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10-1 Introduction

Google's ease of use and superior search results have propelled the search engine to its number one status, ousting the early dominance of competitors such as WebCrawler and Infoseek. Even later offerings by other large tech companies using comparable algorithms, such as Bing by Microsoft, have failed to make significant inroads, with Google retaining an impressive 64 percent global market share. As Google gained popularity, it began expanding into a number of different ventures, including multiple advertising platforms, a digital book publishing space, and social networking. It has spent billions to acquire hundreds of companies in a variety of industries, from robotics to smart home devices to intangibles such as voice recognition technologies. Approximately 2.3 million searches every minute are performed through Google's search engine.

As is common with most large companies, Google has experienced its share of ethical issues. Its mantra "Don't Be Evil" was called into question after it allowed the Chinese government to censor aspects of some of its sites in order to enter the market. Google has also been investigated and sued by multiple governments based on concerns that its widespread reach and market power violate antitrust laws.

The hot ethical topic for many Internet users, however, is the company's approach to Internet privacy and collection of user information. To improve the effectiveness of its services, including customized search results, targeted ads, and more precise integration of its various offerings, Google tracks and leverages user information without explicit permission (although Google's privacy statement informs users about the recordkeeping, and Google does allow users to opt out of some forms of tracking). Such tracking is common practice for Internet companies, but Google's deep access to so many different types of user information has led people to question whether Google violates user privacy. In light of the increasing amount of cyberattacks and the government's determination to crack down on these illegal attacks, consumers also worry their private information, tracked and stored by Google's algorithms, might be compromised.

This case analyzes Google's efforts to be a good corporate citizen and the privacy issues the company has faced. The analysis starts by providing background on Google, its technology, and its initiatives. Google's efforts to be a socially responsible company will be discussed. We then discuss the criticisms levied against Google, including its initial attempts to break into the censored Chinese market, its tracking of users, and more recent changes to its privacy policies. We examine how Google has sometimes clashed with government authorities. Finally, we review some of the legal methods that have been proposed to regulate Internet data collection practices and Google's response to the proposals.

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