

Google Unleashed - The new global power?

Review of Gerald Reischl, *Die Google Falle - Die unkontrollierte Weltmacht im Internet*. Ueberreuter, Wien: 2008.

By Dennis Deicke

In *The Google Trap - The Uncontrolled Global Power In The Internet* Gerald Reischl describes the growing influence of Google due its monopoly in the digital environment. He calls for the reader to question the objectives of Google's founders Sergey Brin and Larry Page. Reischl comes up with some interesting facts and aspects that reveal the enormous power Google has developed by providing many additional services that go far beyond the original search engine functionality.

Initially, Gerald Reischl, technology editor of the Austrian newspaper Kurier, starts by describing his experiences of when he visited the Google's head office, the Googleplex in Mountain View, California. Google is conceived as an attractive and good employer. The company collects its staff with buses having wireless LAN, even if they live 1 hour away. Furthermore, the food for employees is free. They can have their clothes washed and ironed at their workplace or go to the gym. People working at Google can use 20% of the time they spend at work on their own projects.

Reischl points out that the perception of Google by both people and media is very positive. But contradictory to Google's credo „Don't Be Evil,“ he detects some aspects of Google and its position that should be taken into consideration critically. First of all, he criticizes Google's information policy, which he calls „weird.“ Uncomfortable questions are either left unanswered by Google, or the company overrides people with critical positions. Reischl claims that the Google PR-department checks and sugarcoats all presentations given by employees. Besides he maintains that Google never reveals real figures of aspects like generated data out of queries, locations of server farms and the earnings through advertising. But he cannot prove this assertion and has to refer to rumors indicating this.

Gerald Reischl explains how he thinks the strategy of Google has developed. The company, absolute market leader for search engines, provides people with free software applications and receives information and data about these people in exchange. This is one of the main points of Reischl's critique on Google: it collects incredible amounts of data without asking the users they take them from. Google has filed many patents, which show they possess plenty of technologies to identify users. But Google tries to avoid showing what their patents are really about, thus, instead of giving them adequate names like „user tracking“ or „monitoring“ they use terms like „usage statistics.“ Officially, they need data to enable the best search results for each user individually. But Reischl assumes that they need the data to create personalized advertising and user profiles.

Reischl explains that we leave a lot of traces when surfing the internet, especially when we use Google. The data created by every query is stored by Google for nine months and divulges information about the IP-address, time, day, browser, operating system and ID number of the created cookie. Google cannot refer the produced data to a person concretely, but they can conclude the information they have generated over time and create profiles belonging to certain users. A really troubling fact pointed out by Reischl concerns the user accounts people have at Google. If you use Gmail or Google Groups you have to register and create an account. Through this account, Google can link the data they gather directly to the user name connected to the account.

Reischl exposes a dispute between Google and data protection experts. Google is of the opinion that IP-Addresses do not reveal any clues concerning a concrete location or address of a user because the addresses are awarded by the providers dynamically. This means that they change and do not stay stable and therefore it is not possible to track users concretely. But interestingly and in spite of that, Google solicites its advertising application AdWords by stating that it is possible to use regionalized ads. Referring to patents applied for by Google in 2002, Reischl concludes that the company is categorizing, weighing and storing data of users according to their relevance for Google. Another point of Reischl's critique is that the stored data cannot be seen or deleted by the users. He cites Viktor Mayer Schöneberger from Harvard University who has argued that user information

should have an expiry date to avoid abuse.

Another danger emerges because of Google's ability to conduct data mining on a grand scale. Because of their large amount of data, Google is able to detect patterns and can use these findings for their own advantage. Reischl wonders what would happen if Google used this possible knowledge about trends on the real estate market for example. Google is already providing a service called Google Trends, which allows the user to compare search frequencies of certain terms. Gerald Reischl raises the question whether we should allow one enterprise to accumulate that much power. He assumes that Google probably uses software like Google Trends, which is more perfected and sophisticated than the free Google Trends they provide for the normal user. The supply of information has become such an important issue that we should perhaps think about how to control information gatekeepers like Google, through public institutions. But the influence of governments on Google could result in even worse events. Reischl mentions that Google possesses so much relevant information about people, that governments and militaries could develop some interest in it, which is a severe threat to privacy and freedom.

Reischl believes that Google is not independent enough to resist efforts of governments to gain access to Google's data. China, for example, imposed pressure on Google successfully; Google accepted requests of China's government to censor their results in regards of critical issues like Tibet or democracy. Another example mentioned by Reischl is that Google gave a user's IP-address to Israeli public authorities. Initially, Google tried to resist but eventually handed the data to the state of Israel because of a court's judgment. To Reischl, this shows that Google cannot be as independent as an organization with so much power and knowledge should be. Additionally, Reischl explains the case in which a woman from New Jersey who was accused of killing her husband was convicted because the police discovered that she searched for terms like „how to commit murder“ or „instant poison“ by analyzing her computer. To Reischl the issue is that the police could have received the information from Google, too. But that is far-fetched, using an example showing that the police found evidence without Google and then alarming people because the police could have gotten the information from Google seems over the top.

