of Google but the grace of the cross.

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<sup>62</sup> Colossians 2:3, NASB.

## Conclusion

Tool, teacher and tempter, three analogies that reveal Google's increasing influence in everyday life. For factual, clear-cut searches, Google is a research assistance without peer. But this discovery should not seduce users to assume it knows *all* the answers to life, nor that things are as neutral as they might appear. The Internet is far bigger than most think, and search engines must be highly selective, ranking and evaluating pages with computer programs immune to biblical wisdom. *Caveat inquisitor*- Let the searcher beware. An even greater danger still is that Google begins to replace God. Without hardly realizing it, searching becomes easier than prayer and popular wisdom tastier than the cross-shaped wisdom from God. Some need to close the browser and rediscover the power of a search done in the secret place of prayer. Yet for others, Google itself is one of God's means to draw them to his wisdom, and all over the world people are browsing their way home into the kingdom of God by discovering the Gospel online. Christians have almost always used new technologies for good and bad, sometimes with discernment and sometimes without. Google reminds us that Christians must be thoughtful and wise interpreters; discerning and capitalizing on "cultural texts" instead of being tossed back and forth in their ever-moving tide.

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