



Google reaches 20 – Is it now playing God?

By [Chris Goswami](#) September 10, 2018 [Business](#)

No matter what your views are on the search behemoth or on the political spectrum – Google has made astonishing leaps forward in technology in just twenty years.



Does the pursuit of money really change people?

Founded in September 1998, Google's original motto was "Don't be evil". Plucky, individualistic, if a little confusing. That phrase was removed relatively recently and now Google says it "organises the world's information". This is indeed the case. Google's universe of information just keeps growing and now touches almost every facet of our lives - from search to email and from a cloud drive to powering 80 per cent of the world's smartphones. And of course, there's YouTube - the world's top destination for videos of cute animals, as well as, arguably, the number one place to be radicalised.

It goes on. Thanks to the company's acquisition of Nest, the search engine even knows when you are at home and continues to find ways to make us stick even more to their ecosystem. Alphabet, Google's parent company, is investing heavily in the future - quantum computing and driverless cars just scratch the surface of the huge range of projects it has in the works.

Google giveth and Google taketh away

Credit where credit is due. Sundar Pichai, Google's CEO recently announced their plan to give away one billion US dollars over five years, much of this going to education and inclusion projects in developing countries. And they also give away thought leadership. Project Loon, an initiative that 'graduated' from Google's R&D facility aims to bring internet connectivity to the world's poorest, most inaccessible, areas by beaming the internet down from – balloons. This technology could provide an invaluable lifeline. It means anyone - farmers, fishermen and micro-businesses - in remote parts of the world can check market prices when deciding where to take produce, respond instantly, and even transfer money while never owning a bank account.

On the flip side, Google has regularly incurred huge fines from the EU for misusing its monopolies. In 2017 Google was fined for promoting their own 'companion' websites to the top of search results, and most recently fined again for forcing phone manufacturers to pre-install Google apps on Android phones. If that was not enough, Google is just one of a long line of companies including Apple, Amazon and Starbucks that have been accused of "legally" avoiding taxes. And that's just the tip of the iceberg.

The devil is in the detail – and the detail is scary

Despite the fandoms and geekdoms built by the Silicon Valley behemoths, a growing number of consumers have started to voice their concerns about the downside of technology. Many see apps as the technological equivalent of sugar - leaving users wanting to click and swipe more. Depression, anxiety, sleep deprivation are just some of the symptoms. There are well over 3 million apps for almost every situation. There is plenty of goodness in those apps, but, built-in to their very nature, apps constantly interrupt users during the day with distracting notifications.

And then there's the elephant in the room. Search. Each time you blink, Google is said to receive around 40,000 search queries. The search engine continues to tweak and perfect its algorithm over time. In 2004 for instance Google created autocomplete, a function that provides suggestions as soon as you start typing in the search box. Many people accept these suggestions, even if that was not what they were going to type. Why? Humans can be fundamentally lazy, and easily led!

Psychologist Robert Epstein who conducted research during the US election of 2016 identified how search suggestions including autocomplete can seed ideas in people's minds. He demonstrated how Google search appeared to favour Democrats by offering affirmative search phrases about Hilary Clinton when performing auto-complete. The search engine of course denounced the accusations. Whatever your political affiliation or faith in the algorithm - autocomplete demonstrates the astonishing influence that Google has in "managing" information for billions of people, all over the world.

And what about future technology? The company is conducting extensive research in areas such as Machine Learning for conversational AI and a few months ago demonstrated Duplex. The technology made a restaurant booking by phone but was so human-like and responsive that the human on the other end of the line was completely

unaware they were talking to a machine. Duplex's voice even inserted the occasional hesitation "umm ..." and ended one booking with "OK, awesome!"

Thou shalt be disrupted

The lines are blurring between the real and online world as technology saturates people's daily lives. From smartphones and wearables to voice assistants at home, many of us no longer view technology as something distinct. People reach for their smartphones like they used to grab a pen when they want to take note of something. The Silicon Valley innovators want to anticipate our every move – so we do not have to think about it. These 'tools' become a natural extension of ourselves – think of it as the outsourcing of your brain.

This is partly the reason why we fail to notice the 'technology creep' on our lives. For example, did you know that Google holds more information about you than Facebook? The search giant uses it to grab your attention to keep you clicking away and watching ads. The "attention economy" depends on keeping you besotted and why Google wants more and more hooks into your life.

Who will save us?

With the growing tech backlash, attention has turned to groups such as the Center for Humane Technology. Made up of ex Silicon Valley execs and technologists, some of them send their children to schools where phones and tablets are banned. The group's website offers many ways of "taking back control" and goes beyond the usual *keep phones out of the bedroom and off the dinner table* mantra – for example, they advocate turning auto-play off and making your screen "greyscale". Why? They warn that red notifications on phones are a psychological trigger that is designed to draw you attention.

Justin Rosenstein, inventor of Facebook's "Like" button and one of the founders of this organisation says: "It is very common for humans to develop things with the best of intentions and for them to have unintended, negative consequences." Of course, these people created the problem in the first place, but at least they now reflecting on the consequences.

So, is Google playing God?

No matter what your views are on the search behemoth or on the political spectrum – Google has made astonishing leaps forward in technology in just twenty years. They provide employment, directly and indirectly, for hundreds of thousands of people across the world. They are innovators in every sense of the word. At the same time Google now influences almost every home. It has a presence on almost every laptop, phone, and increasingly people's home appliances, giving them a level of "omnipresence". Their stated company mission is to store all the world's knowledge, which starts to sound like "omniscience". And in today's personal-information economy, knowledge is power.

But, hang on, nobody *worships* Google, right? Well, think again. There is actually a Reddit community for the Reformed Church of Google!
So, what's in store for the next twenty years? God only knows.

Chris Goswami, Director of Communications, [Openwave Mobility](#)
Image Credit: Paweł Czerwiński / Unsplash