

The Knowledge Bank of the World: How Evil is Google?

Baran, Kubor

Anglia Ruskin University, UK

INTRODUCTION

Google is the brain child of Sergey Brin and Larry Page. These people were students enrolled newly in a PhD research at Stanford University in California when they started the company. The company grew from strength to strength, and now Google stands out as giant of search firms in the world. The reputation of Google Company was not in doubt when the company first started. This was why [1] stated that for years, Google was seen as one of the companies that had pristine reputation in the valley. It took care of its employees giving them the opportunity to work on personal projects, and explore big ideas. However, things started to change when Google started to engage Microsoft in competition. Other companies in the same field of business emerged and became rivals in the industry. In the last few years, many things changed for Google and the tech world started to turn against Google [2]. These developments brought about competition in the industry and Google started to have challenges. One of such challenges is the accusation against the company that it is evil. But is Google really evil? This study addresses the forgoing question and argues that Google faces ethical challenges in the conduct of its business. It examines the way Google renders its services to their consumers, the ethical questions people raise about the company's services and concludes that based on what ethics in business means to many people, Google could be said to be evil.

What Ethics Means in Business

Every business is expected to have ethical culture that guides its operations and dealings with its clients. This culture includes among other things the development of an ethical code of conduct that is clear, well communicated,

is specific about expected procedures, thoroughly understood, and enforced [3]. The author stated that an ethical culture has something to do with business establishing a structure that provide for equally distributed authority and shared accountability. For an organisation to remain ethical in its business practices, it engages in socialization process that reinforces the practice of the values in a mission statement on daily basis [4]. Google's informal mission statement is "Don't be evil", and it is expected that the company will keep away from anything that could make it to be associated with unethical business practices which are considered in this study as evil in the face of customers who use Google products and services.

Ethical decision making involves coming up with moral standard which the organisation in question can follow as the framework for its operation. This view is supported by [5] model of ethical decision making in business organisation. The model introduces the concept of "moral intensity" moral imperative in a situation. Moral intensity is "the extent of issue-related moral imperative in a situation" [6]. Jones model emerged from Rest's [7] four-stage process: recognizing moral issues, making moral judgment, establishing moral intent and engaging in moral behavior. However, [8] pointed out that the term 'evil' is relative and as such, the notion of what is meant by that phrase has always been slippery one when used in discussion about Google. The author stated that to Google company, what constitutes as "evil" is what Google says it is. Also, [9] stated that it is the Google's definition of evil is that which stands in the way of pragmatism and serviceability operating under the assumption that everything

Ozo and Elem

Google does is a good thing for the world. Bogost argued that the actions of Google are by their nature righteous once it is Google that did them. He, however, acknowledged that the company does not need to exercise any moral judgment which will make it face the biggest risk, the greatest evil - which is failing to engineers an effective implementation of its own vision. One of such visions which Google need to ensure its implementation is its slogan, "Don't be evil".

However, the forgoing criteria upon which [10] based his evaluation of what should be considered as ethical practice in business organization failed to consider what the organization itself should consider as ethical. Ethics is a moral issue and what is ethical to one person or in a particular culture may not be ethical to another or in another culture. In this perspective, what Google company may define as ethical may not be the same as what it critics and even some customers will consider as ethical business practices. In the light of this, [11] believes that that what Google does is quite transparent but that there is a dissonance between our interpretation of evil as "wickedness" and the more practical engineering interpretation of evil that roughly means the same as "implementation". It is against this backdrop that the researcher examines the common question people are asking about Google: Is Google evil?

