



The Search: How Google and Its Rivals Rewrote the Rules of Business and Transformed Our Culture

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If you pick your books by their popularity--how many and which other people are reading them--then know this about *The Search*: it's probably on Bill Gates' reading list, and that of almost every venture capitalist and startup-hungry entrepreneur in Silicon Valley. In its sweeping survey of the history of Internet search technologies, its gossip about and analysis of Google, and its speculation on the larger cultural implications of a Web-connected world, it will likely receive attention from a variety of businesspeople, technology futurists, journalists, and interested observers of mid-2000s zeitgeist.

This ambitious book comes with a strong pedigree. Author John Battelle was a founder of *The Industry Standard* and then one of the original editors of *Wired*, two magazines which helped shape our early perceptions of the wild world of the Internet. Battelle clearly drew from his experience and contacts in writing *The Search*. In addition to the sure-handed historical perspective and easy familiarity with such dot-com stalwarts as AltaVista, Lycos, and Excite, he speckles his narrative with conversational asides from a cast of fascinating characters, such Google's founders, Larry Page and Sergey Brin; Yahoo's, Jerry Yang and David Filo; key executives at Microsoft and different VC firms on the famed Sandhill road; and numerous other insiders, particularly at the company which currently sits atop the search world, Google.

The Search is not exactly the corporate history of Google. At the book's outset, Battelle specifically indicates his desire to understand what he calls the cultural anthropology of search, and to analyze search engines' current role as the "database of our intentions"--the repository of humanity's curiosity, exploration, and expressed desires. Interesting though that beginning is, though, Battelle's story really picks up speed when he starts dishing inside scoop on the darling business story of the decade, Google. To Battelle's credit, though, he doesn't stop just with historical retrospective: the final part of his book focuses on the potential future directions of Google and its products' development. In what Battelle himself acknowledges might just be a "digital fantasy train", he describes the possibility that Google will become the centralizing platform for our entire lives and quotes one early employee on the weightiness of Google's potential impact: "Sometimes I feel like I am on a bridge, twenty thousand feet up in the air. If I look down I'm afraid I'll fall. I don't feel like I can think about all the implications."

Some will shrug at such words; after all, similar hype has accompanied other technologies and other companies before. Many others, though, will search Battelle's story for meaning--and fast. --*Peter Han*

The Search: How Google and Its Rivals Rewrote the Rules of Business and Transformed Our Culture Details

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Bakari says

John Battelle's *The Search: How Google and Its Rivals Rewrote the Rules of Business and Transformed Our Culture*, asks this question on page 13: "What, in the end, might search tell use about ourselves and the global culture we are creating together online?" That to me is a profoundly interesting question, but Battelle's book doesn't explore it nearly enough. He raises all the right questions in the first chapter of his book, but then he takes readers off into a story about the decisions and players who shaped the Google industry we know to today. I would guess from a business sense that story is integral to the meaning of search in the digital age, but for me the best parts of the book are when Battelle focuses on addressing that question that many of us have not thought a lot about. Yet, the search for stuff is multi-billion dollar industry. The process of search has become a commodity, and it can be used and manipulated in very powerful ways. Sadly most of us can't even image how the culture and politics of search can and will impact future generations.

Battelle traces some of the issues of privacy and control about what it means to amass, catalog and make available every bit of data that makes it othe Internet. In other words, there will come a time when every piece of knowledge, especially all knowledge that matters will reside in data bases throughout the world, and Google and other search companies will play a huge role in shaping the future of search and database control. They already are doing so.

It would have been very interesting to read what media critic Marshall McLuhan (1911-1990) would have said about search in modern culture. He of course was onto the subject before the founders of Google were even born. He coined the concept of the global village, which refers to "how the globe has been contracted into a village by electric technology and the instantaneous movement of information from every quarter to every point at the same time. In bringing all social and political functions together in a sudden implosion, electric speed has heightened human awareness of responsibility to an intense degree."

Battelle doesn't reference McLuhan or even invite his readers to know who is. But I think if Battelle could have explored that question he raises a lot better if he used McLuhan as his guide.

The Search okay book, but it just scratches the surface in exploring the issue of search in a global culture.

Bruce Rowe says

If you want to understand the history of search engines, and the start of Google, this is an essential book. If you don't care about that stuff, it's not for you (even though it still is really interesting)

Brad says

Amazing business story that I read during my MBA studies. This is a must read for all business candidates

and helps us understand the concept of market busting ideas. Really enjoyed the background information about Google.

