The Media Equation
Google Seduces With Utility

By DAVID CARR
Published: November 23, 2008

Not long ago, someone invited me out to the Googleplex, the nickname for Google's headquarters in Mountain View, Calif.

The fact is, I already live there. And it's starting to worry me.

Having grown up in the vapor trail of the '60s, I learned to be wary of large, centralized organizations, and yet Google, a huge enterprise with a market value of $80 billion, is my ever-present wingman.

My increasingly exclusive relationship with Google started with search, of course, when I switched from Yahoo years ago. Eventually I accepted an invitation to Gmail, with its oodles of storage and very granular search function, and it has oddly become my default database — deep, rich and personal.

I added the company's calendar because I needed one I could share both inside and outside of work. And then the calendar and e-mail started talking to each other — and to me, I guess — by asking whether I wanted to schedule an event that was mentioned in an incoming message. Although it sort of creeped me out, the answer was yes, which it almost always is when it comes to Google.

Google has begun to crowd out other brands. I was a loyal MapQuest guy, but as Google Maps added features, it seemed cumbersome to go elsewhere. And even something as specific as HopStop, an elegant tool I used to navigate the New York subways, is left behind as Google gets smarter about the difference between the N-R line and the A-C-E.

I'm getting ready for the Oscar season, so I needed to set up some relevant R.S.S. feeds, and Google Reader was handy, so there's that. It's easy to update my status under my chat icon while I'm on Gmail, so I tend to update that mood ring with more frequency than my Facebook status. When Google acquired YouTube, it gained another chunk of my mindshare.

And then a few weeks ago, I noticed there was a steady march of new little camera icons on the Gmail chat function. I looked around and saw a colored button at the top of my e-mail page that was a link to Google voice and video chat. I clicked it, hit the download button, and within 20 seconds, I was ready to go.

It's not the first video chatting that I have done, only the first that actually worked well. Within minutes of downloading, I was talking live on my PC to my 11-year-old daughter on a Mac, a process that in the past would have involved everything short of splitting the atom. Then I told my twins away at college and yes, my mother-in-law about it, and before long we were all chatting away in an easy, friction-free future.

Score another one for the Googleplex.

You could credit Google, the largest ad seller in the world, with being a brilliant marketer and advertiser, but when was the last time you saw an ad, not served up by Google, but about Google? Not very often. That's largely because Google's Web platform, in all of its high-functioning glory, is its marketing.

"The most powerful form of advertising is to be exceptional," said Ranjit Mathoda, an investor and technologist who blogs at Mathoda.com. "Google has created an ecosystem that perpetuates itself by being useful."

Take video chat. Many other companies would take that kind of quantum leap and shout it from the rooftops, but Google just did a smallish blog post about the new feature and left it at that.

"We do have a philosophy that our products should speak for themselves. We tend not to make a lot of noise," said Jeff Huber, senior vice president for engineering at Google.

As always with Google, the price point is appealing: zero, if you don’t count the amount of personal data that I am trading for all that utility. With Google, it is always simple, and any engineer will tell you that simple is hard. There had been a lot of talk within Google about creating video chat as a PC-only application, a much easier endeavor for the company, but it would not have been simple for the consumer.

If Google owns me, it’s probably because I am in favor of what works.

"I’m glad to hear it," said Eric E. Schmidt, the chief executive of Google, who was in New York last week. "We want a little bit of Google in many parts of your life."

Mission accomplished, at least on my desktop, but I asked Mr. Schmidt if I shouldn’t be worried that I am putting all of my digital eggs in one multicolored, goofy-lettered basket.

"That depends on what you think of our company and our values," he said. "Do you believe we have good values?"

Mr. Schmidt seems nice enough, but I sometimes wonder if I will come to regret the easier, softer road I have chosen. A record of my surfing lives on its servers for 18 months — not by name, but still. Google continues to insist that my IP address is not me, but a motivated government with a subpoena in hand could find me, lots of me, on Google’s servers.

Most data privacy experts would call me a fool to index my life into any one company so deeply, and diversification in all matters is just common sense.

Mr. Huber countered that I am free to come and go as I wish.

"The nice thing is that we don’t force you to use only our stuff," he said. "It is not tied tightly together, and the content is all easily exportable. If you feel like we are letting you
tightly together, and the content is all easily exportable. If you feel like we are letting you down, or you don’t like our products or we are failing to innovate, you can pick up and go where you want.”

But with video chat now enabled in my Gmail, how likely am I to click away? Some people worry that Google will take over the world. Through the sins of competence and innovation, the company has quietly and efficiently surrounded me.

“That’s our business model,” Mr. Schmidt said.

E-mail: carr@nytimes.com