GOOGLE AND THE PROSPECTS FOR A GLOBAL CIVIL SOCIETY

Resistance to infrastructural imperialism and the spread of the values espoused by techno-fundamentalists is scarcely limited to oppressive regimes. China is hardly the sole example of a state that effectively censors Internet traffic and throttles political dissent. As the Internet scholar Rebecca MacKinnon wrote during the June 2009 crackdown on Google and other Internet services in China, “The Internet censorship club is expanding and now includes a growing number of democracies. Legislators are under growing pressure from family groups to ‘do something’ in the face of all the threats sloshing around the Internet, and the risk of overstepping is high.” Germany was considering a national censorship system through which Internet-service providers would be required to block a secret list of sites. Australia and the United Kingdom have for a number of years maintained a similar national censorship list. While none of these states censor as perversely, disruptively, or effectively as China does, it’s clear that China has strong partners in efforts to restrict the use of the Internet.

In each of these countries, Google follows orders from the state and thus actively (albeit tangentially and grudgingly) participates in the censorship of the Internet. Even in the United States, digital copyright laws have forced Google to aid the Church of Scientology in its efforts to squelch Web critics. In addition, the United States has for a decade been requiring libraries and schools to install Web filter software similar to the software that the Chinese government attempted to mandate for all Chinese computers for the same overt reason: to restrict access to sites suspected of supplying pornography. Such software, of course, also restricts material of political significance. As I have stated above, measuring by scale or effect, it’s improper to compare the Chinese efforts to restrict the flow of information with those of the United States and other democracies. But it’s a mistake to single out China as the only significant place where Web censorship is a matter of policy.

The liberal values espoused by techno-fundamentalists and corporations such as Google encounter resistance when they meet the realities of corporate and nation-state behavior. The struggle to speak freely on the global network of networks illustrates the daunting challenges of forging a “global civil society” or a media environment in which citizens around the world can organize, communicate, and participate openly and equally. What, then, are the potentials for actually realizing those ideals?

In part, the answer lies in the development of entities that lie outside state sovereignty and outside the economic imperatives and constraints of the corporation. As communication and transportation technologies have connected people in more efficient ways over the past three decades, we have seen the rise in importance of organizations and social networks that operate across borders and outside state control. Paradoxical civil-society organizations include Amnesty International, Oxfam, Falun Gong, the Catholic Church, the International Olympic Committee, FIFA, and the International Red Cross. But this category also includes smaller and more diverse collections of people who come together temporarily to support protesters against the government of Iran, Swedish Internet hackers who enable massive file sharing, and advocates of violent, bigoted brand of Hinduism.

“Civil society” is a messy and not always benevolent construct. The political theorist John Keane defines global civil society as “a vast, interconnected and multi-layered non-governmental space that comprises many hundreds of thousands of self-directing institutions and ways of life.” Certainly, global civil society already exists. Elements of it are divergently global, civil, and societal, and most of these institutions antedate the Web. An ideal global civil society, different from the actual civil society we have now, would foster a cosmopolitan sense of identity and a commitment to the common good of the whole planet. So we must ask to what extent and in what ways Google can help create and support such a society, to what extent and in what ways it hinders it, and what we can do to promote the common good on a global scale.

A “public sphere,” according to the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, is “a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens. A portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body.”
According to Habermas, early examples of public spheres emerged in Europe soon after the rise of nation-states and a commercial middle class in the eighteenth century. The tragedy of the public sphere, Habermas argues, is that its core institutions, such as newspapers and broadcasting, became so rampanty commercialized in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that they failed to support the goals of keeping a republic informed and engaged. When it comes to the Web and the influence of Google on the Web, we can see a case study in which Habermas’s narrative of the collapse of the public sphere has unfolded in a very short time.50

The global network of networks that we call the Internet represents the first major revolution in communications to occur since Habermas’s influential historical work, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, was first published in 1962.51 Habermas described a moment in the social and political history of Europe in which a rising bourgeoisie was able to gather in salons and cafes to discuss matters of public concern. The public sphere represented a set of sites and conventions in the eighteenth century in which (almost exclusively male) members of the bourgeoisie could forge a third space between the domestic sphere and the sphere of formal state power. It was a social phenomenon assisted by a communicative development: the spread of literacy and the rise of cheap printing in Europe.

