

## **Don't be Evil.**

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"It is a sin to believe evil of others, but it is rarely a mistake." --H.L. Mencken

The story goes that around 2001 Google founders were sitting together discussing the principles that the newly public corporation should follow as it grew. The engineers who were participating grew more and more flustered with the corporate doublespeak and platitudinous offerings. At a key moment, engineers Amit Patel and Paul Bucheit suggested that all these corporate ethics issues could be covered by just saying "Don't Be Evil."<sup>1</sup>

For a consumer of Google's services, that motto might as well be: "Whatever." Google's brand of evil is an insidious one. It is couched in the language of openness, freedom, access, democracy, ease of use and a hundred other things it seems impossible to argue with, but that hide its own freedom to exploit, expropriate, own, censor, control and a thousand other things it can now do. "Don't be Evil" also has an obvious elitism to it. "Trust us, we're experts," it seems to say, "we would never hurt you, we love you and want to protect you." And who exactly are they telling not to be evil? Themselves, their competitors, us users, God?

Before the decade is out, Google will have an ownership stake in every book in our libraries, a great deal of the videos uploaded to the web, billions of pictures, every useful mappable and navigable inch of our planet, and our moon as well, along with who knows what else. It already owns most of your brain. It owns your ability schedule and collaborate if you use Gmail, Google

Docs or Google Groups. It owns your ability to keep up with what the cool kids are doing if you use Google Reader, Blogger, or Google Analytics. It owns your personal finances if you use Google Finance. It owns your medical records if you use Google Health. It owns science and scholarship, since we all use Google Scholar now. And it owns your memory, too. I can't remember the citations for this right now, but Google for Siva Vaidhyanathan or "Robert Darnton and Google" or "google watch" and you're golden.

On top of this, Google makes unsavory concessions to human rights-violating nations around the globe; it censors whatever and whenever it serves its own interests or those of the countries it seeks to operate in, but it takes a light approach to the defense of free speech, wherever its interests aren't served. Whatever.

But "Don't Be Evil" is not Google's official slogan. It's not clear whether Google has an official slogan, or indeed, much advertising at all. Unlike the hick-themed, oxymoronic, contra-enlightenment jingle "Yahoo!", which is burned into my brain, Google has had almost no branding or advertising presence. It is in some ways the ultimate corporate oxymoron: a 65% (or more) market share gained on almost no deliberate consumer marketing. How did we get here? We Googled.

Of course, one of the reasons for this is that Google usurps the very core of advertising itself—the ability to find, compare, differentiate and trust products in an anonymous market. Worse in many ways than claiming to sell "safe cigarettes" or "better living through chemistry" is Google's

supposedly neutral control over the content of every conceivable message, oxymoronic or not. There is a justifiable reason why Google's engineers leapt immediately to the theological problem of Evil. It is because they recognize the power Google can have over consumers, over knowledge (of self), over progress, over the very ability to know the world around oneself, much less to change it.

It is nonetheless quite significant that it was the engineers in the corporation who came up with the motto, because Evil, in the world of software and computer engineering, is a term of art. It is one that I've heard repeatedly as an anthropologists studying high tech communities and engineers for the last 15 years. So the oxymoronic motto sounds quite different depending on whether one is on the inside of the industry or the outside. In addition to all the reasons to be fearful of Google as a consumer (owning your brain, censoring your speech, etc), there are also reasons to be fearful of Google as a business, an employee or an entrepreneur in the information technology industry. And it is these latter concerns, primarily, that the motto 'Don't Be Evil' was intended to address.<sup>ii</sup>

The notion of evil is very specific and persistent amongst engineers and geeks. Evil happens when a corporation does something it shouldn't do out of spite, lust for money, or desire for personal control. It is anti-social behavior; it is behavior that prefers the route of minimum gain for one or a few rather than the greatest good for the most people. This may sound like a very general moral worldview, but it is specifically entangled with the kinds of technologies Google and other corporations in information technology create and provide, specifically highly

complex, inter-operating, information and computing infrastructures. It is a techno-moral social imaginary in which there are precise, shared, culturally worked-through notions of the right way to build an information infrastructure in order to enhance a particular notion of the Good.

