

ESSAYS



Death By Inadequacy

[photo animations available online only]

HOTEL COOVER

Robert Moor

[pages 44-80 available online only]

GOOGLE IS BUTCHERING THE WRITTEN WORD, or, “How to Buy PEX Tubing Online”¹

by William Litton

Five menacing stealth-bomber-esque jets fly in a V-formation above a thick overlay of clouds. Their bellies open to reveal an arsenal of sinisterly stylized meteorite-like drop pods, which release from their hatches and rocket towards the earth. The pods' scorching entry into the troposphere is witnessed by a montage of dumbfounded, small town folks. These are folks of admirably simple means—Idahoans, let's say—real salt-of-the-earth types: cattlemen, woodsmen, men on the road, et al. (The one female witness is attractive in a potato-fed kind of way.) These are good people watching something potentially horrifying. The pods strike violently into the earth, leaving wide craters in their wake, sending ranch horses dashing away in that peculiar kind of fear frenzy that only a horse can effectively exhibit. Our Idahoans slowly approach the smoking hollows, wary of what they will find. What the hell waits inside these

1 In regards to such a polemical/nonsensical headline, your essayist feels it's necessary to clarify two items at the outset:

a) Your essayist is not an indiscriminate Luddite, nor does he suffer from any personal or vocational bias against the Google Corporation (i.e., Google has never, to his knowledge, made any disparaging remarks against himself or his family; and—as his creative writing degree has yet to land him a job with Microsoft, Yahoo, Apple, AT&T, Mozilla or indeed any company whatsoever—he has no affiliation with any of Google's competitors). In fact—despite the handful of occasions in which said corporation's 'Maps' application has, through some miscalculation or omission, catastrophically sabotaged one of his road trips—he considers himself a savvy and contented patron of Google's software and Web services.

b) This essay will not instruct readers apropos the online purchasing of PEX tubing; it will not familiarize a curious shopper with the suppliers, varieties, or competitive price ranges of PEX tubing, or even its most basic attributes and uses. Your essayist knows precisely nothing about PEX tubing. Is it used for heating/plumbing? Perhaps as gerbil-cage accoutrement? He doesn't care. Not even enough to perform a simple Google search of the product, which would no doubt take mere fractions of a second. The topic's titular privilege, rest assured, will be explained sometime later in the essay.

unholy capsules? Is it alien? They peek closer. The orchestrated string music suddenly vaults toward a crescendo. The pods hatch open with the familiar hydraulic sound of futuristic things hatching open, and—*holy fucking shit it's a cell phone!*

So goes the fairly recent Verizon/Google ad for their new Droid smart phone. The ad is remarkable for more than its sheer inanity; it's also one of the few times Google has associated its brand with the identity-forming noise, character, and narrative of TV advertisement. Indeed, among the companies vying for supremacy over “The Internet and Stuff Used to Log Thereon / Navigate Therein,” Google has managed a peculiar feat: Unlike Microsoft, with its aura of an impenetrable, viral-ridden, and merciless hegemon; or Apple and its smarmy, scenester-escent, and totally over-aestheticized Justin Long² charm; Google has maintained an immaculate public image.

This may be credited in large part to Google's dominance in its field. Despite Microsoft lading its Windows operating system with IE/MSN/Bing refuse, and its aggressively annoying Bing ad campaign, its current share of US search traffic is astronomically lower than Google's—something like nine percent compared to Google's 72. Yahoo! straggles along around 15 percent, and Ask.com picks up the pieces with about three. Google has successfully dropkicked all of its competitors from the showground of search engines, and can thereby abstain from the ubiquitous TV ad tiffs that so nauseatingly color the iconographies of other tech corporations. (e.g., AT&T v. Verizon: the great 3G war, apps against maps; and Mac v. PC: “I'm a Mac” / “I'm a PC” / “I'm a well-paid actor”).³ But the face of Google is not merely

² Nothing against Justin Long per se. Your essayist feels the same way about Mr. Long as he does about most Apple products: they fill certain roles very adequately.

