Is Google God?

By THOMAS L. FRIEDMAN

Since 9/11 the world has felt increasingly fragmented. Reading the papers, one senses that many Americans are emotionally withdrawing from the world and that the world is drifting away from America. The powerful sense of integration that the go-go-globalizing 1990's created, the sense that the world was shrinking from a size medium to a size small, feels over now.

The reality, though, is quite different. While you were sleeping after 9/11, not only has the process of technological integration continued, it has actually intensified — and this will have profound implications. I recently went out to Silicon Valley to visit the offices of Google, the world's most popular search engine. It is a mind-bending experience. You can actually sit in front of a monitor and watch a sample of everything that everyone in the world is searching for. (Hint: sex, God, jobs and, oh my word, professional wrestling usually top the lists.)

In the past three years, Google has gone from processing 100 million searches per day to over 200 million searches per day. And get this: only one-third come from inside the U.S. The rest are in 88 other languages. "The rate of the adoption of the Internet in all its forms is increasing, not decreasing," says Eric Schmidt, Google's C.E.O. "The fact that many [Internet companies] are in a terrible state does not correlate with users not using their products."

VeriSign, which operates much of the Internet's infrastructure, was processing 600 million domain requests per day in early 2000. It's now processing nine billion per day. A domain request is anytime anyone types in .com or .net. And you ain't seen nothin' yet. Within the next few years you will be able to be both mobile and totally connected, thanks to the pending explosion of Wi-Fi, or wireless fidelity. Using radio technology, Wi-Fi will provide high-speed connection from your laptop computer or P.D.A. to the Internet from anywhere — McDonald's, the beach or your library.

Says Alan Cohen, a V.P. of Airespace, a new Wi-Fi provider: "If I can operate Google, I can find anything. And with wireless, it means I will be able to find anything, anywhere, anytime. Which is why I say that Google, combined with Wi-Fi, is a little bit like God. God is wireless, God is everywhere and God sees and knows everything. Throughout history, people connected to God without wires. Now, for many questions in the world, you ask Google, and increasingly, you can do it without wires, too."

In other words, once Wi-Fi is in place, with one little Internet connection I can download anything from anywhere and I can spread anything from anywhere. That is good news for both scientists and terrorists, pro-Americans and anti-Americans.

And that brings me to the point of this column: While we may be emotionally distancing ourselves from the world, the
world is getting more integrated. That means that what people think of us, as Americans, will matter more, not less. Because people outside America will be able to build alliances more efficiently in the world we are entering and they will be able to reach out and touch us — whether with computer viruses or anthrax recipes downloaded from the Internet — more than ever.

"The key point is not just whether people hate us," says Robert Wright, the author of "Nonzero," a highly original book on the integrated world. "The key point is that it matters more now whether people hate us, and will keep mattering more, for technological reasons. I don't mean just homemade W.M.D.'s. I am talking about the way information technology — everyone using e-mail, Wi-Fi and Google — will make it much easier for small groups to rally like-minded people, crystallize diffuse hatreds and mobilize lethal force. And wait until the whole world goes broadband. Broadband — a much richer Internet service that brings video on demand to your PC — will revolutionize recruiting, because video is such an emotionally powerful medium. Ever seen one of Osama bin Laden's recruiting videos? They're very effective, and they'll reach their targeted audience much more efficiently via broadband."

None of this means we, America, just have to do what the world wants, but we do have to take it seriously, and we do have to be good listeners. We, America, "have to work even harder to build bridges," argues Mr. Wright, because info-tech, left to its own devices, will make it so much easier for small groups to build their own little island kingdoms. And their island kingdoms, which may not seem important or potent now, will be able to touch us more, not less.