Evil is a term that indexes a strong moral judgment about how to do business with other businesses. It might be a peculiar failing of the moral order of geeks that this morality reveals little about how to do business with other *people* (because geeks think people are just peculiar, badly designed and particularly inefficient kinds of technology), but Evil in this moral imaginary, is not something anyone can perpetrate. What makes Google a danger to others, what makes it capable of Evil, is *bigness* and in particular monopoly bigness in an industry where *shared infrastructure* is essential. When these companies do evil, it is not evil of the sort where one person is evil to another—it is an evil with repercussions far beyond its intended target (if there is one). Evil affects everyone, from big corporations to the the minding-their-own-small-businesses using networks and software who just want to get something done.

Evil comes in an academic variant as well, in the economics of technology: ‘Lock-in’, ‘network effects’, ‘path dependency’, ‘increasing returns to scale’--these are the secular scientific terms that domesticate the theology of the Engineers.<sup>iii</sup> But these are terms born of the failure of other economic theories, they represent failures: market failures, failures of the theory of public goods and failures of the theory of monopoly. They permeate discussions of all industries which develop around strong intellectual property rights, and can lead to pathologies of new sorts, as in the case of “me too” drugs discussed by Adriana Petryna (Petryna, this volume). Even if

economists use these terms instead of “Evil” they still refer to the uses of shared infrastructure to force consumers to buy something, and to direct revenue and attention in particular ways which do not obey classic ideals of supply and demand or market allocation. It violates the moral imaginary of justice that economists and engineers alike often share. The engineers on the inside of the information technology industry, and the economists who observe it, may be deluded about the ultimate value of having a global information infrastructure at all, but they are not deluded about the need to build it carefully, fairly and justly. However, it is a different question whether or not this moral-technical imaginary amongst engineers and economists is *in conflict with the corporate form itself* (the only viable form that currently allows this imaginary to be realized). This conflict is what makes the phrase "Don't be Evil" into an oxymoron, rather than a simple injunction to do good.

At the heart of this motto, one might see the conflicts, the double binds that emerge when individuals with sophisticated imaginations of moral and technical order are pitted against a form of life, the corporation, which perhaps cannot be reconciled with that imagination. For the former order is above all the sense that things are arranged justly, fairly and for the maximum benefit of the most number of people. It is the order of a beautiful design, a clever hack, or simply the appearance of right and just pattern in nature. Even if engineers fail to discuss value in qualitative terms, and turn instead to numbers and formulae and models, there is nonetheless a particular moral and technical imagination of order at work, one with deep roots in liberalism, economic theory and evolutionary biology. Such visions also appeal to academic economists, even if they are more likely to repudiate the vague moral theology in favor of their own theology

of economic formulae and laws.

Order of this sort does not appeal, by contrast, to the corporate marketer, or the accountant, or the professional executive at Google. Linear growth, maximization of individual gain, agonistic competition and irrefutable proof of success in the form of hard numbers and perhaps a soft loyalty are the order that governs this imagination. The corporate imagination is one of a neo-liberalism of risk-taking, entrepreneurialism and radical individualism that is quite at odds with the moral imagination of engineers.<sup>iv</sup> Losers are necessary, preferably lots of them strewn in the wake of your bloodied double-entry books, for this vision of order to become actual. Where the engineers and economists dream of a stable, if ever expanding world of fair distribution and maximum happiness, the corporate form demands the constant searching out and exploitation of instability, of winner-take-all strategies and a disdain for the happiness or well-being of its competitors. Very few people can hold both imaginations at once. Co-founder Sergey Brin is often presented as the “conscience” of Google, the engineer whose self-appointed task is to steer Google away from Evil and towards Good. And yet, he may well be one of the most perfect examples of the neoliberal, risk-taking, individualist entrepreneur living today. Thus, a tension emerges between the moral imagination of the engineer-economist—a technocratic one, perhaps even a platonic republic—and the moral imagination of the entrepreneur and individualist—a take-no-prisoners, dog-eat-dog, devil-may care, claw-your-way to the top imaginary of constant threat; a Hobbesian world ungoverned by Good or Evil, and perhaps ungovernable.