³ The Mac v. PC example provides us with some frighteningly Orwellian slogans; as if one's identity, or even one's very *ontology*—as in the bizarre world of the Mac ads (two anthropomorphized computational systems quipping in the midst of a white-lit void)—might be reduced to a preference of OS. Owning a Mac, especially, seems like it's become a kind of personality statement. The ad campaign is so effective, even IBM is joining the fray with its new “I'm an IBMer” slogan.

unblemished by hokey ad slogans—it's one of eerily unfeasible perfection, like a wig stand. And this should give us pause.

In general, people trust and appreciate Google in a way that is surprisingly uncritical, especially in an era characterized by rapid technological advancement, the attendant Neo-Luddite backlash of the conspicuously over-40 crowd, and the insatiable hypercriticism of the young 'me' generation.⁴ Google's website somehow placates with its simple and unaffected style, only occasionally altering its logo to celebrate the anniversaries or birthdays of Beatrix Potter, The Peanuts, Gandhi, and other such entities that are impossible to roll one's eyes at without seeming like a hateful bastard. For all the hulking power Google wields over the Internet—intricately mapping, ranking, and categorizing the endless and coiling miasma of websites; determining at every instant, by some unfathomable⁵ algorithm, which sites will place well for certain popular search terms, and will thus be heavily trafficked, and which sites won't even make the cut—most people find the company harmless, unimposing, and perhaps greater still, compassionate and attentive, all in an unpretentiously hip kind of way. Of Google's remarkable utility

⁴ See Louis C. K.'s "Everything's amazing; nobody's happy" on YouTube.

⁵ The word "unfathomable" requires unpacking. Strictly speaking, the algorithms behind Google's search engine are, to most everyone, unfathomable, simply because most people (your essayist included) couldn't understand Google's complex computational algorithms even if they had access to them, though your essayist might easily make the similar argument that his late grandmother's recipe for dinner rolls is unfathomable, simply because most people, even if they had the recipe, probably couldn't make dinner rolls as well as she did. However, to the select group of algorithmically savvy individuals (or, to follow the metaphor, expert bakers), Google's code (grandma's recipe) is not such a huge mystery. The reason for Google's continued success is that it was the first company to make use of a link-based ranking system, and now it has such incredible funds, infrastructure, and—crucially—brand recognition, that competing is nearly impossible, even if it's not terribly difficult for those skilled enough to create comparable or even more effective algorithms. (At this point, the dinner roll metaphor kind of breaks down, and because your essayist is now realizing it was probably a stupid idea to begin with, he will henceforth abandon it). Yahoo! and Bing are probably nearly as useful as—if not more so in certain capacities—Google's search engine, but the wildly infectious meme of "Googling" something is too deep-seated in our culture to be reckoned with at this point.

your essayist has no doubts—he has employed its technology countless dozens of times in the composition of this very essay, for both legitimate research and asinine distraction⁶—but regarding its ostensible (and fashionable) benevolence, he is deeply suspicious.

Even when Google seems like it's getting dressed down, it somehow manages to end up in even finer duds. Type "Google is" into a Google search field, and the engine will recommend (besides "Google is your friend") two potentially scathing critiques: "Google is making us stupid" and "Google is Skynet." The former is in reference to a pretty astute Nicholas Carr essay in the *Atlantic*, titled "Is Google Making Us Stupid?" The essay's mention of Google, however, is brief—even peripheral. Google's spot in the headline is mostly a hook to start people reading an essay with a much broader thesis: that the Internet as a medium is causing us to become scatterbrained, to think in a fundamentally different manner. In the synecdochic title, though, Google stands in for the entire medium. And, really, this synecdoche makes perfect sense: controlling a large majority of external referrals to US/European websites, Google is the gatekeeper, the polished facade of the Western Internet. The Skynet prompt is in reference to a satirical *Fast Company* article comparing Google to Skynet—the self-aware military computer system in the *Terminator* movie franchise, which ends up turning against the human race and executing a nuclear holocaust. Of course, the article does nothing more than point out how incredibly meaningless the comparison really is.

