



Google CEO Imagines a Dull Version of Utopia

Google CEO Eric Schmidt has once again found himself in the midst of controversy. This time, however, the controversy has nothing to do with China, or even Apple; instead, it revolves around his vision of a technological utopia.

Speaking this week at [TechCrunch's Disrupt](#) event in San Francisco, he set forth his notion of a bold future.

[TechnologyReview.com](#) reported:

Google's CEO Eric Schmidt played make believe and sketched out his vision of the future on stage at TechCrunch's Disrupt event in San Francisco today.



"It's a future where you don't forget anything.... In this new future you're never lost.... We will know your position down to the foot and down to the inch over time.... Your car will drive itself, it's a bug that cars were invented before computers.... You're never lonely.... You're never bored.... You're never out of ideas."

Schmidt filled in his vision with concrete examples of Google's immediate future and strategy. "What we're really doing is building an augmented version of humanity," he mused before going on to talk about how smart phones, "the defining iconic device of their time," can become real-time translators for speech.

Well, as utopias go, Schmidt's seems fairly stale. This is what has become of the bold vision of the future: deliverance from boredom and cars that drive themselves? (Didn't the utopians used to promise cars that could *fly*?) Being saved from boredom is pretty thin gruel; petulant whining about boredom used to be the domain of teenagers; that is, people who do not yet, as the saying goes, "have a life." But as the pseudo-life of Internet social media has trumped having real friends and a real life, society witnesses the dawn of the personality of perpetual pubescence. At least now no one will have to listen as the occupants of self-driving automobiles whine at their autopilot: "Are we there yet?"

The same technology that has been linked to depersonalizing human relationships (does *anyone* think that computerized phone messages and websites have made for better human contact?) will now supposedly deliver us from loneliness, but it is hard to imagine such technology ever returning a tithe of all that it has helped to destroy. The notion that phones will become "real-time" translators is interesting, but can such a technology compensate for the illiteracy of the rising generation, the proliferation of text message abbreviations intruding into serious communications, and the decline of the spoken language to an minuscule vocabulary wrapped around filler words such as "like"?

But [CNET News highlighted another aspect](#) of Schmidt's utopia that makes it less than desirable:

But it's often not what you say, it's how you say it. Schmidt described a technology utopia that's likely to thrill those who truly believe computers will make us better people and horrify those who



Written by [James Heiser](#) on October 1, 2010

fear that computers will rob us of our humanity and create a entirely new set of problems for the world....

It's not that Schmidt is wrong or misguided in making these predictions: the seeds for such a future were sown long ago. But Schmidt and Google never seem to understand how much they freak some people out when they evangelize a future that de-emphasizes the role of people in their day-to-day lives.

And so you get two different opinions of Google: those who think the company is changing the world for the better with its focus on organizing information, and those who think Google really wants to run people's lives for them with computers; specifically, Google's computers.

It is not merely that the future that Schmidt served up is stale and unappealing — when compared to actually living a life — it is that his vision is wrapped in language which many feel (rightly or wrongly) is unduly intrusive, or even oppressive.

Those who wish to live a life worthy of being called “a life” do not wish to rob another person of his Facebook account or Blackberry; in fact, they may find a limited role for such things in their own lives. The problem is that it often feels that opportunities for living a real life are being closed away without many of the advocates of various utopian schemes actually understanding what they have lost. And, for the student of history, there is the knowledge that every attempt to establish a utopia has ended in comedy or tragedy.

Photo of Google's CEO Eric Schmidt: AP Images



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