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The Coming Google Apocalypse (Hint: It's Not Just About Media)

We Know to Fear Google Because of Its Search-Ad Dominance. But Its 'Cloud' Is What's Truly Scary

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Published: July 27, 2009

Why should we fear Google? There's an easy, obvious answer to that, particularly if you're a media or marketing person: because Google is killing us. It is, duh, blatantly steamrolling the business models of countless business sectors, from Madison Avenue to print media. (Despite all the Bing hype, it appears that Microsoft's refreshed search engine -- er, decision engine -- [isn't making a dent](#) in Google's dominance.)



VARNEY: Google Monopoly-buster?

Photo Credit: AP

Annoyingly, it's a *cute* monopoly -- with a cute logo, a cute motto ("Don't be evil"), cute executives and a cute corporate culture -- that bewitches a lot of people into somehow doubting that it's a monopoly, and prompts even otherwise

cynical media people to be unnecessarily polite about it. Witness Wired magazine's current issue, which includes a [must-read story](#) by Fred Vogelstein that convincingly makes the case that Christine Varney, new head of the Justice Department's antitrust division, is "gunning for Google," and ominously points out that "the company's share of the search-advertising market has jumped to 75% from 50% over the past three years." And yet to sell the story, Wired (which saw its ad pages plummet 41% in the first half of 2009) served up the cover line "Is Google a monopoly?" -- which is sort of like asking "Are grizzly bears dangerous?" even as one is munching on your left leg.

But let me suggest that we -- not just media people, but all netizens -- should be as obsessed about *another* reason to fear Google. Vogelstein briefly alludes to it when he writes of Google's vision of "a world in which Web services replace desktop software" -- i.e., cloud computing -- and how it could "become a de facto standard, locking businesses into using its services."

Fine, you might think; businesses will just substitute maybe-evil Google for demonstrably-evil Microsoft. But the larger reality is that more and more businesses and individuals are trusting their mission-critical data and applications to Google's cloud. And the problem with that: Google's cloud has the potential to blanket us -- smother us -- in ways much more systemic and potentially apocalyptic than Microsoft's desktop software monopoly ever did.

When Microsoft software -- installed on a PC or a server -- fails, it can seriously disrupt business, but the disruption tends to be contained (to one workstation or division or company). But when Google's cloud fails, millions can be affected *simultaneously*.

Users of Google applications, including Docs, Spreadsheets and Gmail, know that outages are hardly a rare event. In February, Gmail users (there are more than 100 million worldwide, most of whom use the free, ad-supported version) went ballistic when the service was [unavailable for more than two hours](#). In March, Google Apps was down for 30 minutes, but Google was forced to admit that some unspecified "small subset" couldn't access their docs, spreadsheets or e-mail for -- *oh my God* -- [nearly 22 hours](#).

Even paying customers -- who use the so-called Premier version of Google Apps -- are not immune. Though Premier users get a service-level commitment from Google of 99.99% uptime, in the past Google has offered customers an extension on their contracts to make up for particularly egregious outages (in other words, that 99.99% uptime isn't guaranteed).

If Google Apps Premier Edition can achieve 99.99% uptime, that allows for about 53 minutes of downtime per year, but it's amazing what a difference fractions of a percentage point can make. For example, 99% uptime allows for 87.6 hours of downtime per year.

Meanwhile, keep in mind that Google itself can and does fail. Consider what happened in May when what Google called a "routing error" caused its basic search functionality to fail for 14% of its users. According to Information Week, the hourlong outage, rather astonishingly, caused [a 5% drop in global internet traffic](#).

(Microsoft, by the way, is ramping up its own cloud-computing offerings to attempt to compete with Google; it recently had [a 22-hour outage](#) of its own.)

On July 20, my colleague [Michael Learmonth reported](#) that Google has been busy seducing college IT departments onto its cloud, with some 4 million students on campuses across the country already using Google applications in place of desktop software. Last Tuesday, New Zealand's postal service announced it was abandoning Microsoft software, including Office and Exchange Server, in favor of Google Apps. In Britain, the Daily Telegraph and other newspapers use Google Docs for word processing. Stateside, the 38,000 employees of the District of Columbia are using Google Apps. Last September, Google Apps hit the 1 million mark of paying business users.

Google typically affects an *everything-is-under-control* posture, even when its users are freaking out. Still, consider the [scary language](#) of Acacio Cruz, a Google reliability manager, who posted on the Official Gmail Blog after February's outage:

"This morning, there was a routine maintenance event in one of our European data centers. This typically causes no disruption because accounts are simply served out of another data center. Unexpected side effects of some new code that tries to keep data geographically close to its owner caused another data center in Europe to become overloaded, and that caused cascading problems from one data center to another."

What are your favorite words and phrases in that post? Mine are "unexpected side effects," "overloaded" and "cascading problems."

Now, what happens when 10% or 20% (or, heck, 75%) of, say, all U.S. small businesses come to depend on Google Apps and there's an outage of two hours or six hours or eight hours? What happens when 10% or 20% or 75% of U.S. small businesses effectively have an entire workday wiped out, thanks to Google

cloud downtime?

Cascading ... flop sweat. Tears. Screaming. Desperation. Apocalypse.

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