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How Google's workforce took over the board

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Last December, the House Judiciary Committee spent three-and-a-half hours with Sundar Pichai, CEO of Google, and discussed partisan bias and the basics of location tracking and search algorithms. It was, by most accounts, a missed opportunity. Instead of digging deep into how Google collects and stores data, representatives quibbled over perceived political bias. Instead of seeking to understand exactly where one of the most powerful companies in the world stands on issues of privacy, cybersecurity, censorship, and a possible U.S. federal data protection regulation, the discussions devolved into partisan politics conspicuously devoid of technological expertise.

For his part, Pichai sidestepped any serious questions. When asked directly about Google's Dragonfly project (i.e., a search engine built specifically for the Chinese government), he said that, "We have undertaken an internal effort, but right now there are no plans to launch a search service in China necessarily."^[1]

Pichai was able to avoid scrutiny of his company's dealing with China – in the midst of an all-out "China Initiative" announced by the Department of Justice—and the conversation moved on. The committee missed several other opportunities to grill Pichai. Why wasn't he pinned to the wall over the massive data breach involving Google+, for example? There was also no discussion of Project Maven, the \$10 billion deal with the Pentagon that the company left on the table, and little talk of the legal problems the company faces in the European Union regarding forced consent, monopolization, and other issues.

There is another question no one thought to ask: What can we expect from one of the most powerful companies in the world when its employees can effectively alter major business decisions through public action?

Do no evil

Google was founded in 1998 under the motto, "Do no evil." One of the more well-known cases of the company demonstrating this motto was in 2010, when Google decided to exit the China market—when everyone else was clamoring to get in—because the company refused to subject its search engine to censorship and other restrictions imposed by the Chinese government.

The company's founders, Larry Page and Sergey Brin, have stepped back from the day-to-day management of the company, elevating former Product Chief Sundar Pichai to the CEO position in 2015. Pichai led project management efforts for many of Google's signature products, including Chrome, Drive, Gmail, Maps, and later Android. In his role as CEO however, Pichai has had to face several challenges from the workforce that have little to do with product management and much more to do with culture, ethics, and identity.

The first test came in 2017, when a software engineer, James Damore, wrote a memo regarding diversity and gender that went viral, both inside and outside of the company. In his memo, Damore argued that Google's corporate culture had a strong left leaning bias that blinded the company to other perspectives on race and gender, and ostracized employees who were more conservative, and generally white and male. The response was

immediate. Employees angered by Damore’s characterizations of women as “generally more anxious”^[2] demanded the company take action, and Pichai complied: Damore was fired. He later filed a wrongful termination suit, accusing the company of discrimination.

Suspicious endeavors

Things got more complicated after media reports and internal memos revealed that Google was involved in two projects, Dragonfly and Maven, which were both controversial and possibly counter to the company’s founding motto.

Project Maven, a Pentagon initiative also known as the Algorithmic Warfare Cross-Functional Team (AWCFT), has a stated mission to “accelerate DoD’s integration of big data and machine learning.”^[3] Google’s work with the Department of Defense centered on using artificial intelligence to analyze drone footage. Employees involved with the project discussed it with their colleagues, mostly via listserv email groups, and were generally outraged. They also brought up ethical issues of how to use machine learning and artificial intelligence (AI) to do no evil. Employees drafted a letter, with more than 3,000 signatures, protesting the project and addressing the CEO directly:

Dear Sundar,

We believe that Google should not be in the business of war. Therefore we ask that Project Maven be cancelled, and that Google draft, publicize and enforce a clear policy stating that neither Google nor its contractors will ever build warfare technology.^[4]

The following passage is most telling:

This plan will irreparably damage Google’s brand and its ability to compete for talent. Amid growing fears of biased and weaponized AI, Google is already struggling to keep the public’s trust. By entering into this contract, Google will join the ranks of companies like Palantir, Raytheon, and General Dynamics. The argument that other firms, like Microsoft and Amazon, are also participating doesn’t make this any less risky for Google. Google’s unique history, its motto Don’t Be Evil, and its direct reach into the lives of billions of users set it apart.

Pichai backed down, letting the contract expire in June.

Just a few months later, employees learned that Google would be submitting a bid for another big Pentagon project, this one called the Joint Enterprise Defense Infrastructure cloud, or JEDI. This project too, would use AI to help the military optimize their operations. After protests from employees, Google declined to submit a bid, saying in a statement that “we couldn’t be assured that [the JEDI deal] would align with our AI Principles and second, we determined that there were portions of the contract that were out of scope with our current government certifications.”

The project was worth an estimated \$10 billion, and landing the contract would have positioned Google to compete with Amazon and Microsoft, both of which have high security clearance and a big head start on AI. Employee action, based on ethics and threatening reputational damage, managed to sway C-suite decision-making. Google’s statement cited its AI principles, which bar use of Google’s AI software in weapons as well as services that violate international norms for surveillance and human rights, but that did not seem to be an issue

prior to employee protests.

Project Dragonfly, which may still be ongoing, is a censored search engine built specifically for the Chinese government. The search engine would blacklist websites and search terms about human rights, democracy, religion, and peaceful protest, and allow the Chinese government to track performed searches down to specific IP addresses and users.