Gokhan Dirioz says

Even though the info in this book is now outdated; it still serves as an inspirational story even today.

Bob Page says

If you have any interest in search or how Google came to be, this is fascinating and relevant even 12 years later. Of particular interest to me was how Bill Gross invented what would be Google's AdWords model: he was running multiple companies that desperately needed good, qualified traffic, and realized that he'd be willing to pay far more for differentiated traffic than the 5-7 cents he was paying for bad traffic via banner ad clicks. It was obvious to him (way back then) that search engines could generate this differentiated traffic, and so he started GoTo.com with the model that Google would later copy.

Al Doan says

(My review from HardKnockMBA.com)

So this was an interesting pick (it was on the top of the stack) for my first read in this endeavor, primarily because it isn't necessarily a 'business book' in the traditional sense, so I had to approach it a bit differently, but it still proved rather insightful, and an enjoyable read for a techie like me.

The Search goes over the tale of how the search industry came about, starting with Archie and Gopher then Yahoo and GoTo and finally the arrival of Google. The point of particular mention here is that Google wasn't the first, second, third, or even fiftieth search company, it came along relatively late in the game to fill a hole from a different angle, which subsequently is the niche it both created then dominated. Dominated to the extent that Battelle suggests that "Google is more than just another company. As far as the Internet ecosystem is concerned, Google is the weather." (Pg 183)

So like I was saying, reading the non-business book left me without the luxury of bold, italicized, and highlighted points of emphasis for business lessons that the book is trying to teach. So it made for a good opportunity for me to pull out the pen and go after my own lessons that could be had in the story. I'll go ahead with a quick sampling of what I found.

There is always a need for the entrepreneur

AltaVista, created by Monier while working for DEC (an large and now defunct computer company, if you don't remember the good ole days) which had a good approach to search, grew to be widely accepted, but was never recognized for the opportunity it was by its behemoth of a parent company.

"Possibly most instructive [of the attempts at search:], AltaVista was the product of a company that was an extraordinary success in its original business but ultimately failed because of hidebound management

unwilling to drive by anything other than the rearview mirror.” (pg 45)

(does this remind you of why you left middle management or started your own company? Maybe it's just me) And eventually as DEC was going downhill, and AltaVista was gaining more and more traction, the opportunity was lost completely.

“Lang and Monier fought to protect Alta Vista from its flailing parent, but a mammal chained to a dinosaur more likely than not will get trampled.” (pg 50)

The lesson here for me is the existence of entrepreneurial opportunity. Often you can become discouraged or intimidated by big companies that supposedly dominate an industry, but the big companies aren't designed to be able to fill every nook and cranny of an industry. There will always be opportunity for a little guy to come in and provide a more custom insightful solution to an existing problem, and often using a fraction of the resources. Big companies will mismanage the assets they have, or misalign the opportunity because they have shareholders to answer to and can rarely be visionary in the long term while keeping their sights focused on quarterly results.

Take for instance the recent recession drama we have experienced. Companies responded in one of two ways. Either they respond to their shareholders who demand they keep quarterly profits high and go into a wave of layoffs, crippling their alliances and internal advantages they've built up over the last decades, disregarding all thoughts of the company vision (how many mission statements were thrown out and replaced with “Stay in business” when the times got tough?) This is method A, which I saw most companies do, it's the knee jerk reaction of survival mode, they were going to get through this recession, and that was as far as they could see.

The alternative to this (method B) is to use the recession as an opportunity. All of the sudden you can get great talent at a fraction of the cost, you can gain market share by sticking with advertising / marketing initiatives, etc. I saw a few companies do this, and the payoff to sticking to your guns is that they now have amazing talent in their groups, giving them a very specific advantage exiting the recession.

In the end the economy still moves, product still needs to be made, money still changes hands and it is the agile, strategic companies that come out with the advantage. These traits are found in the entrepreneur and small startups, because to double down in a recession is risky, and it's the small guy that can take a risk that others aren't willing to take.

The Tesla Lesson

Larry Page, at 12 years old, read the biography of Nikola Tesla (while I was reading Hardy Boys, he was reading about Tesla), an inventor who laid the foundation for technologies like wireless communication, X-ray, solar cells, and the modern power grid, but who still remains somewhat unknown “in particular when compared with Thomas Edison, a man Tesla worked for, fought with, and competed against for much of his career” (pg 66) Despite Tesla's success, his inability to commercialize his success robbed him of fame, fortune, and seeing change happen in society because of his work. This is something that impacted Page throughout his career, and understandably so.