But every major tech corporation deserves a suitable and entirely unflattering sci-fi analogy, even if it's just to help the public maintain a healthy level of cynicism regarding that corporation's intentions/actions. Obviously Microsoft is the financially and technologically endowed, yet overextended,

⁶ See, for example, footnote #4. That most mercilessly intoxicating vortex of online distractions—YouTube—is now, of course, owned by Google.

widely-hated, and morally corrupt Galactic Empire; and Apple, by attempting to turn us all into slavishly trendy sycophants, is roughly akin to the alien race in the new ABC series “V”; but Google, despite some mild circulation of the idea, isn’t really Skynet. Even though Skynet was run by an artificially intelligent computer system and Google’s co-founders certainly support the idea of running their search engine with a kind of AI in the near future, the analogy just won’t stick, probably because nothing can stick to Google’s pristinely waxed surface.

Perhaps the aforementioned TV ad, though—stealth bombers, Idahoans, smart phones—presents a unique opportunity to analogize using the material emanating from the minty fresh maw of Google itself (even if it’s really the maw of some subcontracted ad firm, and more intimately tied to Verizon). The mapping is fairly simple: Google is the network of stealth bombers—its incredible wealth and technology are unfathomable⁷

“The dangerous part is that we play the role of grateful, ignorant savage.”

⁷ There’s that word again, “unfathomable,” which your essayist never finished unpacking in footnote #5. The most important point is this: even though the technical specifics of Google’s algorithms are a well kept secret and above the heads of most laypeople, the broad strokes of how the engine ranks websites are widely known, and thus that ranking system is easily manipulated. (At this point, your essayist is pretty tempted to return to the dinner roll metaphor employed earlier, but he remembers his promise to abandon it and is a man of his word. What follows is a more obvious, and perhaps more appropriate, metaphor.) Google’s ranking system is a lot like the special sauce on the Big Mac—sure, we don’t know the exact recipe, but it’s fucking Thousand Island dressing. Because Google holds a near monopoly on search traffic, and because it commands such fervent brand loyalty, it has relatively little incentive to innovate at this point (the sauce ain’t changing much). Individuals and companies are now extremely proficient in gaming Google’s ranking system, so that ranking becomes more corrupted every day. Most importantly, the barriers to entry are extremely un-meritocratic. Google’s engine favors those sites that are already well-trafficked and those with the funds and wherewithal to manipulate its system. More on this in the “SEO” portion of this essay.

and invisible to nearly everyone—and we are the Idahoans, simple, unassuming, barely able to understand and utilize that which Google deigns to offer us, as gifts, as if miraculously from the sky: search results, emails, cell phone applications, etc. The relationship is deeply paternalistic, colonial, perhaps even theological. The dangerous part is precisely this: that we play the role of the grateful, ignorant savage.

Maybe your essayist's rhetoric is becoming a little heavy handed, but goddamnit he's trying to illustrate a point. Despite Google's extraordinary usefulness; its friendly, intuitive design; and the fact that its slogan is "Don't Be Evil"—which its founders love to reiterate as often as possible during interviews—the company's central drive, as a publicly-traded corporation, is, and must be, *profit*.⁸ And it is one of the fundamental philosophical errors of our era—awash as it is with neoliberal influence and the language of economics—to conflate profit with value, or, even worse, to moralize profit, to insist the pursuit of it is a productive force that, if unadulterated, will necessarily be "not evil." The drive for profit is no doubt a productive force, but how and what it produces is too seldom the subject of inquiry. Google may clean up well, but, largely out of the public eye, it still makes time to sully itself in the name of the almighty dollar.⁹