Habermas asserts that such a space had not existed in Europe in a strong form before the eighteenth century and that by the end of the nineteenth century it had undergone some profound changes. On the one hand, the democratic revolutions in the United States and France, parliamentary reform efforts in England, and the unsteady lurches toward republics in Germany and other parts of Europe eventually codified many of the democratic aspirations of the public sphere: openness, inclusiveness, and fairness. On the other, by the dawn of the twentieth century, the corporatization of communicative functions across nation-states had drained the bourgeois public sphere of its deliberative potential and much of its purpose.

Habermas leaves those of us who worry about the health of democratic practice with a nostalgic model of rational discourse with liberatory potential. It’s been a powerful and useful model. Habermas’s book has influenced media-reform efforts and—to a much lesser extent—media policy. Exhausted by trying to rebuild the classical Greek agora, we have set about trying to build a better coffeehouse.32

It’s no surprise, then, that as soon as the Internet entered public consciousness in the 1990s, cultural and communication theorists started asking whether it would enable the generation of a “global public sphere,” or, in the words of Yochai Benkler, a “networked public sphere.”62 Influenced perhaps too much by Marshall McLuhan’s model of a global village, scholars, journalists, and activists drove Habermasian terms into mainstream discussions of Internet policy and its political potential.54

Alas, the public sphere is not the best model to idealize when we think globally and dream democratically. Habermas’s public sphere is as temporally and geographically specific as Benedict Anderson’s notion of “imagined communities” and has been similarly misapplied to disparate experiences that don’t correspond to the specific historical situation examined by the original work: In Habermas’s story of the emergence and deflation of the public sphere, both nationalism (with the rise of the nation-state) and capitalism play a major role. Concern for the fate of the nation or local affairs, he argues, drove people to assemble and deliberate. A global public sphere, however, is necessarily cosmopolitan in temperament. Therefore, members of a global public sphere must culturally cohere in some way. Either they must share a language, or they must share a value system and a common notion of truth and validity. We are far from having such a system, and it’s not clear that it’s in everyone’s interest to create one.59

In addition, any consideration of the potential for a global public sphere enabled by the Internet must confront the discrepancies of access and skills across the world. Often discussions of the effects of Internet and other communicative technologies take on the shallowest analysis of access. Either they assume something close to universal access to the network of networks or they assume that people everywhere experience electronic networks the same way that most Americans do: as fast, cheap, and out of control. In fact, fewer than one in five people in the world have domestic access to the Internet at speeds that allow the viewing
of the simplest YouTube video. As late as 2009, only ten countries had high-speed Internet access that reached at least 80 percent of their populations; and those ten countries account for less than 2 percent of the world’s population. In countries where high-speed Internet is available in public cafes and libraries, many users have to deal with significant filtering, censorship, and surveillance. So they already have a suboptimal Internet experience.56

But the most significant gap separating potential citizens of the world is not necessarily access to Internet technologies and networks. It is the skills needed to participate in the emerging global conversation. Being able to use a search engine, click on a link, and even post to Facebook does not require much skill or investment, but producing video, running an influential blog, participating in the Wikipedia community, hosting a proxy server, and even navigating between links and information sources on the Internet demand much more money and knowledge than most people in the world have. To acquire such skills, people need at least minimal free time and significant means, and many with disabilities are excluded regardless of education or means. The barriers to entry for such productions are lower than ever in human history, but they are far from free, open, and universal.57

To consider the prospects for a cosmopolitan global civil society or its cousin, a global public sphere, and the role that Google might play in it, we should consider the role of powerful and flexible communicative technologies in places as dynamic and diverse as China, Russia, and India. Doing so will also allow us to assess the degree to which Google is now inseparable from the Web in general.