All the great ideas in the world don't do anyone any good if you can't get them into people's hands. If you can't distribute or capitalize on them, you have done a disservice to both yourself and the idea you are squandering. Don't get caught up so much in the creating that you forget to make the creation mean something by scaling it and getting it out there. (also at fault here are perfectionists who think their product is

never ready, cause "... well it's just not there, a few more tweaks, just a few more days...")

Summary

All in all it was a good read, though probably not one of my all time greatest business books at first glance. The story it conveys contains several business lessons just below the surface. The kind of lessons where, if you aren't paying attention to them, you may miss them altogether.

4/5 stars, definitely worth checking out, if for nothing more than to understand the most significant (privacy and potential to alter our future) industry in the world.

Drone Immobilier says

Fantastic Book to read.

Contact Drone Immobilier:

<http://www.drone-immobilier.fr/contact/>

Joan says

Quick read surrounding the origination of search engines and the growth of Google. Interesting to see the evolution and how quickly the progression was made.

Otis Chandler says

Most stuff in this book I already knew (90%). But hearing it in a cohesive story is a great way to fodder new ideas - if you wanna think about the internet and where its going, its a great primer - and a quick read too.

Hearing the the Goto/Overture story was interesting. While it sounds obvious, its an impressive insight by Bill Gross that traffic with an intent (ie search traffic) is worth more than random traffic, and that if you played arbitrage in the middle you could make a lot of money. I like it when people can do math :)

I didn't know Google started in a garage. I learned more about Google's battle to stop SEO spammers. They usually change their algorithm to do this, which of course ends up screwing over legit businesses too - these legit businesses actually name each algorithm change like they were hurricanes - 'Florida' was when Google changed their algorithm on nov 14, 2003.

Supratim says

The word **Search** in large font size and the word "Google" just below it had attracted my attention towards this book. Initially, I thought this book is about Google and its impact on internet search but later discovered

that the main focus of the book is search and understandably Google emerges as the central player.

This book is the revised edition which was published in 2006 and given the very nature of technology some of the technological stuff and rival players to Google discussed in the books have become dated. Nevertheless, I found this book quite interesting.

You don't need to be a software engineer or a digital marketing professional to find search fascinating. All of us have been using search for personal, academic and professional reasons – whether it's an academic project, finding the exact location of a restaurant, job opportunities, a book, information about a movie (the list is endless) – we have reached out to Google, Yahoo, Bing, Amazon, Goodreads, IMDB and so on. Searching the internet has become such an integral part of our daily existence that whenever we need any information or want to buy something we just go online. The author himself has shared about his search experience on “tempting fate” and “immortality”.

The author very succinctly tells us about “search” during the early days, the technological challenges of search, paid search, the profound impact of search on business and marketing, government & corporate firms trying to obtain user information and most importantly – the ultimate reward ---- **the perfect search** , to which the author has devoted an entire chapter, IBM's WebFountain etc.

Through this book, I got to know about a fascination character called Bill Gross – he was the brain behind GoTo (a search engine which later became Overture and sold off to Yahoo) among many other tech innovations. Most importantly, he was the man who came up with the *system of auctioning off certain search words to the highest bidder and performance-based model of online advertising – advertisers pay only when people clicked on the advertisement, this model with modifications have been adopted as the standard.* Later, Google adopted this model came up their own AdWords but ensured that search results were more relevant.

Coming back to Google, the author tells us about Larry Page and Sergey Brin's PhD days at Stanford, how the idea of Google came to their minds, the setting up of the company and its meteoric rise till the writing of his book. He has talked about their struggles in the early days – how they celebrated when they received their first funding by going to Burger King, their various strategic decisions, the superiority of their technology and much more. At the same time he has also written about certain unsavoury aspects of Google – how Google compromised with its principles to operate in China, apparent manipulation of their search results during a lawsuit etc.

We all know what influence Google has on search and by extension on online advertising. When we think about e-commerce most of us usually imagine behemoths like Amazon, Alibaba, Flipkart but there are so many small firms which depend upon the organic search results of Google – these are small businesses and can't afford paid advertising. In 2003, when Google had tweaked their algorithm, many such small businesses had lost out on their business.