8 To be clear, your essayist doesn't wish to portray Google as a malicious profit-grubbing monolith. The company still undertakes plenty of projects that should help reassure us that the "Don't Be Evil" slogan is taken as seriously as it can be. For instance, Google recently discovered that if it monitors the rate of searches related to "flu symptoms" in a given area, it can identify a flu outbreak several weeks faster than the US Department of Health, and can advise that additional immunizations be shipped to that area, preventing the spread of disease and potentially saving lives. Your essayist is happy to agree, that's pretty fucking terrific. However, this does not detract from the fact that the company's most essential driving force has to be quarterly profit. By the very legal construction of a publicly-traded corporation, and the process by which capitalism sustains itself (valorizing surplus value), Google cannot consider the imperative of "not being evil" before it considers its primary imperative of profit. It cannot even *exist* to "not be evil" without first sustaining profit, its lifeblood. Ontology trumps ethics.

9 Though it's far beyond the scope of this essay, a great deal could be said about Google's ethically questionable practices and the way the influence of the

Enter Google AdSense,¹⁰ the company's main source of revenue. The program is, admittedly, pretty ingenious. Any business can create a simple image- or text-and-link-based ad campaign associated with keywords relevant to their product or service, and Google will place the ads on participating Web pages that contain content pertinent to those keywords. Google's crawler scans the text of every participating page and posts only the most applicable ads (though the pairings are sometimes a little awkward). The result is a massive network of fairly well-targeted, niche advertising—much of it very small-scale. The AdSense program is also used to fund Gmail,¹¹ which is why whenever you receive an email from your buddy about the money you still owe him for booze, a bunch of ads are listed for cash advances, debt management, alcoholism recovery programs, etc. (probably all scams in some form or another). Advertisers only pay each time their ad is clicked on, and host sites make revenue on the same per-click payment basis; Google, of course, makes its billions by skimming the difference.

The implications of this program are profound: any website can scrape together a little revenue just by allowing Google to dump ads on its pages. The barrier to sponsorship is, if not totally demolished, at least significantly miniaturized.

commercial sector pollutes what should probably be considered a public utility. That we would allow a corporation to gain a near monopolistic stranglehold on how an enormous portion of the world's population accesses knowledge on a daily basis is already unsettling, but for some further (albeit somewhat poorly organized and articulated) thoughts on the ugly minutiae of Google's opacity, monopoly, and privacy policies, see www.googlewatch.org.

10 The complete program goes by two names, AdSense (for host sites) and AdWords (for advertisers), and is significantly more complicated than need be illustrated for the purposes of this essay. If you care to know the details, just fucking Google it.

11 This means that Google's crawler "reads" the content of every single email sent and received on the Gmail servers, and the data could be saved indefinitely. There was an ugly scandal about this invasion of privacy just as the Gmail program was launching, but it's mostly been forgotten. Probably the largest concern is that the government can subpoena any email from Google's servers, and the tried and true methods of freak electrical fire and paper-shredder accidents are no longer of any use. The USA PATRIOT Act further complicates this whole mess, but your essayist would rather not get into it.

The revenue may not be on the same scale as traditional advertisement sales, but the qualifications to carry AdSense are basically non-existent and the opportunity for expansion (i.e. carrying more ads) is effectively endless. In principle this would seem like a liberating development for small-scale website owners and entrepreneurs—and in many cases it is—but a lot of awful horseshit arises when big companies get the bright idea to exploit this miniaturized barrier/profit situation by maximizing its volume.

That is to say, the AdSense program makes possible an entirely new and utterly despicable business model online: get an assload of written content together—quality be damned—distribute it across a bunch of different sub pages of a central site, add AdSense at every turn, and voilà—a healthy revenue stream fully formed from the head of Zeus. It used to be that

“Attracting e-rubes en masse—a business model as ancient as the carnival.”

websites, just like print publications, had to demonstrate some modicum of quality to potential sponsors in order to carry advertisements and become profitable.¹² But this basic hurdle has been all but steamrolled. Now large Web publishing companies—Demand Studios, Suite101.com, Examiner.com,¹³

¹² Full and immediate disclosure: your essayist has contributed content to each of these three companies. Indeed, it was his harrowing, doldrums-inducing spat as a freelancer that inspired this essay. He apologizes to those readers who—because of the authorial distance implied by the whole “your essayist” gimmick—had high hopes this piece wouldn’t turn personal.

