"If it stays humble and moves with the swiftness of a fox, it will be difficult to catch." Jock Given reviews Ken Auletta's *Googled*

Building 43 at Google HQ, where founders Larry Page and Sergey Brin have their offices. Trey Ratcliff/Flickr (CC BY-NC-SA)

**Googled: The End of the World As We Know It**

By Ken Auletta | Virgin Books | $35.00

THE PEOPLE at Google didn't leap at Ken Auletta's plan to write a book about their company. The *New Yorker's* communications writer since 1992, Auletta portrayed the decline of the big three American television networks in *Three Blind Mice*, published in the early 1990s, and the fate of Microsoft in *World War 3.0* a decade later.

If the picture is not pretty, Auletta will paint it anyway. Corporations with customers, shareholders and valuable brands don't relish this kind of scrutiny. But Google eventually said yes. They let Auletta make many visits to their headquarters at Mountain View in Silicon Valley outside San Francisco, where he conducted about 150 interviews with staff, including eleven with CEO Eric Schmidt. Only one vice-president declined to be
The result is an absorbing confrontation. In Auletta's other work, he is a model of journalistic observation. Who Ken Auletta is and what he thinks are not on show. Here, he is more engaged, for The World As We Know It, the one that is being googled, is Auletta's own. He feels deeply the transformations being wreaked by Google. He’s a journalist; Google’s joint founders, Sergey Brin and Larry Page, are data guys. They may all be searching for answers but they are different species that go about it in fundamentally different ways.

“Google’s founders and many of its executives share a zeal to digitise books,” writes Auletta, “but don’t have much interest in reading them. They worried that cooperating on a book was an ‘inefficient’ use of their time.” This comes at the end of Googled but it has been obvious to the reader from early on. The guys at Mountain View really don’t think or care much about the New Yorker. They may have a use for it – perhaps indexing its copy for their search engine, serving ads into its online spaces, accepting ads from its reps – but the New Yorker is a long way from the centre of The World As They Know It.

At the start, it feels like this might be a book about The Machines (Google and New Media) vs The People (writers, journalists, movie-makers, Old Media). But Auletta is a fairer and more curious inquisitor than this, frustrated with mainstream media’s responses to the Google Machine as well as wary of its consequences for people and information. The Machine also confounds the cliché by turning out to have human qualities. It builds a bucolic campus for its headquarters, makes good food and massages available to its staff for free, allows them to spend a fifth of their work time developing ideas of their own (“20 per cent time”), and runs a Friday afternoon gathering for staff where anyone can ask the joint CEOs anything. The founders of the Machine draw relatively modest salaries and bonuses (though their shareholdings in Google are worth billions) and want to make the world a better place.

The first time we are shown what could have been The People, it is Mel Karmazin from the huge media conglomerate, Viacom, visiting the Google founders. He clearly doesn’t care at all about making the world a better place. He’s trying to cling to a model of advertising where neither the advertisers nor the media companies have much idea how well the product – the advertising – works.

He likes it that way, just as he’s been doing it for decades. “I was selling twenty-five billion dollars of advertising,” he tells Auletta. “Did I want someone to know what worked and what didn’t?” The data junkies at Mountain View, dedicated to more efficient communication between advertisers and potential customers, are “fucking with the magic.”

Instead of The Machines vs The People, Auletta gives us a book that is really all about people and the machines and institutions that different types of people build. The two at the centre are Brin and Page. They are brilliant, self-confident and born in 1973. Both were educated at Montessori schools where teachers encouraged students to follow their own learning paths. Their fathers were college professors, their mothers worked in science.

Aged twenty-two, the Google founders met each other at Silicon Valley’s university, Stanford, where both were enrolled in computer science PhDs. The one striking difference was that Page hailed from the mid-West – Lansing, Michigan. Brin came from Moscow, arriving in the United States at the age of six with his family, supported by the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society.