The Evil Issues in Google

Google, like every other business is established with a view to making profits. Everything it does is aimed at not only satisfying its customers but also making enough profit to enable it to remain in business. Google's informal motto: "Do the right thing, don't be evil" suggests that the business practices of Google as stated by CNN aims at setting the company beyond reproach, and making money by doing good things. In support of the claims of Google to practice business beyond reproach, [5] stated that that there is no evil in what Google do nor is there likely to be because Google makes money by not being evil in the way people think. He argues that it is more

www.iaajournals.org

reasonable to see the activities of Google as the action of a company that has power to suppress start-ups because of its public thin policy. Google is not just a mere search engine company any longer as everyone is aware, and when it starts integrating its products, as Microsoft did, it raises suspicion [4]. This perception of Google tends to exonerate the company from any kind of unethical business practices. However, empirical evidences available about Google's approach to the marketing of its products and rendering of services contradict this assertion. This is why examining the activities of Google from an unbiased perspective could be a better way of proving what Google is in the eyes of the beholders.

According to [1], the people that believe Google is evil usually point to the company's formation as the foundation of its evil. The leaders in Google, Eric, Schmidt, Larry Page, and Sergy Brin, throughout its growth were all heavily involved in bitter battle between Google and Apple for supremacy in the area of technology in the 21st century. This battle means that Google could do anything it considers as ethical whether it is or not to people to withstand and even win Microsoft. The author stated that a battle between corporations for consumers' dollars does not necessarily make a company evil. However, how the leaders of an organization pilot the business of the organization has much impact on how ethics is achieved in the conduct of the organisation's business. In support of this, [9] stated that leaders who are seen as being able to create and support an ethical culture in their organizations are those who represent, communicate, and role model high ethical standards; emphasize attention to goals other than economic, engage in "ethics talk" [10] and maintain a long-term view of relationships within and outside the organization [3]. These top managers create and maintain an ethical culture by consistently behaving in an ethical manner and encouraging others to behave in such a manner as well [5]. These arguments are enough to judge a company as not necessarily engaged in

Ozo and Elem

evil practices but does what it does to save itself from being chased out of the market by her rivals. However, there is more to this.

One of the areas Google is said to be evil is in the company's unsolicited access to private data of individuals. Google is accused of illegally tapping into people's e-mails, and using people's data for targeted advertising. In support of this view, [9] stated that Google makes most of its money by using people's data for targeted advertising; consumers make use of Google's products for free and in return the company gets access to the user's personal information to place ads in strategic positions. The author suggests that this could be the right time for this global company to reconsider its famous motto "Don't be evil". He explained that during the ten years the tech giant has been a public company, it has been constantly criticised from everything from privacy violations to sparking class warfare [11]. The problem here is that Google serves the needs of the public in the way advertisers benefit while individuals whose privacies are violated by Google to serve the needs of advertisers suffer some side effects. The approach by Google enables dubious people to get access to the private data of individuals. Besides, this could be said to be against the provisions of Data Protection Act.

Furthermore, Google is accused of making algorithm changes that cause losses to other companies in similar or the same line of business. In a key note address in one of the conferences held in recent time, [5] accused Google of making algorithm changes that caused a devastating drop in traffic to his Maha.com business, compelling him to lay off dozens of employees. These changes were abrupt and dynamic and no warning was given and no appeal was allowed [7]. It seems that even Google executives are part of the game of unethical practices in the company. This was perhaps why [4] stated that Google executives who like to boast of their company's informal motto, "Don't be evil" are also being accused of being just that and rightly so. The author

www.iaajournals.org

argues that Google's history of anti-social network and anti-trust relations that deceptively breach online consumers' privacy and trust has started to threaten its longstanding brand. The action of Google could be said to be not only unfair but also unethical.

One of the objectives of Google from the onset is to gather user data in order to use the information "to organize the world information". Google takes photographs of people's buildings to perhaps use them and organize the world. This mission generated criticisms and controversies. The owners of the buildings Google took their pictures started to protest. In support of this view, [1] said that when he told the grandmother who has never even heard about Google about the cameras, it made her blood boil and she said, "How dare these people come and take photographs of my house without asking me?" [3] argued that although some of the protesters in Broughton might have been worried that Google was out to make profit from the images of their homes, there is nothing wrong, in legal terms, with it doing so, particularly as in this case, the photos were taken from a public street. However, one can see an unfair use of private property by Google by not even seeking to obtain the consent of the owners of such houses. Google's intention is in public interest but this has to be done in the right way. There is something unethical in Google's approach to this issue.

