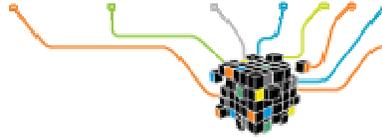


The New York Times



Bits

Business ■ Innovation ■ Technology ■ Society

November 20, 2008, 12:26 pm

Debating the Vices and Virtues of Google

By *Saul Hansell*

The question on the table is “Google violates its ‘don’t be evil’ motto.”

You can vote “yes” or “no” yourself in the comments below. But first read some of the arguments put forward in an Oxford-style debate on the question held this week in Manhattan by [Intelligence Squared US](#), a project of the Rozenkranz Foundation that runs a series of such discussions.



Before the debate between two teams of three experts, 20 percent of the audience agreed and 31 percent disagreed with the statement, with nearly half undecided.

It was a spirited discussion, mixing substantive talk of Google’s market power, privacy practices and its censorship in China with tongue-in-cheek attempts to compare the search company with Pol Pot, Lucifer, Dr. Evil and other dark icons.

Siva Vaidhyathan, an associate professor at the University of Virginia, argued that Google is in fact guilty of all of the seven deadly sins (for which he used the Latin names). Here is a condensed version of his argument:

Luxuria (extravagance or lust): The people who work there get massages. That is corporeal lust of the highest order.

Gula (gluttony): They can eat all day, no matter what they want. There is so much food that they never need to say no. That is the very definition of gluttony.

Avaritia (greed): The Google-Yahoo advertising deal is one of many examples of Google overreaching to corner a market, or completely undermine a market, in an effort to maximize its returns.

Acedia (sloth): Its very model of advertising is based on free-riding. Google makes money off of our work. We blog, we put our cats on skateboards and record them for videos. We do all of this work, and then Google harvests our work, runs all of this content through its computers, spits it back out at us, with almost no actual value added.

Ira (wrath): There are hundreds of small companies all around America that have found their Google ranks decline significantly because they tried to optimize their results. They were just doing what a company should do, trying to get more attention for themselves. And Google's algorithms, its faceless, soulless algorithms, came at them with wrath.

Invidia (envy): . Google has recently tried to push its suite of services that directly compete with Microsoft Office. Of course they have at various times threatened to muscle out eBay, muscle out PayPal, muscle out Amazon, in various ways.

Superbia (pride, or hubris): The actual motto of the company is "To organize the world's information to make it universally accessible." What could be more hubristic than that?

Defending Google was Jeff Jarvis, the blogger who is writing a book called "What Would Google Do?" He listed eight virtues of Google, sans Latin. Again, here's the condensed version:

Google has opened up the world's knowledge to the world: No longer do we end an argument saying, I don't know. We go to Google. Google will tell us.

Google respects the wisdom of the crowd: Google learns what it learns because it trusts us.

Google takes the wisdom of the crowd and it gives it back to us: Look at the Google Flu Trends search. It lets us know how often we search for a flu, and how the flu trend is coming. That is our knowledge, not Google's.

Google connects people: We often are accused online of being anti-social. I think we've become hyper-social. I think we're more connected. Admit it, how many of you have searched Google for an old girlfriend or boyfriend?

Google is a platform that enables us to create: It is an age of creation, and Google creates the platforms, the tools to let us create, the means to let us pay for that.

Google does have ads: [Web publishers] can do what we want with our ads. We can start whole businesses with [Google]. We can create movements with it. We can be found with it. And I believe that Google ads will help support the future even of news.

Google.org is trying to solve (with hubris) the problem of energy and global warming: Politicians are trying to get us on energy with regulation and taxes and prohibitions and slaps on the wrist. Google is giving this investment, and innovation, and invention.

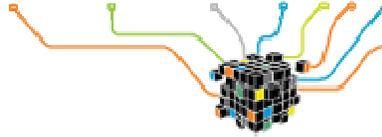
Google has a new model on how to treat employees: We get, they get, massages. [He stops here because his time runs out]

Over an hour and a half, there was discussion of a lot of other issues as well. If you are curious, the transcript of the event is [here](#), a podcast will be available soon on iTunes and the debate will be broadcast on many NPR stations in coming weeks.

After the debate, the audience was asked to vote again on the motion. It split evenly: 47 percent said Google does violate its "don't be evil" motto and 47 percent said it does not.

So Bits readers must be the tie breakers. In the comments below, please first write your vote: "Google is evil" or "Google is not evil." Then say why.

Latin is optional.



November 22, 2008, 12:34 pm

More on the ‘Is Google Evil?’ Debate

By [Saul Hansell](#)

UPDATE: Video clips of the debate on whether Google violates its “Don’t be evil” motto are [here](#). The transcript and other information is [here](#).

The question of Google’s evil was in the air around The Times on Thursday. Just after I pushed the save button on the post that posed the question [whether Google violates its “Don’t be evil” motto](#), I sat in with the Times editorial board (that is, those who write the unsigned comments on the editorial page) for a meeting with Eric Schmidt, Google’s chief executive and also a member of President-elect Barack Obama’s [transition economic advisory board](#).

Mr. Schmidt talked mainly about policy issues, like Google’s plan for alternative energy, and his thoughts about privacy. Unprompted, he brought up Google’s motto, explaining how the company thinks about the sort of tough questions that come up in its business, like whether to identify people who search for child pornography to law enforcement agencies. (It does not because it doesn’t want to be making judgments about its users.)



Eric Schmidt. (Credit: Justin Sullivan/Getty Images)

“‘Don’t be evil’ is an invitation to debate,” he said. “It means we will fight over what it means.”

Beyond Google’s endless meetings, the company’s motto certainly has prompted debate this week. I wrote my original post based on a formal, Oxford-style debate held in New York on Tuesday. That debate left the audience tied with 47 percent believing Google violates the dictum and an equal number believing it does not.

And more than 100 Bits readers have [added their arguments](#) to the question of whether Google actually meets the evil-free standard it set for itself. Our readers were also quite divided, both on the morality of Google’s actions and the reason for their judgment.

Some of those that see evil lurking in the heart of Mountain View object to Google’s actions to limit search results in China. Others accused it of sins including bullying, hypocrisy, and invasion of privacy.

“EVIL!” declared George Burdell. “They are advertising company mining your data and flooding your eyeballs. Everything else is a trail of candy to get you into the store.”

Some readers, taking the view that Google should not be condemned, challenged criticism of the company as “full of holes,” as Steve put it. And many praised the virtues of the company’s services.

“Try living in a foreign country.... (Thailand).....no libraries, minimum access to publications/books/news. Google is a savior!” wrote John Oles.

Many readers declared Google no different from any corporation in a capitalist economy. But some found that to be inherently evil; others did not.

A smaller group saw merit in both arguments. “They’re not evil, but we need to keep an eye on them,” commented B. Mull. Dominik Pucek wrote, “Yes, Google is evil. But dammit, I like it!”

Ultimately, this sort of ambivalence was the combined mood of Bits readers. Of the first 104 commenters who explicitly answered the question, 27 said Google violates its “don’t be evil” motto and 31 said it does not.