



# Is Google Turning Into Big Brother?

The Debut of Chrome, Google's New Browser, May Have Been Quiet for a Reason

COLUMN

By MICHAEL S. MALONE

Sept. 5, 2008 —

While we're transfixed by the presidential election, in the world of high tech another duel between two well-funded, take-no-quarter candidates has just emerged & and in the long run the impact on our daily lives may be nearly as great -- and perhaps even sinister.

As you probably heard, on Monday -- that is, on a national holiday, when business announcements are almost *never* made -- Google rolled out Chrome, its new Web browser.

Why the odd timing? Hard to say. Google surely knows that just about anything it does these days is going to cause a news frenzy -- and especially when it's announcing its first thrust into a huge new market.

[Sign Up for Our RSS Feed and Get the Latest Business Headlines From ABC News](#)

So, perhaps it hoped to temper this coverage to a degree, and drag it out for several days. Or perhaps Google was unsure about the product itself, and didn't want to overhype it -- and then face a potential backlash. Or, maybe Google just didn't think Chrome was that important, saw a window between the two political conventions and rushed it out.

Google's official explanation is that the Labor Day release of Chrome was an accident, and the Terms of Use attached to that product were simply a cut-and-paste from other Google products. We will leave it to the reader to decide if these are viable explanations from a multi-billion company regarding one of its biggest new products in years -- and, if true, what it says about Google's competence in handling some of your most sensitive information.

Well, now that Chrome is out and being field-tested by reviewers, I think we can rule out the second and the third scenarios. That leaves the first. But why would a company that knows it has a solid and newsworthy product on its hands intentionally dampen media coverage of it?

The answer, I think, was that it was a long-term strategic decision to make Chrome look almost like an afterthought. And I think that decision was made at the highest levels of Google, perhaps by CEO Eric Schmidt.

Why? Because Google's ambitions are bigger than most of us have ever imagined, and the company is now rich enough, and powerful enough, to execute them -- even if it means the short-term sacrifice of a major new revenue source.

One more thing: If Google pulls off this strategy, it will be the most valuable company on the planet. It will also be the scariest & and we should start worrying about that right now.

First, a little background. Google sits at the confluence of two historic Silicon Valley philosophical streams.

One, which comes from Sergey Brinn and Larry Page, the two founders, reaches back all of the way to the early days of computing and continues forward through the world of gamers, hackers, Apple and the Web 2.0 generation. It is essentially utopian in its belief that technology -- especially the Web -- will bring about a better world (hence, Google's "Don't Be Evil" motto).

It also has absolutist (some would even say totalitarian) tendencies, in that it also believes that the empiricism of science and technology supersedes messy human institutions. It is proudly amoral, which is why it can celebrate hackers -- or for that matter, Steve Jobs -- as heroes, as long as they remain innovators.

## **Taking on Google: About Schmidt**

The second stream is embodied in a single figure, Eric Schmidt. Schmidt is perhaps the smartest person I know -- and one of the few people in tech history (Andy Grove is another, and the comparison is telling) who has ever successfully made the leap from being a corporate chief scientist to Fortune 500 CEO.

But the trip wasn't easy.

Twice, Schmidt watched all of his efforts come to nothing in the face of devastating assaults by Bill Gates and Microsoft. The first time, at Sun Microsystems, Schmidt was all but helpless to do anything; the second time, at Novell, where he was CEO, he had to take the blame.

In those days, everyone in Silicon Valley was obsessed with Microsoft. It seemed an unstoppable force that would slowly crush one market after another until it had rolled up the entire tech world. Most companies and entrepreneurs either hunkered down and tried to ride out the storm, or simply ran away -- finding market niches where Microsoft was unlikely to follow.

But three Valleyites, each of them a genius of one type or another, and each of them already burned by Microsoft, set out on their own to figure out how to beat Gates.

The first was Larry Ellison, whose company Oracle was nearly as big as Microsoft. Ruthless and insanely competitive, Ellison tried and failed to draw users off their PCs and onto a theoretical "network computer," failed and then embarked on an acquisition campaign that essentially encased his customer base behind impenetrable walls.

The second was Marc Andreessen, who had to watch his beloved Netscape be crushed by Gates' borderline illegal attack with Internet Explorer, quietly withdrew upstream from Microsoft and went into the "tool" business, devising new ways for users to use the Internet without Microsoft.

But neither went so far, with such success, as Schmidt. He spent years figuring out how to beat Microsoft -- and when he was given Google, he knew he now had the perfect club. Microsoft still took most of the world's users to the Internet, but once they got there, Google owned them. The Web was all about searching for information -- and because Google's search service was free, billions of users happily took Google up on the offer.

