

The Death of Google

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Google is dying. It may be possible to save the patient, but it's also quite possible that Google has already passed the point of no return, especially with the array of forces now attacking it from all sides and from within. Since this situation has been largely enabled by unforced errors committed by Google itself, the prognosis can only be described as bleak.

Unfortunately, I have strong doubts that Google is capable at this time of making the kinds of "lifestyle changes" that would be required to truly save themselves. I would love to have these doubts proven to be incorrect.

A company named Google and its parent Alphabet will continue to exist for the foreseeable future, but for all practical purposes the Google that we all know appears to be in a kind of terminal decline, even as the money continues rolling in for now.

How can this be?

Today's announcements of a Google+ security breach and the upcoming shutdown of consumer Google+ are but immediate symptoms of a malignancy that has been creeping through Google for years.

As a big fan of Google, spending a significant amount of my time retorting the mischaracterizations and lies of the Google haters via my written posts and radio interviews, I take no pleasure in this kind of diagnosis.

I've watched the death throes of other major technology firms over the years, who originally seemed nothing short of invincible.

AT&T for one. Digital Equipment Corporation (DEC) was another. Their declines took time — these are processes rather than events. It's actually a fairly long list if you go far enough back. DEC was assimilated into other firms and its talent siphoned off in various directions. AT&T today is still large and powerful but in many ways is but a shadow of its former self, with its gems like Bell Labs long since morphed into meaningless.

The forces that are ripping Google apart are somewhat different in kind, but all the more tortuous and painful to behold.

For at its core, Google is suffering a complex and multifaceted ethical dilemma that not only threatens to decimate the firm from the inside over time, but has opened up vast gaping wounds that legions of politically-motivated Google haters are using to further evil agendas.

I've traveled quite the arc when it comes to Google. In their earlier days starting some 20 years ago, I was a rather intense critic — various of their early data collection and privacy practices seemed to be driven by a cavalier attitude that I viewed as unacceptable.

My first direct physical contact with Google occurred in 2006, when I was invited to Google's L.A. offices to give a talk that I entitled "Internet & Empires" (the video of that presentation by a significantly younger version of myself is here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PGoSpmv9ZVc>).

I believe it was the first talk they'd ever recorded at that office. There was no podium yet — I just sat on the edge of a table for the presentation.

My interactions with Googlers that day — both from the Q&A and our later discussions before I headed home — yielded me an immediate epiphany of sorts.

Googlers are probably the best people I've ever met or worked with in tech — or anywhere else for that matter. It was an honor to consult to Google internally and work directly with them for a significant period several years ago.

They're intelligent. They care. Many of them are pretty nerdy — but I certainly plead guilty to that myself. I've nearly never met a Googler that I didn't like.

But it became immediately clear that day back in 2006 that something of a discontinuity existed between “rank and file” Googlers and some individuals in Google's upper management. Even on that first day of contact, Googlers expressed to me their frustrations in this regard, relating to the very issues that I had discussed in my talk.

Over the years since, a wide range of issues related to Google have changed dramatically for the better. Google has become a world-class leader in privacy, security, and artificial intelligence policies. This doesn't mean that Google is perfect in these respects, and bugs can still occur, but they have excellent people working on those teams — I know many of them personally — who put their lives into this important work.

However, in key respects it seems that the chasm between Google's management and other Googlers has grown from a disconnect to a gaping chasm.

Google has always had what I'd charitably call "blind spots" in various areas. Over the years I've written publicly about these many times, and I won't go into detail about them again here, but we can briefly review a few.

Customer service has been an ongoing problem since day one. It has certainly made significant positive strides over time, but still is massively lacking in important respects, especially when dealing with growing populations of non-techie users who depend on Google products and services, but are increasingly left behind by Google user interface designs and available help resources.

When it comes to user interfaces, readability, and similar areas, we again see a sort of "split personality" from Google. They have excellent and rapidly evolving resources for persons with severe conditions like blindness, but continue to deploy low contrast fonts and confusing user interfaces that drive many users with common visual deficiencies absolutely nuts.