Despite its global and universalizing ambitions and cosmopolitan outlook, Google’s search functions are not effective in connecting and unifying a diverse world of Web users. Instead, its carefully customized services and search results reinforce the fragmentary state of knowledge that has marked global consciousness for centuries. Over time, as users in a diverse array of countries train Google’s algorithms to respond to specialized queries with localized results, each place in the world will have a different list of what is important, true, or “relevant” in response to any query. Already, a search done using the Indian version of Google,

Google.in, while seated at a computer in Charlottesville, Virginia, generates a different set of search results from the same search run in New Delhi, India. Google knows the general location of the searcher and structures the results to reflect the habits expressed by others in that location.

As Google continues to localize, personalize, and particularize its services and results, it fractures a sense of common knowledge or common priorities rather than enhances it. Google might indeed be “organizing the world’s information and making it universally accessible,” but it is not making universal knowledge universally accessible. Everything might eventually be available to everyone (although we are far from that state of affairs, and Google is not necessarily contributing to that mission equally across the world), but essential information could be highly ranked on Google searches in Sydney and buried on the ninth page of results in São Paulo. There might be significant differences in results (and thus effective access to knowledge) between Kiev and St. Petersburg, or Tel Aviv and Hebron.

Just as important, the Internet itself does not simply or automatically universalize experience, knowledge, or communication. Although it connects along certain axes, it severs along others. In Bangalore, India, a growing and technologically sophisticated upper middle class has been turning this once sleepy southern university city into a hub of investment, research, and technological expertise. The standard story of Bangalore’s transformation describes the city’s shiny new buildings, dependable electricity, and burgeoning taste for consumer goods.58 As the city has grown over the past two decades, it has served the infrastructural and lifestyle desires of global corporations and the workers and investors who support them. However, it has not necessarily served the needs of the vast majority of those who live in and around Bangalore—the very poor. The Bangalore lawyer and media researcher Lawrence Liang describes this and other major cities in India, such as Hyderabad and New Delhi: “This urbanism in India has become a significant theatre of elite engagement with claims of globalization. . . . Impressions of the media industry like multiplexes, malls, and lifestyle suburbs go hand-in-hand with the cries of urban decay and pollution, and managing populations that are increasingly restless in the new arrangements.”59
the media scholar Ravi Sundaram has said, “Cities are being actively remapped” in India. “You have sections of the city that are meant only for the elite, with their own power supply, air conditioning, and private security.” So although a small, but growing segment of Indian-society is firmly embedded in the cosmopolitan flows of culture, knowledge, and power as a result of the remarkable investments of the past twenty years in India, the poor pay a disproportionate price and receive an inadequate return.

If there is a cosmopolitan civil society in India, it is composed of the few and the elite. Indian elites both contribute to and benefit from being members of global civil society and contributors to its commercial wings. And in many ways, the members of the global, cosmopolitan, technological Indian elites have more in common (and thus feel stronger communal ties) with American and European society and similar elites in Bahrain or Brazil. “This space is generating an elite hybrid culture that is emancipated from any dialogue with issues such as public space and is securely anchored on the West,” Sundaram has said. However, as members of India’s technological elites converse and connect with expatriate Indians in the United States, Canada, and Europe, they rarely work to forge a sense of cosmopolitan justice. They are cosmopolitan in style, but not in politics.

At the same time, the Internet has provided ample space and occasion for the development of affinity groups, which may be simultaneously parochial and international. Radical Hindu fundamentalism, which has contributed to the rapes and deaths of thousands of Muslim-Indians in the past two decades, has been aided greatly by the rise of global Internet communities devoted to developing a “pure” and portable sense of Hindu identity and thus eroding the eclectic and tolerant traditions of India. The Internet has thus fomented political and religious hatred and violence. Millions of poor people have been able to access Internet services in recent years, thanks to the proliferation of cafes and hot spots in urban India, and they have generated what Liang calls significant “illegal information cities” by using pirated software; discarded or hacked hardware, and stolen electricity. But the marginal improvements to their lives have been trivial compared with the environmental and civic costs they have incurred and the outlandish benefits rendered to the elites. The major effects of the Internet on India thus far have been incivility and inequality, not the making of a global civil society.

