

Oliver Burkeman on: How Google Works, by Eric Schmidt and Jonathan Rosenberg

What is Google, these days? Looked at one way, it's just a massively successful advertising company: 90% of its revenue, or about \$52bn in 2013, comes from ads like the ones that pop up when you search. No wonder, a cynic might say, that Google wants people to be permitted to wear Glass while they drive; it wants people never to leave the internet at all.

Among the more than 160 companies that Google has acquired since 2001 – recently at an average of more than one a week – are makers of robot arms and robot wheels, thermostats and smoke detectors; a satellite imaging company that has launched two private satellites from Russia and Kazakhstan; and Zagat, the restaurant review business. Are these all just the hobbies of astonishingly rich men who'd like to find a way not to die (and a good place for dinner)? Or is there a masterplan? What does Google want?

Sergey Brin and Larry Page (founders of Google) were clear from the outset: their mission was “to organise the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful”. The crucial thing about that sentence is that there's no reference to the internet. In some sense, every person, every object, every thought in every brain, everything anyone ever does, is information. Page and Brin told us what Google was up to. We just didn't take them literally enough.

It began with a dream: What if you could download the whole web, then strip away everything but the links? You'd be left with the hidden structure of cyberspace: how everything connects to everything else. When someone did a search, they were telling Google exactly what they were interested in.” Organise the world's information, and you would create, at the same time, both the most useful service on the internet, and the best-targeted, most blisteringly efficient delivery system for ads.

You could view everything Google does today as representing the extension of these principles beyond web pages to the rest of the world (and, thanks to Google Sky and Google Moon, beyond the world, too). This is fairly obvious in the case of Google Maps, Google Earth, or the Street View image database: they all help make Google a search engine for the offline world.

Now Google sees nothing as being beyond its domain. Everything is subject to being organised or distilled or analysed, assessed and presented by Google's algorithms. It became the operating system of the web, then of our mobile devices; now it would like to be the operating system of your eyeglasses and your automobile. It has a prediction it wants to fulfil: that data will flow through everything, your refrigerator, your clothing, every aspect of human interaction. And if everything's quantifiable and traceable, Google wants to be the company that monetises that. It's an immodest vision – but nobody every accused Google of modesty.

The beauty of this strategy, commercially speaking, is that whatever serves to connect people to what they want also serves to educate Google's giant artificial brain about what they want, enriching the data-stream on which advertising's value depends. The search box learns what you're looking for; location-enabled phones running Google's Android operating system learns that too, along with where

you are, how fast you're moving, or whether you seem to be stuck in traffic; Gmail learns what you're communicating about.

The more people use the internet, the more money Google makes. And if you think about it in that simple way, it gives Google licence to do pretty much anything.

What do human beings do every day? They look for stuff, find stuff, or use stuff they don't have to look for because they already found it. Google built the best search-and-discover machine in the digital world. Doesn't it make sense to try to leverage that into the physical world?

Whether you're alarmed or excited by the possibility of a fully Googleised world, can the internet economy really survive forever on advertising alone?

Whether advertising thrives or falters, then, Google's position as the proprietor of the maps of our lives seems unassailable.

Google is the most interesting company in the world but it's still a company. It won't always be working in the public interest. And that's OK: companies don't always work in our interest. Once we recognise that these companies are not our protectors, we can approach them reasonably, and find the right political framework for the next Google or Facebook eventually to rise and replace the current ones.

(source: <http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/sep/22/what-does-google-want-...>)