What seems to have attracted the attention of people to Google's activities mostly is the company's corporate mission statement: "Don't be evil". [6] criticised the fulfillment of Google's corporate mission statement by pointing out that their actions are questionable and 'evil at worst'. He said that at the time Google created its street view mapping site, the company also collected email addresses, passwords and even bank account details from unsecured Wi-Fi networks. The company claimed that her action was a mistake. But it is clear to every lettered person that Google has got many experts in technology whose

Ozo and Elem

professional knowledge is not in doubt. Thus, it could be argued that this action of Google cannot be in any way pass for a mistake. It was in the least the worst lies and defense a big company like Google can tell the world. Google is simply pushing the boundary too far. Hence, irrespective of the fact that Google

CONCLUSION

Google is a company that formerly enjoyed a high level of corporate reputation. But in most recent time, the company's efforts to make profit and remain in business have made it to start losing public trust and confidence. This has brought the company's mission statement, "Don't be evil" to question. Public opinion as seen in the analysis of the story of Google's growth and development suggests that the company engages in unethical business practices.

www.iaajournals.org provide all the information we need to make our business successful and it remains the most efficient company in the tech world, the company's methods of gathering information for supplies to its numerous customers leave much to be desired. Based on this premise, it could be said that Google is evil.

In the wave of this current development, Google is looked upon as evil. However, some people still believe that Google has done nothing wrong to label it evil. But one thing that is clear is that the company has not been able to live up to public expectations. Hence, one can conclude that any company that behaves unethically in the conduct of its business is evil, and Google is one of such companies.

REFERENCES

1. Ardivchvili, A. A. Jondle, J. and Mitchell., 2008. *Characteristics of ethical business culture*, [online] Available at: <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED501640.pdf> [Accessed 20 March 2015]
2. Berkeley centre. 2012. Google code of conduct: don't be evil [online] Available at: Charles, P. 2010. Is Google evil? *IEEE Internet Computing*, [online]. 14 (13). Pp. 92-96.
3. Chittenden, M., 2011. Microsoft co-founder: "Google is evil". *Sunday Times*.
4. Connor, R. O. *Google is evil*, [online] <http://www.wired.com/2012/06/opinion-google-is-evil/> [Accessed 20 May 2015].
5. Dooley, R., 2012. *Google really evil or just smart*, [online] Available at: <http://www.forbes.com/sites/rogerdooley/2013/10/28/google-evil-smart/> [Accessed 2015].
6. Jones, T. M., 1991, Ethical Decision Making by Individuals in Organizations: an issue-contingent model, *Academy of Management Review* 16(2), 366-395.
7. Leo, T. W. Ferrell, L. and Manfield, P. 2000. A review of empirical studies assessing ethical decision making in business. *Journal of Business Ethics*. Vol. 25, pp.185-204.
8. Lynley, M. 2012. *Why everyone thinks Google has lost its way and become evil*, [online] Available at: <http://www.businessinsider.com/google-being-evil-2012-5> [Accessed 25 March 2015].
9. Maha, A. and Damain, K. 2009. Is Google evil? The online search engine's greatest success story. But as ever more data is amassed, concerns over how the company may use it grow. *NewStatesman*, [online] Available at: <http://columbiama2009.blogspot.com/2009/08/newstatesman-is-google-evil-by-maha.html> [Accessed 20 March 2015]
10. Rivers J. 2014. Can we all just admit Google is an evil empire [online] Available at: <http://www.fastcolabs.com/3024789/can-we-all-just-admit-google-is-an-evil-empire> [Accessed 12 March 2015].
11. Thomson C. 2014. *Does 'don't be evil still apply to Google?* [online]

Ozo and Elem
Available at:
<http://www.cnbc.com/id/1019234>

www.iaajournals.org
22 [Accessed 15 March 2015]