On the outside, however, to the users and consumers of Google, all this is opaque. All this talk

of engineers and economists vs. suits and managers seems to obscure the real issues, the issues of suffering and harm that really matter. This opacity, this question of where to focus speaks to the need within anthropology for a renewed call to understand and analyze the corporate form.

Kirsch and Benson ask us to pay a bit less attention to the State and governmentality and a bit more attention to "how corporations shape the world in accordance with their pursuit of profit, growth, and legitimacy. (Benson and Kirsch, "Introduction" this volume). The case of Google and its oxymoronic injunction is a good one, and can illustrate a few important points towards a renewal of an anthropology of the corporation.

First, there is a continual slippage endemic to such calls to focus on corporations: one starts out speaking about corporations and imperceptibly slides into speaking about *capitalism* instead.

But is the concept of capitalism the best way to get at the peculiar and opaque machinations of Google and its technically complex form of Evil? Doing so erases the distinction I tried to draw between those engineers and academics that form the intellectual core of the project that is Google, and the corporate form within which they find themselves working out that project.

Starting with corporations and moving towards theory is undoubtedly the right thing to do—but as with the concept of the State, Capitalism is, as John Dewey would say, a concept that it is "too rigid and too tied up with controversies to be of use."<sup>v</sup> Why jump immediately to the explanation of capitalism when we have so much explaining to do of the "facts of human activity" going on in and around the corporations that people our world?

Reading "corporate oxymorons" as symptomatic of a tension might require making more

distinctions, rather than fewer. Perhaps these oxymorons emerge where double binds happen, where people get together to change the world for all the right reasons, but end up sending a message of fear and intimidation to all those who resist them. Perhaps these defensive oxymorons are not a feature of capitalism, but something arising out of more proximate historical threads: the nature of liability, the legal structure of property, the management/shareholder split, the necessity of branding (even for industries like mining where branding would seem singularly unnecessary to a consumer—but now we have clean diamonds and blood diamonds for exactly this reason). And if this is the case, then that might actually combat resignation, since it no longer attributes causality to an impersonal and unstoppable force, but to an assemblage of laws, practices and techniques that might be more clearly identified as the culprit behind a particular style of response.

Second, in blocking the kick from corporation to capitalism, if it is possible to ask whether some kinds of corporations are part of a “harm industry” and some are not (and some control the politics of harm and some do not), then by extension it must be possible to *differentiate* industries from one another. Is the corporation the right of scale of analysis, or is it perhaps the industry? Google is by far from alone in its practices, even if it is a near monopoly in some respects. Take for instance Springer Verlag, publisher of *Dialectical Anthropology*, whose oxymoronic slogan is "We Manage Knowledge." Certainly we need a corporation to manage the complex process of transferring the copyright on whatever you produce to their coffers, so they can sell it back to you or your University, so you can access it in your office. And we certainly need a corporation to manage the financially complex transaction of spending \$3000 for



"Springer Open Choice(TM)" so that Springer can graciously allow you to keep your copyright instead.<sup>vi</sup> Our oxymoron monitor might translate their slogan as: "we turn you into a consumer of the knowledge you produced." Springer's Evil is of the same genus as Google's, and it has a lot to do with the corporate form behind the practices. However, it has even more to do with a shared industry-form in which intellectual property law, specific forms of information technology, and a near total lack of regulation are common across both corporations. And at stake behind the scenes is a similar tension between the good intentions of the people building the information infrastructures and the corporate form within which they are attempting to serve this public mission. Is the corporation the problem here, or should we disentangle the outlines of an industry?

Indeed, it is Google's *industry-form* within which those moral imaginations of technical and moral order that give rise to the concept of Evil make the most sense. Evil is a clear concept to many who work at Yahoo and Microsoft and Oracle and elsewhere, but likely foreign (in this form) to those who work in the Tobacco industry. And if the industry is the right level of analysis for understanding moral orders, then one has to look to other structuring agencies: governments that facilitate particular industrial structures (or ignore their entrance into particular locales); associations and societies; laws, regulations, incentives and mechanisms designed to induce such industries and the harm they bring. For some areas, the issue is a chicken and egg question: did Du Pont come first or the chemical "industry"? But for others like information technology, the interaction between the definition of an industry (software? information? Entertainment? ) and the innovations created by corporations is a constant game of back and

forth with the legal and political structure of nations around the globe. Industry structure in IT affects labor markets (Bodyshopping and labor-migration), environmental responsibility (e-waste and consumer products), and the powers of science and culture with respect to politics (open access and intellectual property issues).

