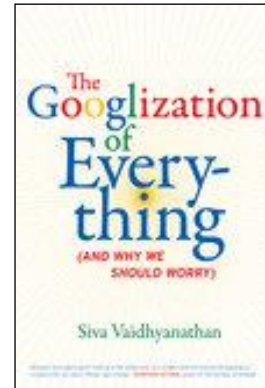


Siva Vaidhyanathan, **The Googlization of Everything (And Why We Should Worry)**, Berkeley, CA, University of California Press, 2011, 280 pp., \$24.26 (hardcover).

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The basic thesis of this book is that Google assumes roles and projects that, because of their central importance in society, should be carried out and led by public institutions, or at least subjected to regulations that assure the interests of the public. The main threat represented by a private company overseeing a function as important as “organizing the world’s information and making it universally accessible and useful” (Google, n.d.) is the commercial nature of the enterprise, which in the long run will enforce the commoditization of knowledge. Consequently, the democratic values governing society will be displaced as commercial values increasingly inform the challenge of digitalizing and processing human knowledge.

One of the most relevant commercial biases here is adapting search results to geographic and individualized data. In trying to reflect the preferences of the user, Google prevents the World Wide Web from becoming a global public sphere for consensus building and exchanging opinions. This adaptation is known as filter bubble (Pariser, 2011): the filtering of results according to the customs and opinions of the user reinforces those opinions, offering the user a personalized perspective of the world, specially designed to suit the user’s likes. In **The Googlization of Everything (And Why We Should Worry)**, Siva Vaidhyanathan, a media scholar and professor at the University of Virginia, makes the point that this feature can be highly useful for shopping, but not for learning and obtaining relevant information about what is happening in the world. And it certainly does not help build consensus about cultural values or to ascertain the best ways to deal with global issues and threats. In this sense, Vaidhyanathan converges with other critics of the default personalization of digital services that are directly designed to capture the attention of the user, orienting him or her to the commercial services and advertisers that ultimately make those services profitable.

The book also presents a significant reflection on the company that leads the process of the digitalization of society—“The Googlization of everything”—by asking how this function affects the balance of political and economic powers. In this way, the book presents the undesirable consequences of a world ruled by a single private corporation that outstrips governments and public agencies in funding for research and technology.

Probably one of the best points made in the book is the critique of techno-fundamentalism, characterized as the hubris—of believing that technology is the best way to solve every problem, even those created by technology itself. This view results in human diligence and creativity becoming more important than reflection on and understanding of social problems. This outlook is not unique to Google:

It's the ideological bias that characterizes most current discourses about technology and innovation. It is often presented as a well-intended desire to make users' lives easier by providing convenient solutions while preventing users from understanding how the technologies actually work. In the case of Google, this means offering a simplified interface while performing thousands of complicated operations on the backstage of the program, including exhaustively monitoring users' actions to improve the knowledge of the system. In the long run, this philosophy of technological design produces dumb users unable to understand the Big Data machinery of global surveillance that is built around them, of which Google is a major actor.

In reference to surveillance, Vaidhyathan proposes the concept of cryptopticon—analogue to Foucault's model of the Panopticon (1977)—to characterize the work of the unseen tracking mechanisms that constantly operate while we are using the Web: surfing, searching, blogging, using email, watching videos, and so on. While in the Panopticon, the threat of constant surveillance prevents people from acting, in the cryptopticon, the means of observation are hidden. Here people are encouraged to express themselves as freely as they can so they can produce as much reliable data about themselves as possible. In this picture, Google is one of the major gatherers and aggregators of user data throughout its pervasive services: Gmail, Blogger, YouTube, Google Maps, Google Analytics, AdSense, and so on.

Infrastructural imperialism is another relevant concept used in the book; it refers to the power obtained by tech companies by just designing the characteristics of technology offered to the public. Through infrastructural imperialism, Google can expand its power and its vision of the world by selecting the default settings that promote the behavior they want to reinforce. The choice to "opt out" of their systems and settings is always available, even if that means not using the service at all, but the fact is that Google and many other tech companies can exercise a great deal of power over the way people use information and communication technologies simply by designing the general terms of digital interactions according to the companies' own interests.

