

An inside look at the Googleplex

May 3 2011, By Mike Swift

Larry Page is disappointed in all of us.

So says noted tech writer Steven Levy, who spent much of the past three years playing anthropologist at one of the Internet's most interesting villages and set of inhabitants - the [Googleplex](#) and the tribe of Googlers who inhabit it.

Page, Google's co-founder and current CEO, is perhaps the most striking character that emerges in Levy's new book, "In the Plex." The book is a deep dive into Google's culture, history and technology and includes the Internet giant's troubled foray into China, its intensifying rivalry with [Facebook](#), and the inner workings of its search, advertising and data center technology.

Page emerges in the book as the driving force behind Google's relentless technological ambition, the motivating force behind Google's "moon shots," such as the company's long and troubled campaign to digitize every book every published and its recent work on driver-less cars.

With a personal mantra to have a healthy skepticism about what is generally assumed to be impossible, Page is disappointed that so few people share that attitude.

"He's very disappointed that many people aren't more ambitious, because he believes that we're at a point in history where technology makes possible things that previously were thought to be impossible," Levy said at a recent Silicon Valley event. Levy seems to be the only journalist to

score a recent interview with Page - though even that was last year.

Levy, the author of such seminal books about [Silicon Valley](#) culture and technology as "Hackers," and a senior writer with Wired magazine, has been reporting on Google since the late 1990s, and said he has long wanted to do a book on the company.

"It's really an exercise in anthropology, in a sense," Levy said in an interview. "When you first go to the village, even though I'd been covering it for a long time, once you are speaking their language, and you know the stuff that they know but that people outside of Google don't know, then the whole nature of the interviews change. It becomes much more candid, and you learn about stuff that they never would usually talk to a reporter about."

Levy does come up with a number of scoops. He reveals that former CEO Eric Schmidt tried to get information about a political donation he had made scrubbed from Google's search engine. He reports that Page and co-founder Sergey Brin had to be schooled by former Vice President Al Gore about proper behavior in China as Google prepared to do business there, and he describes Google's inability to understand the very different rules of doing business in China, firing a Chinese manager after she used her expense account to buy iPods as gifts for Chinese government officials - a typical business custom in China.

Google's experience in China "is almost like a novel or an opera in and of itself," Levy said. "There were so many twists and turns in the story. It was a complicated story, but one with a lot of human threads and poignancy."

At times, Levy said, the founders' faith in data causes them to see things others miss, but also to have trouble accepting what others believe.

Even now, Levy says, Page and Brin have trouble accepting the opposition to Google's efforts to scan the world's books to create a digital repository that could be accessed by Google's search engine, an effort the founders see as "this gift to civilization." A federal judge recently scuttled the proposed settlement of a class action lawsuit by authors and publishers that would have allowed the books effort to move forward.

"They're smart people but they could not wrap their minds around the fact that people were rejecting this," Levy said of the opposition to the books project. "They are flummoxed when people won't accept what they think is compelling data to accept something. The way they work is that if the data comes up to tell them something, they accept the data. At Google, the way you are supposed to run an argument is not from a personal basis, but you bring the data to convince the other people."

From the company's earliest days after its incorporation in 1998, Page and Brin told some of their first hires that Google was certain to become a huge company, something that sounded highly implausible at the time, but has come true. They had done the mathematical calculations, one Google executive remarks in "In the Plex." Google now has more than 26,000 employees around the world, and recorded revenues of \$29 billion in 2010.

"A lot of people think Google is some sort of a runaway train, but there is sort of an internal thread," Levy said. "Some people say Google is a media company, and I think that's really misleading. If you look at [Google](#) as a media company, you are not going to understand it at all, because that is not how it thinks and operates. It's an artificial intelligence company; it's an Internet company; it's a technology company."

(c) 2011, San Jose Mercury News (San Jose, Calif.).

Distributed by McClatchy-Tribune Information Services.

Citation: An inside look at the Googleplex (2011, May 3) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2011-05-googleplex.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.