¹³ Mining search data could provide excellent sociological insight into populations’ collective consciousnesses; it’s an incredible shame that the intricate details of search traffic are propriety information.

and many others—court enormous armies of freelance writers to crank out tidal waves of barely-passable content (usually for slave-rate commission wages); and then those companies publish the rotting lot of it and rake in big money off the AdSense clicks. This isn't the whole story, of course. Because AdSense pays per click, the onus is on the website to attract click-happy traffic if it wants any revenue. The real barrier becomes, as always, attracting a large viewership to this heap of written garbage; or, more appropriately, attracting e-rubes en masse—a business model as ancient as the carnival.

But Google is also revolutionizing this timeless endeavor of duping people into visiting dumb places (or now, Web pages); Google is the vehicle used to crash headfirst through the viewership barrier, and the whole bloody catastrophe bears this title: “Search Engine Optimization” (commonly abbreviated SEO). An entire industry has emerged around these three letters. There's not a marketing/pr/ad agency the entire world over that hasn't adopted “SEO” into its litany of sacred rigvedic mantras (giving the term a privileged spot beside other hallowed business jargon like “differentiation” and “synergy”). The trend has, to a very serious extent, changed the composition of the Internet; and, given the amount of search traffic Google controls, “Search Engine Optimization” might easily be re-titled “Google Optimization.”

Though it has broad-reaching and complicated effects, the SEO concept is pretty simple. The large strokes of how all the major search engines rank websites are widely known in the business world, so—with the proper expertise and necessary resources—those rankings can be manipulated a great deal. SEO is basically all the things that a company does to juke its Web presence higher on search engine rankings for certain key terms and phrases. And, because search engines—Google especially—drive most of the traffic on the Internet, the kings of SEO command incredibly high viewership. At journalism

conferences, reporters are now taught that they don't make it on the quality of their writing, but by the strength of their SEO—and, unfortunately, as websites like the Huffington Post prove every day, this is precisely the case. The old manuals of style—AP, Chicago, Times, etc.—have been all but discarded online. The responsibility of the Web writer is becoming less about writing for a human audience and more about writing for Google's crawler.

The SEO techniques employed are myriad: the incessant use of key terms in (often superfluous) headers, subheads, nut graphs, section heads, picture captions, etc.; continual updates to the page via user comments, twitter feeds, and other drivel; artificial inflation of external referrals and click-through traffic; interlinking several pages with basically identical but slightly rephrased content; and the list goes on and on. The important point is that the SEO structure drives many companies to create noisy, crowded, ugly Web pages filled with awkward, vacuous, and repetitive content. The game that Google facilitates—or rather, incentivizes—is simple: dump Google ads on a page and elbow it to a healthy search ranking; rinse, repeat. And if the profit incentive is to produce tons of search-engine-optimized content as quickly as possible—without any regard for the quality or even the veracity of that content—the result will inevitably be enormous, steaming piles of written shit.

Perhaps the finest exemplar of this phenomenon is eHow.com. If you want to know how to accomplish any task, chances are eHow has a dozen articles on the subject, several of which will invariably be among the top hits of any Google search pertaining to the task, and will, most likely, be of no real help to you at all. eHow's strategy is all about scaling horizontally, maximizing the miniature. The site may not control the top hits for super popular keywords, but it does have a monopoly on just about every “how-to” project and “about” article, no matter how mundane or obscure. And every one of its articles is fueled by Google ads.