According to *The Intercept*^[5], which broke the story, only a few hundred employees knew of the project, which was steered by Pichai himself, who had traveled to China several times and met with high-level government officials. When the news hit, Google employees went into action, drafting another letter and submitting it to Medium.com, which published the letter in its entirety:

We are Google employees and we join Amnesty International in calling on Google to cancel project Dragonfly, Google's effort to create a censored search engine for the Chinese market that enables state surveillance....Providing the Chinese government with ready access to user data, as required by Chinese law, would make Google complicit in oppression and human rights abuses.^[6]

Pichai has given several wishy-washy, oily responses to questions about Dragonfly. As of now, it is unclear what will come of the project. The employee response, however, has brought the issue out to the forefront and has definitely put a freeze on whatever cooperation was brewing between the Chinese government and Google. In another telling passage, the authors state that:

Many of us accepted employment at Google with the company's values in mind, including its previous position on Chinese censorship and surveillance, and an understanding that Google was a company willing to place its values above its profits. After a year of disappointments including Project Maven, Dragonfly, and Google's support for abusers, we no longer believe this is the case. This is why we're taking a stand.

Remaking a culture

By far the biggest test came during the Fall of 2018, when reports emerged that Google paid Andy Rubin \$90 million as part of a severance package, while keeping quiet about a misconduct claim. Rubin is known as the "Father of Android" and was a top executive in the company, earning millions of dollars and overseeing multiple projects. According to *The New York Times*,^[7] Rubin engaged in extramarital affairs and so called "ownership relationships" – in which he paid women large sums of money in exchange for their company – and allegedly coerced a woman into sex. Rubin wasn't the only male executive who received big payouts despite allegations of misconduct. When the report hit the streets, thousands of outraged Google employees decided to stage a walkout in protest.

The walkout coincided with an interview Pichai was giving to Aaron Sorkin for the *Times* Dealbook. Pichai, and most everyone else, was unprepared for the scope of the protest. Initial estimates put the turnout at around 1,500 people, but more than 20,000 employees walked out of offices all over the globe that day, from California to Ireland to Singapore. Employees also issued a list of demands to company executive to help end the toxic culture at Google^[8]:

1. An end to forced arbitration in cases of harassment and discrimination for all current and future employees.

2. A commitment to end pay and opportunity inequity.
3. A public report on the number of sexual harassment complaints made against Google employees and the outcomes of those claims.
4. The creation of a clear process for employees to report sexual misconduct safely and anonymously.
5. To have the chief diversity officer answer directly to the CEO and make recommendations directly to Alphabet's board of directors, and to appoint an employee representative to the board.

Crisis of identity

Google's experience last year pointed out two major themes for the company: The moral compass they possessed for the first half of the company's lifespan needs to be recalibrated, and employees are the driving force behind that recalibration.

The walkout on November 1st is not just about male executives getting big payouts, or a toxic culture, or even the dubious projects Google is involved in. It's about the struggle for the company's identity, its ethical foundation, and the path it will take going forward. Pichai has given lip service to many employee demands and has stepped back from some of the projects they objected to, but in the hearing before the House Judiciary Committee, he struck a very ambiguous tone. It's hard to gauge where Pichai wants to take the company and how he will respond to a workforce that understands the power they wield.

"We are a company that provides platforms for diverse perspectives and opinions—and we have no shortage of them among our own employees," Pichai told the committee. And when discussing the company's work with China, he delivered a response that neither confirmed nor denied any sort of position other than a commitment to provide users with information: "We have a stated mission of providing users with information, and so we always think it's in our duty to explore possibilities to give users access to information ... I have a commitment, but as I've said earlier on this, we'll be very thoughtful and we'll engage widely as we make progress."

Pichai's stance, and presumably the stance of other top executives, is that the company has a business directive to provide a service for a fee. That flies in the face of a large part of the workforce's stance, which is that Google has an identity and a set of ethics, and any deviation from those ethics can and will result in action by the workforce to influence and steer the company in a direction they deem fit. The implications of an educated, motivated, powerful workforce steering one of the largest companies in the world based on a collective set of ethics are great:

Shareholders and partners face additional unpredictability; employees and potential employees may find themselves in the struggle for the company's identity; while users and regulators must deal with a company that could turn on a dime at any given moment.

One of the biggest challenges lies with the C-suite itself. How can top executives instill confidence and trust in the company among employees and consumers, while also ensuring that business decisions remain in the hands of businesspeople who have the growth and survival of Google at heart? That's a big question, and one Pichai and his colleagues are confronting right now.

¹ "Transparency and Accountability: Examining Google and its Data Collection, Use and Filtering Practices," U.S. House of Representatives Judiciary Committee, December 11, 2018. <http://bit.ly/2Qn4fno>

² James Damore, "Google's Ideological Echo Chamber" July 2017. <http://bit.ly/2TqGNYh>

³ Memorandum: Establishment of an Algorithmic Warfare Cross-Functional Team (Project Maven), Deputy

Secretary of Defense, April 26, 2017. <http://bit.ly/2LN3gfC>

4 Open Letter to Google CEO Sundar Pichai. <http://bit.ly/2LNh7Tb>

5 Ryan Gallagher, “Google plans to launch censored search engine in China, leaked documents reveal” *The Intercept*, August 1, 2018. <http://bit.ly/2SAG5ro>

6 Open Letter, “We are Google employees. Google must stop Dragonfly” November 27, 2018. <http://bit.ly/2BYBYhL>

7 Daisuke Wakabayashi and Katie Benner, “How Google protected Andy Rubin, the ‘Father of Android’” *The New York Times*, October 25, 2018. <https://nyti.ms/2CKzJjK>

8 Claire Stapelton, Tanuja Gupta, Meredith Whittaker, et al: “We’re the organizers of the Google Walkout, Here are our demands” *The New York Magazine*, November 1, 2018. <http://bit.ly/2SAPAHg>

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