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The Google Story

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The Google Story

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Google continues to be the very symbol of the Internet. It seems inadequate to refer to it as merely a corporation. And as David A. Vise and Mark Malseed, the authors of The Google Story show, Google is a cultural force, an international phenomenon that has changed the nature of acquiring knowledge. Moreover, the Google story is clearly not concluded. The founders, Sergey Brin and Larry Page, repeatedly demonstrate that their ultimate goal is to change the world. And all this since 1997 when the nascent search engine was first made available to students, faculty and staff at google.stanford.edu.

Many may wonder why, although all the above is true, why it is that Google is worth reading about. After all, its success depends in large part on its transparency. Google is essentially an attempt to create the fastest, simplest and most transparent user-friendly means of searching the immense chaos of the World Wide Web.

At this writing, for example, I am working in a suite in the Specialists’ Residence at Wenzhou Medical College, in Wenzhou, China. Until my Internet connection foundered yesterday, I was a mental agent free to roam the world, a Google search away from whatever I wanted in a virtual sense, whether knowledge or entertainment. Now Google and the WWW are inaccessible to me, because of an undersea earthquake off Taiwan [1]. Two days ago, I was unfettered, electronically at least; now I am devastatingly localized. When Google is down, so, alas, am I.

The authors, Vise, a Pulitzer winning journalist with excellent credentials as a specialist in financial matters, and Malseed, also a journalist with a considerable reputation, have taken many different approaches to telling “the Google Story.” The two co-founders are kept front and center throughout. They seem, somehow, however, a bit less interesting than say, their counterpart on
the Dark Side, Bill Gates, perhaps because they so relentlessly eschew publicity. Neither, however, have they done much in a conventional or expected manner. Theirs seems a partnership made in Geek Heaven with enough similarities in personality and background to keep them communicating effectively, but sufficient difference to bring a wide range of intelligences to their joint projects.

Speaking of Geek Heaven, the authors suggest that it may be at Google HQ, the Googleplex, where a series of chefs whip up healthy, creative and free meals for what appear to be the world’s most contented employees. One entire chapter is told from the viewpoint of Charlie, Google’s founding chef. Surprisingly this gives the reader yet additional insights into the Google phenomena, as well as what is certainly a mouth-watering recipe for Elvis’ Favorite Fried Chicken, at least when drooled over in Wenzhou, China.

Vise’ credentials as a financial journalist, however, will probably make this work most interesting to those with what the two founders would probably view as an unhealthy interest in investment strategies. From Google’s inception, the key question has always been how this strange pair might possibly make money doing what they were most interested in doing, facilitating searches. Several other Internet giants initially turned them down, and Wall Street itself has done its best to whip them into conventional line. But all the while they have gone from making oodles of money to gigantic heaping piles of it. Just when their stock cannot go any higher, it does.

Why have they been so successful? Vise and Malseed suggest that in large part it is a result of immense creativity, spawned perhaps in their highly accomplished families with scientists cluttering both family trees. They also each had excellent educations beginning in each case with Montessori Schools, and culminating at Stanford.

However, these two fun-loving geeks, as at home in a computer lab as at Burning Man or a Grateful Dead Concert, were equally capable of going bare-knuckles with Microsoft or AOL. Their firm has flourished in part because they pay constant attention to doing what they do better than anyone else, whether that is a fundamental envisioning of search processes, or creating the world’s largest centers for computer processing of data. And, while observing the corporate motto, “don’t do evil,” all this has been accomplished cheaply and efficiently as well in such a way that, unlike, alas, my access in Wenzhou, Google itself has never been down or even appreciably slowed.

At first glance the book seems a painfully eclectic, possibly disconnected one. What authorial vision can possibly hold together chapters on chefs, Chinese censorship, and book scanning? The answer it turns out, is that these, like global mapping and indexing the human genome, are all part of the Google story. It is evident that The Google Story is going to require constant updating, and one looks forward not only to Sergey and Larry’s next outrageous adventure, but also to Vise and Malseed’s intelligent retelling of it.

Their initial realization was what in retrospect seems obvious to all: links to other sites on the Internet mattered as much or more in creating page rankings for web searches as did key word searches.

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