Your essayist and some of his closest friends spent several months under the employ of eHow's parent company, Demand Studios, and during that time (a very dark time, indeed) they produced some of the most heinous how-to articles to ever pollute the Web. The Demand Media Company has a computer that tracks relatively popular search terms and their projected Google AdSense revenue, and then synthetically generates titles based on that data. Freelancers can then claim and crap out the articles for \$5 to \$15 payment. The computer comes up with some absolutely bat-shit ridiculous titles. As a reflection of fairly common search phrases, these titles are also a reflection of the sheer weirdness of the modern condition, and they beg to be anthropologized.¹⁴ A lengthy though certainly not exhaustive selection, to wit:

How to Buy Different Kinds of Faux Leather, How to Design Your Own Dog Bandanas, How to Make a Tree with Little Debbie Swiss Rolls, How to Make a Keytar, How to Declare a Missing Person Dead, How to Use Multiple Condoms, How to Know If Your Contraceptive Fails, How to Grow Taller at 40, How to Use a Hitachi Bread Maker, Helpful Hints for Proper Use of a Meter Stick, Making Broom Puppets, Words You Can Make Using the Periodic Table, Pee Wee Tennis Rules, DIY Build a Dog Casket, Heely Trick Tips, How to Start a Reflective Essay, How to Change Body PH, How to Make Eel Traps, How to Make Lamps From Deer Antlers, How to Make a Homemade Flame Thrower, How to Make Your Own Parrot Toys, How to Use the Words of the Serenity Prayer, How to Answer IQ Tests, How to Prepare for a Colostomy Reversal Operation, How to Use Sugar Sweetener, How to Prevent Alcoholism, How to Have Dinner with Diabetes, How to Treat Lice on Goats, How to Kiss After a Dental Extraction, How to Eradicate Tiredness, Apple Cider Vinegar Cure for Shingles, About Tui Na Massage for Dogs.

¹⁴ Mining search data could provide excellent sociological insight into populations' collective consciousnesses; it's an incredible shame that the intricate details of search traffic are propriety information.

Perhaps your essayist's personal favorite, though, is the most worthless one he ever composed: "How to Buy PEX Tubing Online." He appreciates this article not for its outlandishness or aesthetic decrepitude, but for its sheer brevity. It is a near-perfect distillation of the inanity that is eHow.com. Here it is, reproduced in full:

PEX tubing is some of the strongest, most versatile home plumbing and heating tubing on the market. One of the best ways to purchase PEX tubing quickly and cheaply is from online suppliers.

1. Visit various wholesale suppliers' websites online, such as PexSupply.com, BlueRidgeCompany.com, and PEXHeat.com.

2. Browse the various PEX tubing options. There are a wide range of lengths, diameters and strength grades for different prices.

3. Find the option that is right for your needs and click "add to cart."

4. Follow the website's guidelines for purchase and shipment.

Tip: Browse several different websites to find the best price before buying.

Ah, fuck all. Your essayist's name will be attached to that rubbish in perpetuity, for anyone and everyone to stumble upon online. He wishes he could be like Michael Caine in regards to his role in *Jaws IV*: "I've never seen it. I hear that it's awful. However, I have seen the house that it built, and it is terrific." The closest your essayist can come: "I have seen it. I bloody well wrote it. And the Subway sandwich and 12-pack of Miller High Life it purchased were mediocre at best."

Your essayist has no idea whether PEX tubing is "some of the strongest, most versatile home plumbing and heating tubing on the market." This may very well be an outright lie. The real travesty, though, is that when you Google "how to buy PEX tubing online," this article is the first hit; but, the three preceding sponsored results are almost always PexSupply.com, PEXHeat.com, etc.—the listed websites that will not just instruct

you how to purchase PEX tubing online, but will, in fact, allow you to purchase PEX tubing online. The further irony is that the Google ads listed on this article are also, almost invariably, for those exact same several websites that sell PEX tubing online. People looking to purchase PEX tubing couldn't possibly derive

“I have seen it. I bloody well wrote it. And the Subway sandwich and 12-pack of Miller High Life it purchased were mediocre at best.”

any value from your essayist's article;□ they'd do far better visiting the suppliers directly. The article thus occupies a strange and useless adjunct space in the architecture of the Internet, like a blank hallway that loops its way between two rooms that are already directly connected. But, just like any bridge to nowhere, plenty of people are making a pretty penny off the article's worthlessness. With the current incentive structures in place, the geometry of the internet will only become further convoluted by trap doors and superfluous compartments.