-Linguistic differences are, of course, another barrier to the creation of a genuinely global civil society. Here, too, although the Internet connects along certain axes, it divides along others. One exceptional aspect of Google’s global role is its automatic translation tool, which enables people to read very rough translations of documents written in other languages. It works very well for simple documents, such as most Web pages. However, complex and long documents remain beyond its expertise. My recent attempt to read the Italian-language book Luci e ombre di Google: Futuro e passato dell’industria dei metadati, composed by an Italian collective, was frustrated by the poor quality of Google’s translation. But as Google imports more text into its linguistic-analysis computer and obtains feedback from users, it is certain to improve. In the meantime, Google is striving to add new languages to its translator software as events demand. When the protests over the disputed June 2009 elections in Iran broke out, Google rolled out a Farsi translation tool within a week.

Even so, because language skills differ markedly throughout the world, Google has different effects and influence in different regions. The current trends in Web search and Web use point toward the evolution of at least two Webs with very little interaction: one using the Latin alphabet (with English dominating that realm) and another in simple Mandarin (but with as global a reach as the Chinese diaspora itself). The utility and universality of English on the Web in general, according to some scholars, have been reinforcing its position as the dominant language of commerce in the world. But two factors have complicated this trajectory: the rise of Mandarin as the fastest-growing language area of the Web, and the ability of Google to customize, search, and translate elements of the Web into dozens of languages. So the next ten years of the Web might see the domination of two languages on the Internet, or of none.

Google is most dominant in Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Belgium, and the Netherlands, where it controls more than 95
percent of the Web search market. Venezuela, Switzerland, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Germany, France, Finland, Denmark, Colombia, Chile, Brazil, Argentina, and the United Kingdom are close behind, with Google controlling between 90 and 95 percent of their Web search traffic, according to various search industry reports in 2009. In examining the linguistic characteristics of countries where Google leads the pack, it's hard to find a common denominator. Most of them use the Latin alphabet, but several, including Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, and Finland, use a script heavily marked with diacritics and thus differ significantly from the Latinate languages of Western Europe.

Because Google does not handle diacritics well, it's surprising that some new local search engine has not challenged Google in Eastern Europe and the Baltic states. Most countries that use Asian syllabic scripts and non-Latin alphabets find locally developed search engines better suited for their needs. Google is far behind the local competition in China, Hong Kong, Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, and Russia. Each of these nation-states grants Google less than 40 percent of the search market. And each of these countries has major languages that use scripts that are very different from Latin.

Linguistic diversity does not explain everything, of course. As of 2009, most of the major Web search services worked better in English and the languages of Western Europe than they did in other languages. In addition, regardless of the local language of the search engine, the legacy strength of English-language websites (the greater traffic they receive as a result of having been up longer) biases most search engines in favor of English sites. The world, and thus the set of markets that promise greatest growth, is hardly biased toward English and is highly diverse. Web-search and portal companies certainly understand this. So it's clear that linguistic diversification is central to the long-term success of any Web company.

There are also important differences between countries using non-Latin languages. Google actually does worse in Taiwan, with just 18 percent of market share, than in mainland China, with 21 percent. So technologies of censorship might not be the most important factor to searchers. In South Korea (which now has a rich commitment to democracy and high-speed Internet services accessible to 70 percent of the population), Google has only 3 percent of the search market. Naver, the search leader in South Korea, exploits local knowledge generated by generous Web users to tailor search results, resulting in a sort of blend of Wikipedia and Google. And the fact that few Google users use Korean text means that Google's computers have not been able to master the data in Korea the way they have in other parts of the world. Naver got in early on this market, so Google has had nothing but trouble and frustration in South Korea. Moreover, the Korean government has been pressuring Google to adopt a system by which users must identify themselves truthfully when posting videos or comments on YouTube, a policy that Google does not want to enforce. Google has been limiting access to some services for South Korean users rather than abandon the protection of user anonymity.

Google has offered its service in Arabic since 2005, but I have not been able to find any information on its market shares in Arab countries. Google does have offices in Amman, Jordan, and Cairo, Egypt. It offers Gmail to users in Egypt, despite the fact that the Egyptian government is just as aggressive as China in tracking down, jailing, and torturing political dissidents and critics. Google has not been as forthcoming about its concerns for the fate of its users in Egypt as it has in China, and no one in the U.S. Congress or major human rights groups seems to have raised the issue of Google's policies in other oppressive regimes.