The author presents the story of Neil Moncrief, a seller of shoes for people with large feet, who totally depended upon the organic search result of Google for orders. His page had a good rank and business was fine but on 14th November, 2003 his phone stopped ringing. His store was not in the first hundred rankings. Imagine that – just before a critical holiday season his name has been wiped off the search results. Who goes beyond the results displayed in the first page of the search? He reached out to help@google.com and searchquality@google.com but his emails went unanswered. This had happened to thousands of other small businesses. Google claimed it was only trying to weed out spammers but a few conspiracy junkies might have claimed that it was a move to get more people to sign into Adwords.

Battelle has written about Moncrief's new boss – *“His name was Google, and he made Ebenezer Scrooge look like a saint.”*

I hope in the years that has gone by, Google has tweaked its algorithm such that similar incidents don't happen again.

Whatever the business decisions of Google, none of us can deny the part it plays in our daily life. Not only just the search engine – we all depend upon Gmail, Google Chrome and a host of other Google services. Personally, I just can't imagine a life without Google and I believe I speak for many if not most Internet users. I just hope it does not turn into the corporate monster so often portrayed in sci-fi and dystopian movies.

Overall, a good read but as I have already mentioned before this book is quite old so I would suggest some recently published books to learn about search and Google. I, myself, would certainly try to find such books.

Dannii Elle says

This chronicles the rise of the infamous Google corporation and discourses on the impact it has had on the structure of our lives and our web browsing experience. Whilst I did find it of interest, the information is now a little dated and technology has moved on from the time of publication. The later portion of the book focuses on projected estimations for Google's future, which is of little relevance to a modern-day reader.

Michael says

I first used the internet sometime around 1993, when it seemed gopher was still where all the good information was, or maybe I just wasn't in the know since most of my direction was from a deadtree book of listings. I quickly grew to love the internet in college, and Altavista was the clear best choice for search until someone introduced me to Google and I saw it was clearly better. I have been paying attention to things technical and their social ramifications since 2000.

Thus there was not a great deal of material I hadn't already been exposed to, though I did enjoy history up to 2000--that was the best part of the book IMO. Battelle is a journalist covering the business side of technology, so there was nothing to be found where I was hoping for some insights into Google's technical development. Of course, Battelle has a slant toward financial matters, and that tinged the book an ugly color for me.

Battelle claims the book is really about search and not Google. Please--the book is a history of Google with Battelle's speculations about future technology, and it's rather schizophrenic in that respect. I can't put my finger on it exactly, but there is something missing, and I think it stems from Battelle's bias towards things financial. What is missing is that Battelle cannot see past the culture of consumption, of corporations controlling their customers. His examples seem to be based on an underlying assumption that it is always a customer searching for something to consume. Even if the thing to consume is information, Battelle seems to have a complete lack of understanding of the concept of free. One example is a pregnant couple being offered a coupon for a stroller as a result of having given up their search/browsing/viewing history and

watching ads in return for free tv/internet. Battelle portrays the wife as pestering the husband, causing marital friction, and along comes the corporate internet to save the day--disgusting.

Another of Battelle's examples turns the situation on its head. In a situation right around the corner, a shopper at Whole Foods uses a device to scan a wine label and the internet provides him with the information that the price is nicer at a shop on the way home. The trouble is that this is a bubble, supporting only the techno-elite. Surely something would be done if such devices became mainstream. Whole Foods would preemptively present such a user with a digital coupon in an attempt to keep the sale. Worse yet, it becomes valuable for the store to know you are a shopper with such a device--if you'll only divulge the information, perhaps let your device interface with the store's sensor network, you will get significantly different prices. This is like a technologically advanced Randall's card. Randall's in Texas have a card whereby you divulge your information and allow your shopping history to be tracked in exchange for significant dollars off your bill--but actually the situation is that the prices are simply unreasonable unless you participate in their system. Will we see a future where shopping without allowing access to your gizmo results in unreasonable prices? Will it become necessary to have such a device? Combine this scenario with Jonathan Zittrain's thoughts in his book *The Future of the Internet and How to Stop It*. Battelle's scenario becomes bleaker as corporations use pricing to make it increasingly painful to shop without granting access to information from whatever gizmo they have produced and locked down such that you don't really have control over its functionality. And if that gizmo is produced by Apple, the masses will say "thank you sir, may I have another?" Perhaps corporate greed actually saves us in the end as no single corporation can put all the pieces of the puzzle together, or else, so help us, our government is capable of doing the right thing. Bleak indeed.

