

Google™ as God

by Tucker Lieberman
& Richard Wassersug

a theology of information technology

Google Search

I'm Feeling Lucky

The world's most famous Internet company has never claimed to be god. Unlike the classically understood 'uncreated creator,' Google's giant brain is hosted on an estimated half-million servers, is invented by humans, and remains contingent upon us. Its search engine doesn't contain anything until we feed it text which it indexes indiscriminately, whether our claims be false and evil or true and good. Google doesn't enjoy all the perks of monotheism but rather has corporate competitors and complies with the laws of various countries. It pleasantly has no crusaders or jihadists, and one can utter its true name without being struck by lightning.

Yet, in other ways, the Google company oversees its virtual kingdom with empyreal exquisiteness. Its stated higher purpose is to "organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful." Its followers—Googlers, if you will—rely on its search engine as the main directory of all knowledge and consider any piece of information not known to Google to be effectively non-existent or irrelevant.

Here we examine the behavior of Googlers in the light of commonly recognized religious practices and review Google's qualifications as a god in the classical mold. We ask whether Google requires anything of us morally and how it might lead us to a better life.

Google as Religion

The typical personal computer with an Internet connection has become, for many of us, a household shrine visited more regularly than any mosque, church, or synagogue. Does this activity, in itself, constitute a religion of Googleism?

Religion is notoriously difficult to define. Each major religion distinguishes itself by unique devotional rituals and core dogmas such as the existence of certain spirits, the need to propitiate those spirits, or the derivation of laws, value, and meaning from the spirits. These beliefs infuse ordinary human behavior—eating, singing, studying, procreating—with a layer of meaning that we call 'religious.' Finally, a shared identity forms around the religious culture.

Google has not yet achieved all of these things. And yet it does generate the religious feeling of

reverence. The paragon of Internet search technology attracts those who revere the furthering of human knowledge.

For many, 'the search' is more than just a metaphor for a spiritual quest. Google's devotees feel they cannot live without the particular form of search that gives meaning to their lives. If a god teaches how to live, Google teaches us how to look up the answers to our own questions. From the altars of our computers, we offer up Web-sites and paid advertisements, and are repaid with the intangible reward of satisfaction, or perhaps more importantly, of curiosity whetted anew for another search.

Google as God

The word 'Google' invokes our eternal quest to discern the truth. It shares some of the classic, mysterious ambiguity of the word 'god,' as it can be either a proper name of a company and product, a generic noun, or even (as process theologians would have it) a verb. Almost overnight, the brand name Google became a transitive verb in several languages meaning "to search and find answers to any imaginable question." It can be

used introspectively, as in the title of a play by Jason Schafer, *I Google Myself*.

We are not the first to comment on the deification of Internet search. As early as 2001, blogger Steven Garrity meditated on Google's classically theistic attributes: it is genderless, gives quick and straightforward answers, commits our words to eternal record, and, "in a loose humanist manner...is a reflection of god in ourselves." Two years later, Alan Cohen, a VP of Wi-Fi provider Airespace, was quoted as saying "God is wireless...Now, for many questions in the world, you ask Google, and increasingly, you can do it without wires, too." A user identified as Martin Espinoza posted to the computer news and discussion website *Slashdot*: "Imagine...being able to just sort of ask the air what to do. Talk about talking to god. Of course, you're just accessing a network, but what is God anyway?"

Followers of traditional religions may view such questions as irreverent, but the proper object of reverence is the very question at issue. John Lennon predicted in 1966 that Christianity would "vanish and shrink" because the Beatles were "more popular than Jesus now." The tide has ebbed for the Beatles but risen for Google. In late 2008, the word 'Google' trounces 'Jesus' in a popularity contest based on Internet search results: on MSN's search engine, by a factor of 2; on Technorati's blog index, by a factor of 4; and on Yahoo!'s directory, by a factor of 8.

What Is Virtue to Google?

