OP-ED COLUMNIST

Dinosaur at the Gate

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Eric Schmidt looks innocent enough, with his watercolor blue eyes and his tiny office full of toys and his Google campus stocked with volleyball courts and unlocked bikes and wheat-grass shots and cereal dispensers and Haribo Gummi Bears and heated toilet seats and herb gardens and parking lots with cords hanging to plug in electric cars.

The C.E.O. of Google doesn’t look like a Dick Cheney World Domination sort whom we should worry about as Google ogles our houses, our oceans, our foibles, our movements and our tastes.

But there is a vaguely ominous Big Brother wall in the lobby of the headquarters here that scrolls real-time Google searches — porn queries are edited out — from people around the world. You could probably see your own name if you stayed long enough. In one minute of watching, I saw the Washington association where my sister works, the Delaware beach town where my brother vacations, some Dave Matthews lyrics, calories Panera, females feet, soaps in depth and Douglas Mangum, whoever he is.

The 53-year-old Schmidt is soft-spoken, exuding the calm knowingness of a therapist as he explains why privacy is passé and why passé newspapers are not going to pry more money out of Google to save themselves.

The therapist tone works with me because my profession is in a meltdown. Firms, like...
Google here and Craigslist in San Francisco, have hijacked journalism, making us feel about as modern as the Tyrannosaurus rex model that sits on the Google campus.

Google is in a battle royal over whether it has the right to profit so profligately from newspaper content at a time when journalism is in such jeopardy.

Robert Thomson, the top editor of The Wall Street Journal, denounced Web sites like Google as “tapeworms.” His boss, Rupert Murdoch, said that big newspapers do not have to let Google “steal our copyrights.” The A.P. has threatened to take legal action against Google and others that use the work of news organizations without obtaining permission and sharing a “fair” portion of revenue. But what’s fair will be hard to prove.

“So,” I ask Schmidt in a small conference room that, disturbingly, has an ejector seat. “Friend or foe?”

“We claim we’re friends,” he replies, maintaining equanimity even when a cartoon stuffed doll on a desk behind him falls on his head.

Why can’t Google, which likes to see itself as a “Don’t Be Evil” benevolent force in society, just write us a big check for using our stories, so we can keep checks and balances alive and continue to provide the search engine with our stories? After all, Schmidt acknowledges that a lot of what’s on the Internet is “a sewer.” He told me people don’t come to Google for “crap,” but for what’s “useful.”

He declines to pony up money, noting that newspapers could opt out of giving their content to Google free and adding, “We actually like making our own money for obviously good capitalist reasons.”

He says: “The best way to get out of this is to invent a new product. That’s the way Google thinks. Incumbents very seldom invent the future.”

He admits that it’s harder for newspapers to target ads as precisely as Google does. If you’re reading about a murder with a knife, he says, you can’t show a cutlery ad. He’s talking to newspapers about a new ad model that “understands your history” and your interests.

“They’d know enough about your demographic to know male, female, age group, what have you,” he says. “The whole secret here is the ads are worth more if they’re more targeted, more personal, more precise.”

To save journalism, Google has to know my most intimate secrets?

“Johnny Carson smoked, and for 30 years he was never pictured smoking a cigarette,” Schmidt says. “Today that would be impossible.”

Of course Google is a leader in stripping away privacy, although Schmidt says if anyone complains about being captured in an embarrassing shot by Google Street View cameras, they will implement a “de-facing” device known as “the anonymizer.”

“It’s fair to say that there will be no heroes,” Schmidt says. “Heroism requires understanding the person in the absolute best light. I’m not sure this is good. What was Barack Obama like in elementary school? ‘Oh, yeah, here’s a picture of him picking his nose. God, he’s no longer a hero.’ ”

When I ask him if human editorial judgment still matters, he tries to reassure me: “We learned in working with newspapers that this balance between the newspaper writers and their editors is more subtle than we thought. It’s not reproducible by computers very
easily."

I feel better for a minute, until I realize that the only reason he knew that I wasn’t so easily replaceable is that Google had been looking into how to replace me.