



## GREG SCHNEIDERS

# Google's defiance could be its downfall if it isn't careful

Vladimir Lenin famously cited the principle “You can’t make an omelet without breaking eggs” to justify creating a Utopian society through bloody revolution and dictatorship. For seven decades, the Communists broke a lot of eggs without producing an omelet.

But Lenin was right – to drive change, you have to break some rules and, often, some laws. Consider Google. The company is under siege by publishers for digitizing and distributing copyrighted work, and by the Bush administration for refusing to turn over individual search histories. The former is probably illegal and the latter a dangerous challenge to a President who thinks he’s Jack Nicholson in *A Few Good Men*.

Ironically, while breaking the rules in the US, Google is timidly observing China’s rules of wholesale Internet censorship – the so-called “Great Firewall of China.” Next time you visit Beijing, try Googling “democracy,” and you’re likely to get the same result as placing a collect call to Osama bin Laden from New York City. Apparently, Google thinks it can make an omelet in China without breaking the yolk.

The inconsistency of these policies – one bold and rebellious, the other compliant and complicitous – says a lot about Google and the relationship between change and rule-breaking. Google’s mission statement – “to organize the world’s information and make it universally accessible and useful” – is high-minded and populist. If information is power, Google promises “power to the people.” The company further cloaks itself in righteousness with its motto of “Do no evil.”

For Google, “Do no evil” isn’t the same as “Break no

rules.” If society’s rules are designed to screw the little guy, Google is happy to pursue a high-profile, defiant rule-breaking strategy – in line with its commitment to avoid evil-doing and illustrative of its corporate persona as a populist defender of the common man.

But Google needs to be careful. Rules help preserve the power of the powerful, and when challenged, those interests are fierce defenders of the status quo. Ask Napster’s Shawn Fanning. While Google has plenty of economic and market power of its own, there are only so many times it can stick its finger in the eye of the ruling elite with impunity. The company is already finding that, despite its positive buzz and soaring market cap, it can’t find a well-connected Republican in Washington willing to represent its political interests. It should ask Bill Gates what being an outsider in Washington can cost a company in legal bills alone.

And Google, like a self-righteous politician (think Tom DeLay), could easily become an overstuffed political piñata for competitors, politicians, and the media. The hypocrisy of its China policy looks like the big bull’s eye on that piñata’s butt. Google is in its corporate adolescence – big growth spurt, lots of testosterone, moral certitude, and flagrant disdain for authority and rules. But adolescents who don’t learn when to play by the rules become obnoxious and, ultimately, unsuccessful adults. ■

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