Lurking behind corporations is a complex entanglement which it is rarely the role of any social scientists—much less anthropologists—to try to unravel. It is, however, in the case of IT precisely this complex tangle of regulations, laws, technical infrastructures, standards and standards associations and the incentive structure of intellectual property law that has created the possibility for Evil of the kind Google claims to avoid.<sup>vii</sup> The question of whether that industrial structure is also relevant to the domain of pharmaceuticals, the domain of mining, or the domain of corn-syrup-based beverages is open, and maybe by exploring these complexities we can start to develop a conceptual lexicon appropriate to them.

Finally, it is true that such a call for the investigation of the corporate form, or the industry-form, seems to demand an anthropology engaged elsewhere than with those who are at the receiving end of harm. It seems so far from the once beloved practice of anthropology wherein which one can so clearly demonstrate the disastrous suffering of the victims of the harm industries. But at the same time, that suffering is exactly what is rendered sufficiently distant by the corporate and industry-forms themselves. What are corporate oxymorons if not ways of introducing more and more distance between their actions and the lives of people who are affected by them. By contrast, we need more careful anthropological investigation of the corporate-forms and

industry-forms, as dreadfully boring as they may be, as tied up as they are with the detailed lives of computer programmers, or HR executives, or mid-level mine managers, or plant supervisors or clinical trial planners, it is precisely there that we have no knowledge, no theory, and no means for intervening, whether from the inside or the outside. What's more, it may be that those programmers, managers, supervisors and planners also need that theory, also need a jolt to their sensibilities which might demonstrate the double bind they are in: that one can have good in one's heart, but end up with the capacity to do terrible evil.

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- i There are various more and less reliable sources for this story, usually Battelle, *The Search*. The wikipedia page collects some of them, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Don%27t\\_be\\_evil](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Don%27t_be_evil).
- ii Google's most vociferous critics today focus on a couple of aspects of its power, specifically its potential to violate privacy (see e.g. "Is Google Evil?" by Adam L. Penenberg, *Mother Jones*, Oct 10, 2006, <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2006/10/google-evil>) or its involvement in China (see eg. "Google vs. Evil" by Josh McHugh, *Wired* 11.01, [http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/11.01/google\\_pr.html](http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/11.01/google_pr.html)). There are some subtle differences in the meaning of Evil that might suggest neither of these things fall under the label of Evil as Google itself, or engineers understand it. Chris Jay Hoofnagle recently published a paper arguing that the evil talk is mere propaganda, distracting from the more important issues surrounding privacy, for instance. See Hoofnagle "Beyond Google and evil".
- iii On path dependency and increasing returns, see seminal the works by Paul Krugman, Paul Romer, W. Brian Arthur and Paul David.
- iv This mode of "responsibilization" oft-discussed in anthropology and given theoretical force, for instance, in Nikolas Rose's work, is much different from a collective imagination of the system and its just and fair functioning. Responsibilization individualizes absolutely. One must compete by turning oneself into an entrepreneur of the self. Engineers and economists, as I am characterising them here, are more likely to put themselves inside the system; to see their own actions as happening within a system that maximizes or processes the sum of all individual actions. See e.g. Rose, *Politics of Life Itself*, Rose and Miller, *Governing the Present*.
- v Dewey, *The Public and its Problems* p.
- vi To be fair, Springer is one of the more enlightened of the corporate knowledge-managers when it comes to open access, and will soon be the corporate home of BioPubMed Central, the erstwhile official depository of nearly all publicly funded and open access health and medicine related research. One hopes the contracts and promises they make to keep it open for the future are good and binding ones. And personally speaking, I don't have to worry about paying the \$3000 fee to keep my copyright, because my severely cash-strapped public-cum-corporate university has already paid it for me. Talk about a Ponzi scheme.
- vii For more on this, see (Kelty 2008)