

Vaidhayanathan Siva, *The Googlization of Everything (And Why we should Worry)*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011 pp 281.

The Prophecy of Siva

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In "*The Lord of the Rings*" trilogy, the story is told about the "dark lord" Sauron, who devised a scheme by which he ostensibly gifted each ruler of the Nine Kingdoms of men with a "ring of power" that conferred great abilities upon its bearer. The dark lord then secretly forged the "one ring" in his volcanic abode. This "one ring" had the power to dominate the nine other rings and enslave their wearers, and by extension all the followers of the wearers, to Sauron's will. It was the "one ring to rule them all!"

Echoes of this trilogy flashed through my mind as I followed media updates about *Snowden-gate*. Sometime in June 2013, Edward Joseph Snowden, a former Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) contractor, suddenly disclosed details of classified electronic mass surveillance programs to the press. Snowden shared materials on top-secret NSA programs, including the PRISM surveillance program, with key media houses who did not hesitate to publicize what they gathered from him. Snowden said his disclosure of NSA data capture gimmicks was an effort "to inform the public as to that which is done in their name and that which is done against them".

Around the same time as Snowden-gate was escalating, I was equally engaged in reviewing Siva Vaidhyanathan's book titled "*The Googlization of Everything: and why we should worry*". Published in 2011, the 281 paged book is, according to the author, "not about Google, it is about how we use Google". Anyone with a mould of mind resembling that of the author will find nothing whatsoever shocking about the Snowden affair. Siva continues, "tracking Google was never my goal; instead I seek to explain why and how

Google tracks us”. While maintaining that Google is certainly not walking in the footsteps of the dark lord Sauron, Siva aims to show that Google indeed aims to become the overlord of the Internet. The word “Google”, Siva notices, has gradually meandered its way into many cultures and conversations, being presently used both as a noun and a verb.

This descriptive review will closely follow the layout of Siva's work. Beginning with the historical circumstances that led to the development and domination of Google, I shall dwell upon four main areas of human life that, according to Siva, are being concurrently and surreptitiously googlized each passing day. The review will conclude with a brief reflection on the gradual googlization of Africa.

A Brief History of the Search-Engine

The Internet is ultimately a network of inter-connected computer networks. It is a notoriously complex system. As is often the case when humans create complex entities, problems arose with cataloging exactly what web pages were where and hosted by whom. These gave rise to the necessity of the “search-engine”. Early search engines blossomed, and the competition ensued. In Husserlian terms, search-engines perform a sort of digitized *eidetic reduction* whenever they carry out searches and display results. It is simply not possible to view the entire Internet at once. Our searches, however, provide us with an aspect of the Internet.

Then came the problem of page rankings. Who, it was asked, has the final say on the ranking of websites? Why should a search engine rank, say, one fashion-designer's website higher than another? What stopped the designers of a search-engine from totally ignoring the website of a fashion-designer with whom they are not in good terms? Siva notes that early search-engines “were unwieldy and incomplete, and some early guides even accepted bribes for favoring one source over another. It all seemed so hopeless and seedy”.

Google arose in the midst of this confusion as a tiny tech company. “Google was clean. It was pure. It was simple. It accepted no money for ranking one page higher in a search than another. And it offered what seemed to be neutral, democratic rankings: if one site was referred to more than another, it

was deemed more relevant to users and would be listed above the rest. And so the biggest, if not the best, search engine was created ”.

The Googlization of “us”

Siva maintains that the “Googlization of us” occurs “through Google’s effects on our personal information, habits, opinions, and judgments”. This, according to the author, is bound to be the case if we persist in our mass-formed habit of viewing a system as complicated as the Internet only through the lenses that Google provides. Google subliminally persuades us to accept its incomplete phenomenology of the Internet as the entire truth. Siva asks, “Does anything (or anyone) matter if it (or she) does not show up on the first page of a Google search?”. Our brains perceive the information given by a Google-search in theory, but our minds do not interpret the information for inner meaning. This is at the heart of Siva's worry, and at the heart of the kind of worry he wants to precipitate in the mind of his readers.

Siva's chilling exposition on the inner-workings of Google continues: “One way to begin is by realizing that we are not Google’s customers: we are its product. We—our fancies, fetishes, predilections, and preferences—are what Google sells to advertisers. When we use Google to find out things on the Web, Google uses our Web searches to find out things about us. Therefore, we need to understand Google and how it influences what we know and believe”. For the author, this commoditization of user-generated content ultimately amounts to a form of human objectification and de-personalization which increasingly borders on the unethical.

The Googlization of the World

Siva contends that the world is being Googlized “through the globalization of a strange kind of surveillance and what I'll call infrastructural imperialism”. Citing examples including the renaming of a town named Eu in Northern France and the resolution of some of the town leaders to hire a firm that “specializes in optimizing search-engine page-rankings to raise the digital profile of the town” , the blockade of the Google domain in Iran during the controversial 2009 elections as a way of silencing dissent, the conviction of some Google executives by an Italian court for privacy-violation charges for failing to prevent the posting to YouTube of a video of an autistic child being bullied, Siva shows how the impact of Google has long transcended its

digital and electronic origins, becoming a force to reckon with in strange territories like politics, geography, human rights, justice and so on.