That might have been enough. Google is now one of the world's most valuable and influential companies. Much of the planet's population passes through its simple and friendly portals every day, and in the process it has snatched up a sizable chunk of the advertising money out there. Meanwhile, no one talks much about Microsoft these days.

It would seem that Schmidt has had his revenge, and the techno-utopians of the world have been vindicated.

But if you think that means the battle is over, don't kid yourself.

## Did Google Lie?

If anything, the dreams of both have just begun to unfold. Schmidt seems no longer content to defeat Microsoft, but to become it -- and more. Moreover, he's got the army of brilliant, amoral young foot soldiers to do the job.

Remember, for these young techno-utopians, technology trumps all, even privacy. We saw a glimpse of that earlier this year when Facebook, that seemingly benign social network for young people, quietly implemented Beacon, which tracked users' purchases and then notified their friends in hopes of influencing their future purchases. Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg professed surprise at the massive backlash against Beacon and shut it down -- but left the door opened for future surveillance programs.

But nowhere is the power to apply technology for its own sake more available than at Google. And despite the company's motto, and childlike logo and home page, this is the real driving force behind the company. And the long-term goal of this applied technology? Google has already said it: to manage all of the world's information.

Five years ago, this seemed harmless enough, even welcome. The Web is a huge, messy place -- so what's wrong with having some help navigating through it? But as Google has grown larger, and after it has taken over the big, general stuff (the Web) and begun focusing on the smaller, more specialized stuff (libraries, personal records, search patterns) that we begin to understand what "all" means ... and what Google is willing to do to get it.

For example, a couple weeks ago, in a barely noticed blog entry, reporter Clint Boulton of Computerworld recounted a conversation he'd had with a Google insider who admitted that whatever the company was saying publicly -- and to Congress -- about user privacy, it was indeed tracking not just user search trails, but also their identities -- so-called "Deep Packet Inspection." The entry drew few readers, and no comments, but it did attract attention from one source: A senior Google executive called the magazine to get it to back off the story.

Even if true, had Google lied to Congress about user privacy? Probably not -- at least not in the way that Google had carefully phrased its words.

Then there is Google's odd acquiescence to the demands by authoritarian regimes around the world, especially China, to censor its search operations in those countries. These actions, inexplicable at the time, only become clear when one assumes that Google's real business now is not providing a service to its users, but in owning the world's data.

And that brings us back to Chrome. Why so low key an introduction? And why suddenly turn on a solid partnership with browser provider Mozilla? The answer, I think, has two parts.

## Google: From Microsoft Killer to Big Brother?

First, Google believes that Chrome could be its Microsoft killer. Not only does it have the potential to beat MS Explorer but, fulfilling Ellison's old dream, it could be a way to let users easily download applications from the Web -- and thus circumvent Microsoft's lock on Office, even Windows, the very core of its business.

But a second reason is more sinister. Only a few people have noticed that, until recently, in the Terms of Service for signing up for Chrome, Google demands "perpetual, irrevocable, world-wide, royalty free and non-exclusive" license to any materials users create with the browser. (Google on Thursday announced that it

was rescinding the clause.)

And that's only part of the story: An earlier reviewer of Chrome, Andrew Cheung of TGDaily, has noted that the browser almost seems to work "too well." For example, Cheung found that with a few keystrokes, Chrome will go into an online banking site and find account numbers, balances and transaction activity. Cheung suggests that it is a security flaw in the product. I'm not so sure.

Microsoft only wanted all of our money. Increasingly, it seems that Google wants all of our data. In running away from the evil empire, have we now instead rushed into the arms of Big Brother?

*This is the opinion of the columnist and in no way reflects the opinion of ABC News.*

**Michael S. Malone** is one of the nation's best-known technology writers. He has covered Silicon Valley and high-tech for more than 25 years, beginning with the San Jose Mercury News as the nation's first daily high-tech reporter. His articles and editorials have appeared in such publications as *The Wall Street Journal*, *the Economist* and *Fortune*, and for two years he was a columnist for *The New York Times*. He was editor of *Forbes ASAP*, the world's largest-circulation business-tech magazine, at the height of the dot-com boom. Malone is the author or co-author of a dozen books, notably the best-selling "Virtual Corporation." Malone has also hosted three public television interview series, and most recently co-produced the celebrated PBS miniseries on social entrepreneurs, "The New Heroes." He has been the ABCNews.com "Silicon Insider" columnist since 2000.

Copyright © 2008 ABC News Internet Ventures