Proposals to create the kinds of roles at Google that have been so successful elsewhere — such as Ombudspersons and Consumer Advocates — have continually and routinely hit brick walls at Google whenever I've suggested them. I've probably written a hundred thousand words or more on this topic alone in my various essays about Google issues.

It has been very clear that Google's style of public communications has become a major part of their ongoing problems — because in my experience so many common false claims about Google are easily refuted when you take the time to actually do so in a way that non-techies will appreciate.

Yet Google PR has always had a tendency to clam up when something controversial occurs — until the situation has escalated to the point that

silence is no longer an option, and matters have become much worse than they would have been if dealt with publicly in a prompt fashion. Google's deeply entrenched fear of the "Streisand Effect" — the idea that if you say anything about a bad situation you will only draw attention to it — has not served them well.

Today's belated announcement of a security breach related to Google+, which appears to be the handy excuse for Google to shut down consumer Google+ over a period of 10 months — a process that Google also announced today — encapsulates much of what I've said above.

Though the practical impact of the breach seems to be negligible, Google played directly into the politically-motivated hands of the lying Google haters, who have already been screaming for Google's blood and for its executives to be figuratively drawn and quartered.

These kinds of Google communications strategies are giving the evil haters even more ammunition to use for false accusations of political user censorship, they give the EU additional excuses to try fine Google billions extra to enrich EU coffers, and they give massive energy to the forces who want to break up Google into smaller units to be micromanaged for political gain by politicians and those politicians' minions and toadies.

In the case of Google+, while I don't have any inside information about today's announcements, it's pretty easy to guess what happened.

I've been a very active user of Google+ since the first day of beta availability in 2011. But it was obvious from the outset that Google management's view of the platform was significantly different from its many dedicated users — and there are many millions of them despite the claims of naysayers. I have a wonderful core following of Google+ users who are absolutely great people, and the loss of Google+ will make me both sad

and yes, extremely angry. It's difficult to consider this to be anything short of loyal users being betrayed by Google itself.

Because it didn't have to happen. Google+ has obviously been operating on very limited internal support resources for quite some time — this was apparent to anyone who used G+ routinely. And there were some terrible executive decisions made along the way — perhaps mostly notably an ultimately abandoned integration of G+ and the YouTube commenting system, which cross-contaminated completely different spheres of interest with disastrous effects. I advocated against this both publicly and internally, but even though it was ultimately rescinded the damage was already done.

Another Google self-inflicted injury is the new controversy over purported plans for Google to again provide Chinese government censored search in China, a concept that Google abandoned many years ago. I've written a lot about this recently — I believe it's a terrible idea and plays into the hands of Google's adversaries — but I won't get into the details again here, other than to note the great distress that these moves and the ways that they were handled internally have caused many Googlers who have spoken out publicly.

And yet as I've also recently written, when we view that leaked Google TGIF video where Google executives discuss this matter, you won't see any evil intents, and in fact you'll find execs emphasizing the need to continue preventing any political bias from finding its way into Google search or other Google products. So their hearts are clearly in the right place overall.

But even the best of intentions are not enough.

With the opening words of Google's 2004 IPO Founders Letter, Larry Page and Sergey Brin wrote:

“Google is not a conventional company. We do not intend to become one.”

I can't help but be reminded of that classic scene in “Citizen Kane” where Charles Foster Kane takes the “Declaration of Principles” that he'd written many years earlier and rips them to pieces, declaring them to now be antique.

It is indeed possible, even likely, that Google can continue onward without the kinds of changes that I and other Google supporters have advocated over the years, and still make bushels of money.

But it won't be the same Google. It will have become the “conventional company” kind of Google, not the firm of which so many Googlers are so rightly proud, and that so many users around the globe depend upon throughout their days.

The Google that we've known will be dead. And with its passing, we'll be entering into a much darker phase of the Internet that many of us have long feared and have worked so hard to try prevent.

And that loss would be terrible for us all.

—Lauren—