It's not just that Google is butchering the written word; more importantly, it's corrupting both our knowledge base and how we access it. In an ideal world, one would be able to search for instructions on “how to make a keytar” and the top results would be legitimate, detailed literature on the subject (and yes, surprisingly enough, plenty of detailed literature on how to make a keytar does exist online, but for the most part it won't make the first page of Google results). As it stands, the top

results are usually whatever eHow garbage some idiot like your essayist has shat out in about half-an-hour for a \$15 payment, because eHow is extensively search-engine-optimized.

The really terrifying trend, though, is that Google prices keywords according to how popular and lucrative advertisements associated with them will likely be; and, because the most lucrative terms are often associated with health and finances, this encourages the massive Web content production companies to target these topics, seeing as they get a slice of that inflated price. Getting bad info on how to make a keytar is one thing; getting bad info on how to treat a serious illness or refinance a home mortgage is another thing entirely.

Your essayist's roommate—a med student—would often write eHow articles on topics regarding health and wellness. He's a very intelligent guy, and some of his pieces were actually pretty astute, given the formal constraints. Unfortunately, he would often encounter titles that were, in and of themselves, outrageous—something along the lines of, “how to use some bogus treatment to cure multi-drug-resistant tuberculosis.” If he ever wrote the responsible article, which would read, “Don't try this crap. Consult a doctor right away. MDRTB is one of the deadliest diseases worldwide, and it was misinformation and improper treatment that led to the rise of these strains in the first place...” editors would throw the yellow flag and demand that he treat the topic in a more ‘unbiased’ fashion—in other words, to entertain some bullshit that might actually kill somebody if taken seriously, just so eHow could attract search traffic and Google ads.

For a portion of time, your essayist himself dabbled in home finance writing for Suite101.com. Your essayist knows absolutely nothing about home finances—he has never even owned a home—yet when he wrote a dozen half-assed articles on home mortgage refinancing and debt reduction, his editors lapped up his crap because it brought in high-paying ads. It's not news that

you can't trust what you read on the Internet, but the scary part is that perhaps the least trustworthy material often occupies the top search result spots. Your essayist's finance articles certainly fare way better than their quality warrants. Largely thanks to the Google Corporation, it's most profitable for Web content companies to either not monitor the veracity and ramifications of published articles, or, even worse, to purposefully entertain false and pernicious ideas just to have the written content on which to place ads.

Critics may say that your essayist's attacks on Google are misdirected. It's not Google, they will argue, but the companies that fund and publish this rot that ought to be blamed. Or, in fact, much of the blame should be directed toward your essayist himself; after all, it was he and he alone who penned "How to Buy PEX Tubing Online," etc. These critics are, of course, correct—to a certain extent. eHow is, by and large, a despicable organization, and deserves a healthy portion of the blame. And it's not your essayist's wish to deny outright his own agency in the decline of the written word online. He has shamefully contributed to the squalor. Call this essay his confession, his plea for forgiveness.

But your essayist is wary of treating the individual subject as an absolutely sovereign unit of analysis, or of assigning full responsibility to an institution without glancing towards its surroundings. One must look toward the intricate systems and socioeconomic structures that govern the manufacture of abysmal Web content. Complicated shit is afoot, and Google occupies a central role in the strange organism that excretes all of this written waste. It is the beating heart and the brain. It provides a nearly endless supply of sponsorship to make the writing profitable, and it provides the means and defines the logic by which that writing will be located and consumed by readers. It also profits most.

Perhaps the more astute critic would raise the opposite

complaint: that your essayist's attacks on Google are still far too microscopic, beset with blinders to the even larger systems and structures at play—the logic of Capital, the infinitely complex fields of economic power. This critic would argue that the current situation of knowledge pollution

“Google runs a business, not a public utility; but does this really make sense?”

has more to do with the fact that the internet emerged in an advanced capitalist society where knowledge is intensely privatized and proprietary, where the valorization of surplus value trumps ethical concerns. This critic is probably onto something. This critic is also most likely a professor, and far more intelligent than your essayist; so your essayist will leave the pursuance of this line of argumentation in the doctor's more qualified hands.

