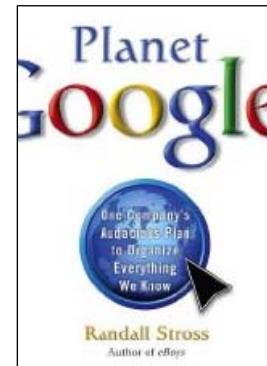


Randall Stross, *Planet Google: One Company's Audacious Plan to Organize Everything We Know*, Free Press, 2008, 288 pp., \$26.00 (hardcover).

Reviewed by
Emma Fish
University of Southern California

Planet Google offers readers an inside look into the strategy of one of the most innovative and important companies of our era. Drawing on his open access to the Googleplex offices, CEO Eric Schmidt, and Google's founders Larry Page and Sergey Brin, Randall Stross explores Google and charts its progress toward becoming an indispensable gatekeeper of all the world's information. Despite his subtitle, Randall Stross does not dwell on the social effects of Google's mission to "organize the world's information and make it universally accessible" (p. 1). *Planet Google* is an examination of the company's growth, strengths, and weaknesses, not a sociological study of Google. Stross' expertly written account will please both those who believe that Google is heroic, and those who see it in more conspiratorial terms. He paints a picture of Google's "audacious plan to organize everything we know."



Stross dexterously tells the Google story, from the company's modest beginnings in a Stanford dorm room to its current position as the envy of the business world. The Algorithm, the software that powers Google, was originally devised by Brin and Page, and it has evolved to meet the needs of the ever-expanding company. Stross compares the objectivity of the Google algorithm against other Web-search approaches from Yahoo! and others that use human editors to choose the most relevant sites. He avers that Google's algorithm extracts more information from the automated programs called spiders with the least human intervention. This strategy proved effective with the exponential growth of the online world. The secret to Google's algorithmic success is this: The more data it has to deal with, the more accurate it becomes.

The history of Google is spellbinding, but Stross brings a new level of personalization to the story, starting from its early troubles and multiple acquisitions. The founders, Brin and Page, are portrayed as the most innovative engineers of our time. Stross begins by focusing on the conflict inherent in Google's "closed" approach to protecting its own technology and code existing alongside its public promotion of "openness" of access to all information. Their underlying closed approach is illustrated by the company's withholding of information about the scale of Google's server "farms," something that is still unknown. Stross argues that these self-built servers are a key to Google's technical success.

Stross describes Google's expanding family of services and businesses. These services include Gmail, Google Maps, and YouTube. Since 2000, Google has launched countless new services and announced its ambitious plan to create a digitized library of all of the world's books, Google Book Search. Google Book Search is described by Stross as the search giant's "moon shot" (p. 90), a financially and

legally taxing venture. The author provides a detailed description of the legal struggle over Google's effort to digitize all books, focusing on Google's fragile relationships with publishers and competitors. Despite the rocky road, as of June of 2010, Google had digitized 12 million books in its Google Books Library.

One less successful venture is Google Video, an attempt to develop a paid video service. The service was designed to use the Algorithm to sort video in the same way as textual information, but it lagged behind its competition. To compensate for the original failure of Google Video, Google later acquired YouTube. Google Earth also showcases the company's quest to embrace as much information as possible, providing ever-more accurate "street-view" pictures of geographical locations to anybody with access to the Internet. In addition to describing the bouquet of Google applications, Stross depicts the internal conflict that came with the creation of Gmail and AdSense. Gmail was born not out of the quest to make a profit, but rather because Google employees "had come to view e-mail as an unsolved search problem" (p. 156). As Google's e-mail service grew in popularity due to its superior search algorithm, the struggle over whether or not to place advertisements on Gmail came to a head. Ultimately, Paul Buchheit connected a successful advertising code to the e-mail system, which slowly won over senior Googlers to the concept that the contextual advertising could work effectively and be accepted by Gmail users.

The advantages that come with behind-the-scenes access allowed Stross to enliven even the most uninteresting of subjects. What could be a bland corporate history reads as a suspense novel, keeping readers' interest even while explaining complicated engineering terms, such as the section which describes the development of the Google Algorithm that catapulted Google to success in search. Stross avoids computer science terminology, bringing out the story in accounts of things like how Google builds its own servers more cheaply than other major corporations can buy them.

Stross also pays significant attention to Google's relationship with China, but his critical eye does not look much farther. He hails Google's innovative and ambitious mission statement to "organize the world's information" (p. 1), but does not assess the risks that accompany Google's continued expansion. Programs like Google Health, which organizes user's medical records, put a large amount of private information at the hands of an ever-more powerful corporation. Stross glosses over the risks that come with such power, focusing on the sheer speed and strength of Google innovation. Further, the speed of Google's innovations and introduction of new services, like Google Buzz and Google Chrome, inevitably meant that *Planet Google* was out of date the day it was published.

Planet Google is an informative and entertaining romp through the stories of the creation, successes, and failures of one of the world's most important companies. Stross provides an inside look into the company and its rapid growth. Love or hate the company, Google's innovation is changing the world. Its brand is global and ubiquitous, and learning a bit about its history provides an excellent window on today's fast-changing Internet technology.