Indeed, the cover of this book indicates that it has won several awards for best business book. Battelle has single-handedly turned me off from business books. It is my opinion that Battelle's treatment of the societal impact and issues of search would easily be blown away by any author writing from a non-money-grubbing point of view and his treatment takes away from his coverage of Google which is not what it could be for lack of focus. Furthermore, the book grew out-of-date from the time Battelle finished it to the time it was published, as Battelle recognizes with a 15-page diving-catch update attempt at the end of the book. The downside of writing from a business perspective is that all but the most general predictions will go sour, and that is another reason I lament Battelle's insistence on trying to make the book more than a biography of Google.

Perhaps I should instead have read *The Google Story*, which apparently tells more of the human tale, the MapReduce and Google File System papers, and Google's PageRank and *Beyond: The Science of Search Engine Rankings*.

Other notes:

- * I was surprised I couldn't remember ever having run across the Overture search engine.
- * Battelle mentions the effects of 9/11 on Google, largely referencing a paper by Richard Wiggins, which is an interesting read on its own.
- * Battelle briefly touches on the closed nature of Google's algorithms protecting its results from being spammy. He mentions Doug Cutting and Nutch. Nutch was pulled into Hadoop, which basically provides Google clone technology (obviously missing a bunch of proprietary stuff) with an Apache license.
- * American Blinds sued Google over their trademark being sold as AdWords. After four years of litigation American Blinds settled worse off than it started: Google conceded nothing and paid nothing, while American Blinds had two of its trademarks thrown out as unenforceable and paid sanctions to Google for mismanaging the discovery process.
- * Geico brought suit with a similar claim which was thrown out, but Geico also objected to the use of Geico

in an ad's text. It appears Google settled on the minor claim. American Airlines sued on the same grounds, and also settled the case. No legal precedent has been set. Selling trademarks as AdWords is similar to putting Coke and Pepsi on the grocery store shelf next to each other. There is potential for shadiness including a trademark in the text of an ad, but I would expect the advertiser and not Google to be held responsible.

* I was curious what Google's ad deal with the Da Vinci Code movie was. It is still up here.

Phil Simon says

A few weeks ago, I saw a list of the best business books of all time. I was a bit proud of myself that I had read most of them--at had at least heard of the rest. For whatever reason, though, one book had escape me over the years: The Search: How Google and Its Rivals Rewrote the Rules of Business and Transformed Our Culture. I was more than five years late, but figured that I owed it to myself to give it a read.

I'm glad that I did.

I had seen Battelle on Bloomberg West and he was particularly smart and articulate. My one initial hesitation with The Search: I had already read many books about Google. (I count Ken Auletta's book among my very favorites.) Did I really need to read yet another book about Larry and Sergey's company?

But here's the rub: Battelle's book is hardly Google-specific. Rather, it's about the vast implications of being able to find an increasing amount of information within seconds, a trend that shows no signs of abating. Now, to be sure, you can't write a book about the history of search without delving into Google, but this is a book about so much more than one company. For instance, I learned a great deal about the role of Bill Gross and GoTo.com, a precursor to Google and the guy who cracked the nut on paid placements. I hadn't realized that Larry and Sergey modified Gross' central idea.

A Glimpse of What's Beyond

While I probably should have read this excellent text when it was released, in a way I'm happy that I stumbled upon it now. Sure, AOL and Yahoo! are not nearly as relevant today as they were when Battelle was hammering away on his Mac. But reading books like this years after their release allows you to assess the author's predictions ex post facto. Battelle's vision of then then-future in 2006 is, for the most part, panning out.

On a general level, my very favorite business books do the following:

- * advance a big idea
- * teach me something new (not that easy to do, since I read many non-fiction, business, and technology books)
- * tell interesting stories
- * leave me wanting more

Battelle does all of the above with considerable aplomb. The man is a gifted writer and I can't wait for his next opus.

Get. This. Book. Now.

Rubi says

Scrisa in 2005, tradusa la noi in 2008.
Recomand.

Shiri says

Fascinating book in the history of commercial search engines, including (but not limited to) Google. Must read for anyone in the field; highly recommend for non technical readers as well!