Whereas the success of Sauron's scheme depended on the lust for power of each of the nine kings, the success of Google's scheme depends heavily on the dynamics of an ever burgeoning electronic consumerism. On a personal note, I find it difficult to lay all the blames on the table of Google. To those who are aware of the inner-workings of TCP/IP (the major communications protocol on the Internet), Snowden-gate and the possibility of the “*googlization of the world*” comes as no surprise at all. It has long been known that the original designers of TCP/IP (Transmission Control Protocol / Internet Protocol) did not put security concerns at the top of their priority list. The passage of time and the spread of Internet connectivity among many users gently exposed the hidden flaws. Security was then slowly retro-fitted to the family of protocols that comprise TCP/IP, but by this time billions of people were already communicating on the information superhighway using deeply insecure software. There are movements calling for a total replacement of the TCP/IP protocol stack, but then people have committed too much in terms of hardware and other resources, thereby making departure a prohibitively expensive venture.

The Googlization of Knowledge

For Siva, Google effects the googlization of knowledge “through its effects on the use of the great bodies of knowledge accumulated in books, online databases, and the Web”. This portion of the book reminded me of an old aphorism: “Data is not information, information is not knowledge, knowledge is not understanding, understanding is not wisdom”.

Google attempted, in 2004, to digitize millions of bound books from five major English-language libraries (Harvard, Stanford, University of Michigan, Oxford University, New York Public Library); thereby attempting to pull the carpet from under the feet of many long-established publishing houses. Legal arguments arose considering the effects of this planned digitization on the issue of copyrights. Is the issue of copyright yet another metaphysical debate waiting to be smashed by the onslaught of an Internet giant like Google? What will happen when, inevitably, the profits of these publishing houses drop as more readers discover that they can download e-books rather easily, while paying Google for the service, instead of paying the original publishers?

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What if the drop in profits lead to the lay-off of workers in huge publishing houses? What will happen to the shares of these publishing houses if their profitability is seen to have dipped? What will happen to those who have invested their life savings on these shares?

The digitization project had a high probability of success, given the modern craving for soft-copies, but Siva's point is that it is “the little rift within the lute, that by-and-by, will slowly make the music mute”. It remains remarkable how a technical decision by a technology company gradually grows tentacles and begins to affect law, employment, profits, the stock market and so on.

The Googlization of Memory

Siva argues that human memory is slowly being outsourced to Google-search. ”As a totally wired person, I have access to more information than I could ever know what to do with. So it feels somewhat liberating that I don’t have to remember very much”. The ancient Greek poet, Simonides of Ceos, once escaped a disaster that destroyed the building where he was dining with other dignitaries. He was able, according to the legend, to name the otherwise unrecognizable victims by recalling where each had been seated during the dinner. Siva fears that the evolution of human memory is slowly being trumped by our over-reliance on electronic memory. “The ease of retrieving information with Google might make us too lazy to remember things on our own. I can’t remember my mother’s phone number. On the other hand, thanks to Google, I can pretend that I never forget, either”. Furthermore, the fact that historical events are being recorded not only in printed books but in electronic media increases the possibility that past mistakes which were made by an otherwise repentant individual can be called up with great lucidity and marshaled into action as veritable haunting apparatuses. The existence of millions of user-generated YouTube videos is a prime example of this, and the fact that Google owns YouTube deepens the author's uneasiness.

Neuroscience has long known that the brain operates on the principle of “use-it-or-lose-it”. In other words, neurological functions which are not frequently exercised gradually evade the individual and fade into irrecoverable oblivion. Citing Carr, a neuro-psychologist, Siva predicts that statistical data which shows that “Web use undermines the ability to engage in sustained thought” is frighteningly becoming available. He re-iterated Carr's concern that “the

more we consume online—snippets and links and videos and songs and animations and more snippets of text, each one sending us flitting to another—the less we will be capable of sitting and reading, say, an extended discourse on how Google is affecting our lives”.

The Googlization of Africa

I decided to include the word “prophecy” in the title of this book review, and I would like to conclude by bringing this prophecy closer home, to sub-Saharan Africa. I think that the time is long overdue for the creation of good quality “local internet content” in sub-Saharan Africa. The Internet should work *for* Africa, not help distant imperial powers achieve their objectives through African use of the Internet. Many argue that the existence of good quality and stable electricity continues to constitute a huge obstacle to the hosting of Internet servers in Africa. However, the counter-arguments hold that electricity problems are not due to a lack of technical expertise or raw materials but rather border on high-level myopia exhibited by sybaritic political regimes, in addition to stagnating neocolonial interferences. It is notable that the rate of information flow between African countries is considerably lower than that between African countries and, say, Northern America. This, among others, has often led to the description of African countries as “distant neighbors”.

The googlization of Africa through electronic surveillance will only enhance Western intelligence while sacrificing African content on the altar of Western security concerns. Thankfully, a considerable portion of African philosophical endeavors still exist as oral traditions and is presently inaccessible to the googlization of knowledge. However, the need to create good quality African content equally presents a huge opportunity for the growth of African intellectual life and literature. It also exposes a huge potential for job creation and an economic shift in focus, especially when it comes to the many problems brought about by the resource curse.

A review of this book can conclude only by imagining the effects on Africa of the googlization of African memory, the prospect of millions of Africans losing substantial part of their memory function due to the extended use of Google-search, poses great risks to educational development that is rooted in African experiences and African recollections of those experiences. In a

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continent struggling to define and provide education for many, the possibility of experiencing a neurological devolution among African youth is most certainly not a happy thought. That the same youth can only recall what Google allows them to recall is a terrifying prospect.