Google, which earned $1.1 billion in operating income in the second quarter of 2007 alone, is now the single most important company on the Internet. Catapulted to a position of power by an ingenious and effective search engine, Google has since branched out, offering photo sharing, social networking, online shopping, e-mail accounts, a map of your neighborhood—even a digital copy of the novel you’ve been dying to read. “Google has become such a commonly used resource that people are beginning to regard it as synonymous with the Web,” writes David “Doc” Searls, a fellow this year and last at Harvard Law School’s Berkman Center for Internet and Society, a research program devoted to the study, exploration, and development of the Internet and Internet law. Searls is the author of a widely cited blog about technology and the Internet, and a self-proclaimed fan of Google.

The size of Google’s empire and the quantity of customer data it may possess prompt suspicion from some observers. They wonder what Google may do with the massive amounts of information it has gathered—potentially the text of every e-mail sent via Gmail, every Google search performed, every advertisement clicked on, every address to which someone seeks directions using Google Maps. Earlier this year, the London-based group Privacy International gave Google the lowest possible grade, accusing the company of “comprehensive consumer surveillance and entrenched hostility to privacy.” Even if Google guards all its data zealously and does nothing nefarious with it, the possibility of hackers or identity thieves getting access is undeniably frightening, no matter how unlikely.

Google’s reputation for a culture of secrecy fuels such suspicion. Take the company’s reluctance to discuss its international network of “server farms”: collections of computer servers for processing and storing data. The “farms” require massive amounts of electricity and plentiful fiber-optic cable, and produce so much heat that they need adjacent cooling plants. Local officials in the small Oregon community where the company has built one the size of two football fields told the New York Times they couldn’t discuss the facility because they had signed confidentiality agreements with Google. The company will not disclose how many locations or how many servers make up its network; the Times reporter was forced to resort to such imprecise phrases as “best guess” when citing the estimated number of Google servers worldwide—450,000—and describing what the Oregon server farm “will probably house.”

In May, Google debuted a new function, Street View, which offers eye-level photographs of individual buildings along entire streets in several U.S. urban areas. The photographs were taken not by people, Google said, but by cameras in special vehicles; the resolution was high enough that some people complained after going online and seeing their pets or other details of their private lives captured by the robotic photographers.

Yet Searls resists divining anything sinister. Google has grown large, he says, simply because “they happen to do a real good job at what they do.” The ability to perform quick, powerful, accurate Web searches has transformed the way we live our lives, from shopping to tracking down an old college roommate to writing a research paper or news article.

On privacy matters, the official response from Google is that the company has made a point of building “transparency and choice” for customers into all its endeavors, says Peter Fleischer ’83, J.D. ’87, who serves as global privacy counsel for the company. Gmail account holders who have made purchases using Google Checkout, for instance, can view their purchase history at the click of a mouse; people wary of having their credit-card
information, mailing address, and shopping habits stored in the same place as all their e-mail can choose to pay a different way. Fleischer points out that the minimum amount of information required to register for a Gmail account is quite small—a first and last name—and even that information can be falsified: there is no requirement that users enter their real names. Any additional information the user gives Google is provided voluntarily, in exchange for some additional benefit.

And such trade-offs are not unique to interactions with Google. Whenever we pay with a credit card at a restaurant or gas station, we create a paper trail and increase our exposure to identity theft by some small factor. We could use cash instead, but most of us consider the risk so negligible that we choose convenience.

Searls reminds those who fear Google that Microsoft’s once seemingly unbreakable “hegemony”—based on Internet Explorer, Windows, and Office software—has begun to show cracks. That, in part, is thanks to Google’s efforts to make the Microsoft products irrelevant by creating free Web-based programs that do the same things.

Searls suggests that Google will also lose its dominance, and thinks the concept he’s developing at the Berkman Center may play a role in that process. He believes the Internet is ripe for a consumer revolution that will empower individuals to define the terms of their relationships with companies, rather than let the companies dictate the terms. His name for the idea—Project VRM—stands for “vendor relationship management,” as opposed to the established corporate jargon of “customer relationship management.” In Searls’s utopian vision, companies that insist on collecting all kinds of extraneous information will lose out to those firms willing to provide the same services for a “lower information cost,” so to speak, as customers refuse to relinquish any more information than is absolutely necessary to provide the services they desire. Searls sees sizable unmet demand in this arena, and believes that every company will be forced to adapt—including Google.

~Elizabeth Gudrais

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