

ethikos Volume 33, Number 2. February 28, 2019 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.

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