The Google story starts, like every Silicon Valley story, in a garage. It’s the mid 1990s, the World Wide Web is young. They get an idea. How about we allow users to search the whole thing? Rather than relying on the number of times the search keywords appear in particular sites as a measure of how useful those sites will be to the searcher, count the number of links to sites, and the links into those linking sites. This “PageRank” (after Larry) will provide a better measure of how useful searchers will find particular sites. Over time, the most useful sites will attract the most links and therefore appear highest in search results.

The search engine is called BackRub but Page and Brin decide to change that. They reject The Whatbox – it’s too like The Wetbox, which sounds like a porn site. They like Googol, 10-to-the-power-of-100, because it suits
their goal of building very large search engines, but the domain name is taken. So they settle on Google, incorporating a company of that name in September 1998. Stanford wants them to leave because their work is consuming so much of the university’s computer resources, although a licensing agreement and 1.7 million shares when the company floats ensure the institution benefits if the project is successful. Page and Brin decide not to complete their doctorates. “You guys can always come back and finish your PhDs if you don’t succeed,” a professor tells them.

But they need money. It comes first from four investors tipping in $250,000 each. One is a Silicon Valley “angel,” one a Stanford professor, one an executive at Cisco. The fourth, Jeff Bezos, is Amazon’s founder, Time magazine’s Person of the Year in 1999. “I just fell in love with Larry and Sergey,” he tells Auletta. “There was no business plan. They had a vision. It was a customer-focused point of view.”

They rent the inevitable garage plus two spare bedrooms from friends in Menlo Park, set up a whiteboard on the driveway announcing Google Worldwide Headquarters and tell the landlords the company will be worth billions of dollars. At the end of 1998, there are six employees. Within 400 weeks, annual revenue exceeds US$20 billion.

Around a third of the book follows this story from the garage to the company’s highly successful Initial Public Offering in 2004 and the beginnings of a backlash against its growing power. Another third continues the story from this point until mid 2009, just after Google celebrated its tenth birthday. In the final section of the book, “Googled,” Auletta assesses where the Google “wave” is taking “old media” and where it is taking Google itself.


Most readers will be familiar with at least some of what Google does, the development of the idea of search, and the extraordinarily profitable “monetisation” of it through advertising. Like any successful business, it all seems obvious in retrospect. The history is fascinating precisely because it reveals how it wasn’t predestined for the people who did the thinking and building, raised the money, took the risks. Auletta connects the people who founded the company not just to the products they make and profit from, but also to the type of organisation Google became and how this adapted as the company grew so rapidly.

When Google staged its Initial Public Offering, a Letter from the Founders declared “Google is not a conventional company. We do not intend to become one.” It is run by engineers and half the staff are technically trained. They conceptualise things, make things, measure things. Auletta says a lot about this. Page and Brin deplore inefficiency and waste. They love fast, hate slow. If something doesn’t have a purpose, it’s gone. If it does, they want it. They quantify and trust the figures.

But where perfectionist engineers are sometimes caricatured as designers of utopian machines for inhumans, Google’s founders were obsessed from the start with being useful. Rather than being frustrated by the messiness of ordinary human existence, they wanted to draw from it and serve it. The messier it is, the bigger the challenge to make sense of it. Brin explains the company’s mission – “to organize the world’s information and make it universally accessible and useful” –as serving a very simple purpose. “People with the right information make better decisions for themselves. People with the right commercial opportunities will buy things suited to them.”

Throughout the book, various observers note the clarity and constancy of this vision. “Tunnel vision” is common among young entrepreneurs, says Auletta, but Brin and Page stand out from the many smart, focused people in Silicon Valley because of their audacity. From overusing Stanford’s computer resources as students, offering a deal to take over search for AOL that could have bankrupted the young Google in 2002, to the detail of a meeting where a design team’s lack of ambition is lamented, Brin and Page don’t like being told things are impossible. “I named this 3.0 for a reason,” the designers are told. “We wanted something big. Instead you proposed something small. Why are you so resistant?” (Of course, that’s just the kind of meeting a skilled corporate
This ambition was reflected in recruitment processes. Only those with the best grades and SAT scores got a look-in. Page and Brin delighted in testing candidates’ capacity to deal with the unexpected. A young lawyer was asked to draw up a contract for one of them “to sell my soul to the devil.” Having secured smart people prepared to think unconventionally, they then had to get the best out of them. Page and Brin believe their technical expertise is vital for this.