In other words, infrastructural imperialism represents the projection of Google's ideology to the world, via the settings, conditions, and design of the digital services they offer. It operates when Google Street cars sweep the streets capturing pictures of homes, cars, and pedestrians, and also when YouTube is not held responsible for the content users upload or when the system records your searches and clicks and decides what advertisements you see. If the public complains enough, the company might adapt their services, but in the long run it will impose a certain way of understanding digital technologies, and, through them, social relations themselves. As a result, the public will perceive these practices as normal, and find it reasonable that a single company can have control over the largest amount of information ever produced, while also able to decide how this information is accessed and used. The concept of infrastructural imperialism expresses a progressive expansion of Google's influence in every realm of life, from the organization of the World Wide Web, to the mapping of the physical world, to the digitization of millions of books stored in university and public libraries.

Indeed, it seems the Google Books project and its asymmetrical collaboration with universities is what most worries Vaidhyathan. For him, this project marks the point when Google stopped looking like a friendly company and became an imposing megacorporation. This project shows the extent to which

Google's power has been overwhelmingly uncontested by the most respectable scholarly institutions, while displacing them in their role of curating the accumulated knowledge of society. In Vaidhyathan's own words:

Through its voracious efforts to include more of everything under its brand, Google has fostered a more seamless, democratized, global, cosmopolitan information ecosystem. Yet it has simultaneously contributed to the steady commercialization of higher education and the erosion of the standards of information quality. (p. 186)

In this sense, Vaidhyathan admits to the dual effects of Google's actions, but it becomes clear that in the long run what prevails are the negative trends of commoditization and public dependency on private enterprises.

In its general analysis of society's relationship with Google—Vaidhyathan says the book is not about the company, but about our relationship with it—the book interlaces criticisms with comments from Google representatives to help the reader understand the discourse behind the company's activities. For example, this extract from an interview with Google executive chairman Eric Schmidt (Jenkins, 2010), quoted in the book, shows the extent of Google's ambitions to control users' consciousness and actions:

I actually think most people don't want Google to answer their questions. They want Google to tell them what to do next. . . . We know roughly who you are, roughly what you care about, roughly who your friends are. (p. 200)

The underlying proposal of the book is that information and communication technologies should be directed toward the development of a global public sphere, similar to the one proposed by Habermas (1989). Vaidhyathan's perspective is based in the theory of modern democracy, in which media companies have to inform the people of public affairs in order for democracy and civil society to exist, and at the same time, the state has a necessary function in regulating media companies. These reflections urge the reader to consider the political role played by the liberal state and by the public as we define the social and economic relations that make up the world. At the end of the day, when considering the astonishing power of Google, we are required to think about the way the world works and, in particular, how economic private enterprises can interfere with the public interest.

In fact, this disjunction between public and private interests, suggested at many points in the text, is also presented in relation to the financial entities who control the flow of wealth throughout the globe. Drawing on the complementary concept of "market failure" in the economy, Vaidhyathan identifies a "public failure" in fostering digital technologies (among other social challenges), which offers a good opportunity for private enterprises to step in. However, as he points out, this public failure is due to the general degradation of the state and the public agencies that have lost their power over the regulation and production of wealth. This is the reason why there is no public enterprise that can scan the millions of books from the shelves of public libraries and why universities and other social institutions feel so overwhelmed by Google's offers of help and partnership, seeing the company as a wealthy private benefactor who comes to aid public entities of limited resources.

The author's proposal is an alliance composed of a coalition of agencies from different countries: The Human Knowledge Project. It is inspired by the Human Genome Project. In the analogy, Google would be Celera Genomics trying to privatize the human genome, and the conglomerate of public-private enterprises would make its appearance to prevent that from happening. However, "the digitization of everything" is a much more complex process than a single scientific enterprise, even one as difficult and important as revealing the human genome. To begin with, the digitization process implies millions of users constantly producing information and generating revenue; it is directly involved with current political and economic struggles, and affects any social activity that relies on information technologies to function. The genomics analogy is also not sufficient, since pharmaceuticals have taken over the commercialization of the practical uses of genome information. Therefore, if we are to find an alternative to the threads described in the book, we have to keep looking for it, as no easy answers seem to be at hand. In any case, Vaidyanathan's book makes for solid and interesting reading, if only for breaking the ice and inviting the public to think about how the digital society is being shaped.

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