Reischl reveals another aspect of Google that users are often not aware of: even on sites that superficially have nothing to do with Google, users unknowingly send data to Google. The IT-giant provides webmasters with free software called Google Analytics, an instrument allowing website operators to collect basic information about users on their website. But the critical point is that the data generated when users are surfing a webpage that runs Google analytics, are sent to Google, too. It is the task of the webmasters using Google Analytics to inform the visitors about the circumstance that their data are passed down to a third party, in this case to Google.

Reischl's critique also concerns Google's dominant position in the advertising market. Initially he criticizes Google for placing ads in every service they provide, the search engine, maps, Google Earth and so on. However, in my opinion the placement of ads is not objectionable in itself, one cannot expect all these services to be free of costs and commercials. And even the aspect that Google's AdWords matches the ads to searched terms is just a logical step. Reischl warns that Google is at the point of substituting classical media agencies and becoming a marketer for any kind of ads in every medium. In the United States Google has already started the marketing of radio spots and printed ads. Additionally, they have a contract with NBC allowing Google to market parts of NBC's airtime. Hence it is Google's idea to be a marketer of advertising space and time in any medium. Surely, that is a threat for media agencies, but if Google is able to provide such a broad and simple service one cannot not blame them for it.

Another point that proves Google's intention to become a world power, according to Reischl, is their effort to enter the still growing, lucrative telecommunication market. With Android, Google published an operating system for mobile phones and entered this market, too. Reischl criticizes that Google intends to further grow into a new market and quotes Eric Schmidt, CEO of Google: „Mobile advertising is twice as much lucrative as not-mobile, because it is personal“. But it is not adequate to object Google for their intention to grow and enter new markets, that is not characteristic for Google, but lies in the nature of an enterprise. Another far-fetched claim of Reischl is that services like Google Maps or Google Earth could be used by terrorists to plan attacks, but if someone really plans a terrorist as-

sault he can also go to a kiosk and by a map, Google does not lower the threshold for committing terroristic attacks.

Reischl mentions another point of critique concerning Google and plagiarism. Like Stefan Weber, in his „The Google-Copy-Paste Syndrome,“ Reischl believes that the increasing use of Google enhances plagiarism because it facilitates the process of copying and pasting a text. Searching has become a new cultural skill. He admits that Google cannot be blamed to be the main reason for plagiarism but complains about Google’s not doing anything to avoid it. This is supported by Google’s book scanning project, which has another interesting aspect. Reischl refers to Jean Noël Jeanneney, former director of the French national library, who holds the view that Google Books can cause an Americanization of book culture, because people using this service would mostly see and prefer books that are translated into English (French trauma: search for Flaubert and all you’ll find is English secondary material and translations).

Gerald Reischl’s book is wake up call to reconsider Google’s power in a critical way. He mentions interesting and well-researched facts that really stimulate reflecting on Google’s position. For example, the fact that Google Statistics is often used on websites that have nothing to do with Google but send data to them. Or the fact that Google is able to link surfer behavior to a (user)name if that person has a Google account and is logged in. But the conclusions Reischl draws on the base of the collected facts are only assumptions about Google, which he presents like facts. Exemplarily, Reischl asserts that Google is spying on all of us because they have applied for patents of technology enabling it. This conclusion may be traceable but does not have the quality of real evidence proving that Google is collecting data and tracking users on large scale. Sometimes it appears that Reischl tries to prove the conspiratorial plan of Google to become a global power too intensely. He tries to create an atmosphere of anxiety by using hypothetical scenarios which are supposed to support his view on Google. For example, the murder case of the New Jersey woman. Google had nothing to do with the investigation but Reischl sees danger because it could have. This way of arguing weakens the well-researched facts which are prevalent in the book.

Links:

A (bad) video Gerald Reischl shot at Googleplex in Mountain View, California:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=POfcyPE7oVA&eurl=http://www.googlefalle.com/googlefalle>

Gerald Reischl's *The Google Trap* website: <http://www.googlefalle.com/>

Gerald Reischl's homepage: <http://www.reischl.com/>

Heise's website about Stefan Weber's *The Google-Copy-Paste Syndrome*:

http://www.heise.de/tp/r4/buch/buch_25.html

German book review of *The Google Trap* in *DIE ZEIT*:

http://www.zeit.de/online/2008/16/die_google_falle?page=1