It's no doubt frustrating to listen to some raving malcontent bitch and moan about something and never propose a solution; but, in the face of the endlessly convoluted shitshow that is Google's Internet, simple solutions seem to be in sparse supply. Though perhaps, if your essayist may be so bold, part of the solution is to make search engines act less like Google and more like PEX tubing (or at least more like what we can only assume PEX tubing is and does). If, as Senator Ted Stevens postulated, the Internet is a series of tubes, then this comparison ought to be downright brilliant: Google and PEX tubing are already a lot alike; they lurk nearby—underground, behind drywall, on your browser's toolbar—and deliver essentials: water, heat, search results, and automatic updates.

But Google never allows anyone past the opacity of its architecture. There are few building codes for it to be in

compliance with; it never allows outside plumbers into its infrastructure. In short, Google runs a business, not a public utility; but does this really make sense? More and more, search engines are the way most everyone accesses information on a daily basis. We regulate the public's access to clean water because we consider clean water an essential public good, and we understand that the commercial sector can have a dangerous influence on it. Should information not also be considered an essential public good? Imagine an open-source, completely transparent search engine, with a deep crawl powered by publicly-owned processors, or even a cloud of volunteer participants.

Obviously this doesn't address nearly all of the aforementioned problems, and it's not at all as simple as the analogy might make it seem. Nothing is so simple in the information age; and yet, on the surface, it would seem that Google is continuing to simplify everything—to annex all the major Web continents, raise its four-colored flag¹⁵, and initiate one beautifully streamlined online empire: faster, smarter, easier at every turn. Google recently acquired YouTube and now runs AdSense on its videos; it launched Google Wave beta testing to revolutionize data sharing/networking, and Google Buzz¹⁶ to potentially unseat Facebook and Twitter in the social media domain; it is aggressively advertising its new Chrome browser; and it's making serious headway with the new Android operating system.

And hell, your essayist will almost inevitably end up using and probably enjoying each of these programs. He feels a lot like that guy in the Hotels.com commercial seriously, go ahead and watch it on YouTube so this analogy makes sense); even if he suspects

15 Really, it's not so outlandish to think of Google hoisting a flag. What with the recent Google/China debacle, we've witnessed how the company now participates as a sovereign entity in serious international affairs.

16 Many people have been shocked and outraged by the volume of information Google had already amassed for their personal profiles when setting up a Buzz account. Like the outrage over Gmail privacy policies, though, this suspicion will likely subside as "buzzing" enters our common parlance.

there's an ugly game behind it all, he still loves to have that shampoo. On top of being hilarious, this advertisement presents us with a perfect figure of the subject of late capitalism—a man standing in front of his own reflection, lathering himself with a commodity that is both snare and salve, lamenting loudly, “Ahhh, they got me. It's working! It's working!” The image is outright haunting. It reflects how your essayist feels every time he uses Google—terribly, irreconcilably satisfied.

Postscript: On “Google Search Stories”

During the late drafting of this essay, Google launched a new TV ad campaign for its search engine. The campaign is called “Google Search Stories,” and it's devilishly brilliant. Each ad unfolds a heartwarming story through a series of searches. Just like every good Coke ad—hawking the ameliorative and friendship-inducing powers of high fructose corn syrup—the search stories make you feel as if a world in which Google exists must be a world filled with love and companionship. The pilot ad, titled “Parisian Love,” was launched in one of the most prized slots in all of TV ad history—Super Bowl XLIV, no less—and tells the story of a young American man who studies abroad in France, meets the woman of his dreams, moves to Paris for her, then gets married and has a child.

That last bit of information is conveyed through a search for “how to assemble a crib.” And what's the very first hit is when you actually Google that phrase? An eHow article. And it is absolutely worthless.

FOUR AUDIO EXCERPTS

Andre Perry

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