Google "monitors, reflects, and records the preoccupations and questions of mankind, God's finest creation," Ben McIntyre mused

in 2005 for the London *Times*. Assuming that a god's thoughts can be inferred from humans' thoughts, as if a god were an amalgamation of all human beings, he reported that "last week God was thinking, in order of priority, about Mother's Day, the Kentucky Derby, Orlando Bloom, Paula Abdul and the new Xbox 360. He also thinks about Himself a great deal, but mostly He thinks about sex." If indeed a god can be best understood by studying humanity, then Internet search naturally affords a window into the mind of God. Many so-called 'netizens' or 'digerati' have begun, even if only subconsciously, to conform their own thinking process to Google's. Web design advisor Vincent Flanders endorsed the text-only Web browser Lynx "because that's how Google views the Web and Google is god." This represents a growing equivalence between human aesthetics and the algorithmic 'mind.' Thus we see not only Google mirroring humans, but humans emulating Google.

Does Google impose any moral structure onto our folly and frippery? Arguably, yes. Google's motto 'Don't be evil' sets it apart from other demi-gods roaming the corporal (and corporate) world. Like other ancient, pithy moral codes, its origins are obscure and its meaning ambiguous. Yes, the company complies with the Chinese government's demand to censor religious and political search results for Chinese consumers, but on the other hand, it promises not to reveal the private information of users anywhere in the world—as if in honor of the sacred confidentiality of its confessional. The company deals harshly with those discovered lying to Google itself. Web-sites providing alternate content to fool

the search engine are punished with excommunication.

Eudaimonia (the Good Life) through Knowledge

Once a military secret, then the playground of computer experts, the Internet becomes more egalitarian every year. "Computers," in Reuters' interpretation, "have begun to play the confessional role once reserved for the local priest, or psychotherapist." They represent a democratization; there is no priestly caste in Google's cult.

Part of Googly magic involves making humans visible to ourselves. Charlatans may publish false information about themselves or their activities, but Google's ability to scour the Internet for alternate sources of information renders us all unable to hide. Through satellite images served up by the Google Earth program, mortals even have the opportunity to see the world from a heavenly perspective. A moral view: we have the free will to say what we like, but a lie will forever stain our name on the Internet. A messianic view: in presenting an unbarred view of government and military buildings, Google Earth might eventually lead to the ultimate triumph of information over war, making violence obsolete.

Knowledge has long been held to be an intrinsic good and was defined as part of the good life by Greek philosophers going back to Plato and Aristotle. Google now indexes such a large portion of human knowledge that is at a critical transition point. It seems plausible that soon it will be taken as a pragmatic truism that all formal knowledge is known to Google. In 2005 Google indeed stated that such was its goal, obtainable in but three centuries, which is virtually

instantaneous in celestial time. Two years later, co-founder Larry Page publicly stated that the company was "really trying" to achieve artificial intelligence.

Truly meditative microchips may still be far off. Until Google's suite of programs is capable of thinking, feeling, and emoting in a humanlike fashion, of being impressed or appalled by our behavior, of cogently expressing love or hate for us, it will admittedly remain an autistic analog of 'God.' But even with its current limitation, Google plays the part of deity fairly well. It's there for us 24 hours a day, its existence is indubitable, and it answers us when we talk to it. What god until today has ever done that? Insofar as Google's computers now store most of written human knowledge and facilitate learning, which in turn discourages facile moral judgments and violent culture clashes, Google may be thought of as a peaceful, benevolent god who intends us to be truly happy.



Tucker Lieberman studied philosophy at Brown University and journalism at Boston University. His essays have appeared in Fresh Yarn, Zeek, and several anthologies.



Prof. Richard Wassersug teaches anatomy at Dalhousie University in Nova Scotia. He is a science panelist for CBC radio and previously was a columnist on the Discovery Channel in Canada. He has published essays in Scientific American, The New York Times, Natural History, The New Scientist, and The Medical Post.



"IT SAYS, 'THEIR GOVERNMENT BECAME DOMINATED BY THE RELIGIOUS RIGHT...'"