Even in technology companies, Page argues, “typically the management isn’t very technical… If you’re a programmer or an engineer or a computer scientist and you have someone tell you what to do who is not very good at what you do, they tell you the wrong things. And you sort of end up building the wrong things; you end up kind of demoralised. You want to have a culture where the people who are doing the work… are… managed by people who deeply understand what they are doing.”

Central to the company’s culture is “this sense of being connected to something larger.” Many corporate mission statements seem like so much blather – how many organisations think declaring their goal to be the world’s/Asia’s/Australia’s-leading-blah-services-company will get their employees bouncing out of bed each morning? Google’s “search” mission is clearly much less boilerplate than this. “If you can solve search, that means you can answer any question. Which means you can do basically anything,” Page told a Stanford class in 2002.

The problem with connecting to something larger and relentlessly pursuing a vision that “means you can do basically anything” is that Google has increasingly rubbed up against other companies that already do things themselves. Being so rich at a time when many of the sectors they rub up against have been struggling has made the contact particularly traumatic. The CEO of ZelnickMedia says, “There’s really nothing that doesn’t look cool and interesting to a fourteen-year old [twelve actually] with an Amex card and no spending limit.”

Google’s many ambitions are now being tested repeatedly. Other search methodologies are being explored, the Google Books “settlement” has not settled and the relationship with Apple has strained. The company has faced intense criticism and possible legal action for gathering and storing information about wireless network use as part of its global Street View project, and shut down the version of its search engine operating in mainland China in protest over local censorship. (It is reported to have maintained a healthy share of Chinese search revenues by redirecting mainland users to its Hong Kong site, although this may not be a permanent solution that satisfies the Chinese government.) A recent interim ruling from the French anti-trust agency found Google had misused its power in the internet advertising market, and just this week the European Commissioner for Competition Joaquín Almunia said in London that the Commission was in the early stages of examining allegations that Google had unfairly demoted rivals in its search rankings.

But the company is also having plenty of wins, completing the acquisition of mobile advertising company AdMob in May and announcing the acquisition of travel technology company ITA Software last week. It won a case in the European Court of Justice against Louis Vuitton about the use of trademarked terms in AdWords searches and defended the long-running copyright action by Viacom against the Google-owned YouTube, successfully arguing that YouTube’s policy of taking down infringing material when alerted to it by rights holders relieved it of liability for infringement under the “safe harbour” provisions of US copyright law. (Viacom is appealing.) Content creators are being wooed through the expansion of YouTube’s “partnership program,” allowing more people who upload videos to YouTube to share in the advertising revenue sold against their content. And according to James Fallows in the Atlantic, several schemes are under way at Google aimed at “a reinvented business model to sustain professional news-gathering.”

As he did when writing about Microsoft, Auletta poses large questions about a big corporation’s future at what might prove to be a crucial time for it. He has views of his own but also cites a lot of well-informed observers and participants. Will Google become more conventional, too powerful, Evil? Has it already? Will the goal of “perfecting” search mean computers become more intelligent, eventually thinking just like humans? Or will the humans end up thinking like computers?
Auletta concludes that “if Google maintains its deposit of public trust – continuing to put users first – and if it stays humble and moves with the swiftness of a fox, it will be difficult to catch.” But “if the public or its representatives come to believe Google plays favourites, aims to monopolise knowledge or its customers, invades their privacy…”

Columbia University’s Tim Wu thinks the basic question is whether the company can remain true to the founding philosophy. “Will they stay focused on search… which is really an engineers’ aesthetic of getting you to what you want as fast as you can and then getting out of the way?” Or will it try to be everything, “a source of content, a platform, a destination…? I predict that Google will wind up at war with itself.” •