As Russia has lurched from fragile democracy to nationalist, authoritarian, one-party rule under the direction of Vladimir Putin, Google has been able to operate freely within the country. Although Putin's regime has stifled journalism deemed critical of the government (to put it mildly), it has kept the Web relatively open. We often assume that greater Internet use and freedom correspond with greater political liberty, but in Russia over the past ten years, a steady rise of Internet use and freedom has been accompanied by a harsh crackdown on dissent. It's as if the Russian regime believes that the Web is for shopping, and that whatever political organization might occur over it is a mere nuisance.

Despite the structural openness of the Russian Internet, Google has not been able to establish a significant or influential share of
the search market in the birthplace of its cofounder, Sergey Brin. Yandex, a Russian company with close connections to the state, had 44 percent of the search market in 2008; Google had only 34 percent. At the time, only about 25 percent of Russians were regular users of the Internet, so the potential for growth and change in that market was significant. Yandex also controls many wi-fi access locations and a popular photo-sharing site. Yandex and Rambler, the second most popular Russian search engine, have the advantage of being programmed natively in Russian, using the Cyrillic alphabet. Yandex specializes in offering Cyrillic-text sites in other related languages, such as Ukrainian and Belarussian.

Russian grammar is complex and very different from that of most European languages. Because search techniques now demand complex linguistic analysis, Google's lead in these areas of research for Western European languages is no help in the Russian market. What growth Google has experienced since its debut in Russia in 2006 can therefore be attributed to its influential ancillary services, such as YouTube and Google Maps. And in Russian markets, political connections and the support of the state can matter just as much as or more than the quality of the service. Because of this complex ecosystem, it's hard to imagine Google prevailing or even growing significantly if Russia becomes even more nationalistic than it already has. If, on the other hand, Russian society and government open up and liberalize, one could imagine Google playing an important role in that process. Once again, social and cultural conditions would drive the change in the media environment, rather than the other way around.

Perhaps Google does better in countries with more internal linguistic diversity. The United States, which is largely monolingual (although Spanish is America's second language), gives Google only about 72 percent of its Web-search business—although this number has been climbing steadily since 2005. Google does slightly better in bilingual Canada, with 78 percent of the market. India, the most multilingual of major economic powers (with twenty-one major languages in use), is a much better market for Google, with more than 81 percent of the search market.

Many of the searches in India are done in English, which is the standard language of commerce across the country of more than a billion people—more than 77 percent of the world's population. Unlike Korea, where mastery of one script and one language has been the key to success for Naver.com, India offers Google an ideal environment to demonstrate its flexibility, adaptability, and computational power. Google has invested much in automatic translation within and among Indian languages. As of mid-2009, Google offered its service in nine of India's languages: Hindi, Bengali, Telegu, Marathi, Tamil, Gujarati, Kannada, Malayalam, and Punjabi. Although India is a major high-technology incubator, its software engineers have yet to produce an effective local search engine that does anything more than mimic Google's look and feel.

LOCAL CULTURE AND THE RESISTANCE TO COSMOPOLITANISM

Although the Internet may have great potential to unite the world, it has done so unevenly over the past twenty years. Rather than act as a membrane that connects everyone with everyone and everyone with every piece of knowledge equally, the Internet allows for punctuated connections. It succeeds best at uniting diasporic communities and at forging political alliances both within and across borders. Google's role in these phenomena has been anything but simple. In its search functions, Google has increased the "tribalization" of the Web, letting Dutch football fans and people of Maori descent find each other and reinforce their shared opinions. It fractures the world, in new ways even as it unites it in other new ways. One aspect of global civil society, what we might call "local-culture movements," has benefited greatly from this simultaneous aggregation and disaggregation of people and places. It demonstrates how global civil society and the potential global public sphere conflict rather than cohere.

Local-culture movements have little use for the global public sphere. In fact, they see it as a problem. These movements represent the interests of long-marginalized culture groups, particularly those that have struggled to assert and maintain identities under intense pressure from