

Without Google

Living without Google?
About Inge Kloepfer and her one week long experiment.

Google is everywhere. Even my hands and mind have been taken possession of by the corporation. Without thinking twice, I type "Google" whenever I want to know or find something as fast as possible – as if Google was the first answer to every question. My brain is geared to it. I can hardly imagine an internet search without Google, Google Maps, the News button, or Pictures. Years must have gone by since it all started. It was only 2004 when "Googling" entered the Duden [Translator's Note: The leading German dictionary] in its 23rd edition.

I count my daily search requests: Depending on the kind of research I'm doing, there will be about 10 to 30 of them. I take the mean, 20, multiply it by 365 and again by 10, since I haven't used another search engine in at least a decade.

This leaves me with the conclusion that I've been on Google around 73 000 times total, researching soccer clubs, schools, orders of service of Catholic churches, material for my books and articles, travel destinations, flights, gossip and scandal. I've uploaded cards, planned routes, spent time on YouTube listening to – preferably – classical music, searched Pictures for chairs, tables, armatures, swimsuits, cloth and I don't know what else. I can hardly remember the times of Yahoo and I don't know any other search engine, so using one would never even have crossed my mind. Why not? Convenience, perhaps.

One week without Google – would that even be possible? The last words I type into Google before my experiment starts are: Alternative search engines.

Nearly 500 000 results show up in

just 0.34 seconds. I skim the descriptions and pick Ixquick, a Dutch search engine whose privacy protection – according to various Internet experts – seems to be exemplary. Ixquick won't store my IP address or observe my searching behavior and adapt their results according to it. It's also from Europe, which, considering US companies' willingness to cooperate with the NSA, I find to be beneficial.

Restraining myself from using Google isn't easy. To be entirely honest, it takes a great deal of effort – as if I had been brainwashed. The first two days I concentrate solely on staying away from it. When I click on the site by accident, I close it immediately afterwards – with a bad taste in my mouth. Doubts emerge almost instantly: Will Ixquick's results be delivered as fast and, most importantly, in the quality I've grown accustomed to? The

urge to compare the results of each query with Google is incredibly powerful.

On the third day, I start my first attempt. I type "narcissism" into Ixquick's search field – a subject I have to look into because of an article I'm writing. The results vary greatly, but they're all equally interesting. Not long until another question arises: How much does the course of an internet search depend on the search engine used, and on the adaptations made based on my collected data? On the fifth day, my restlessness and constant desire to compare search results have vanished. Obviously, I've weaned myself off, so by the time day ten comes around I decide to end my experiment. But will I return to Google now?

Google is, as comparisons have shown, very accurate. Then again, the

notion that – after a decade of searching for all kinds of things – it might know me better than I do disturbs me. Even search patterns that were the product of boredom rather than purpose have been stored by it. This means that Google knows what I'm most likely to do next even if I myself have yet to find out where the journey goes. Will the engine secretly direct me? If I was to turn my back on Google, I would pay with personalized accuracy in exchange for maximum discretion. So the question is, which do I consider to be more important? Right now, anonymity wins. I don't use Google anymore. And I don't miss anything.

" We are much more discreet than Google."

A Dutchman challenges Google: The search engine Ixquick doesn't store data. And yet, it still makes money.

Mr. Beens, the search engine Ixquick has existed for over a decade. Why does nobody know about it?

We count up to six million search queries per day. Granted, that's nothing compared to Google, who are in the order of three, maybe four billion, but it's still quite a few. And: Those who use Ixquick or our other site, Startpage, know exactly why they do it.

And that would be?

Because we're discreet, do not store data or IP addresses, and don't generate user profiles.

Those are claims I've heard from various search engine providers. What is true?

We have ourselves certified by the EU on a regular basis, which is an incredibly complex and expensive process – but only in Europe. In the USA one can simply buy a 'seal of discretion' and claim not to store personal data.

Your company, Surfboard, provides both Ixquick and Startpage. Where lies the difference?

Ixquick is a meta search engine using many different search engines as its source – except for Google. Startpage, on the other hand, is limited to Google results. If you have grown accustomed to Google, you can access their results through Startpage without giving away personal information.

Why do you run two search engines?

Because Google don't want their results to intermingle with those of other search engines under any circumstances, and we in turn don't want to give up Google results. They are excellent, after all.

How did you get the idea to make discretion your unique selling point?

I'm a lawyer. When I first invested in Surfboard, the company that provides Ixquick, Startpage and our encrypted e-mail program, Startmail, I asked our technicians what we actually knew about our user base. They confessed we knew everything, from IP addresses to search patterns concerning any topic

imaginable, no matter if legal, medical, or otherwise private. The idea to use the collected data commercially wasn't even on their mind yet. Data storage simply isn't expensive. I told them we had to get rid of all this personal information. For one, I consider the storage of this kind of data unethical. And on the other hand, being a lawyer I knew the risk behind it. Information may be stolen and abused.

That's a problem Google is dealing with as well.

Indeed. Even this company might fall victim to a hacking attack carried out by the Chinese, for example. For search engine users, there are three areas of risk: First of all, the hackers. Not even Google can keep your stored data safe. Second, the companies that read and check everything for potential usability, and make huge turnovers selling personal information. And third, the governments that spy out and collect data on a grand scale. That's a different problem altogether, because nobody knows how a nation's security service might put this information to use. Being a private search engine that doesn't collect personal data isn't particularly easy, by the way.

Why?

IT specialists have a tendency to collect information. They can't help it. A lot has to happen in their heads for them to stop doing it. In our case, this cultural change took two years to happen. Moreover, we deliberately dispense with profitable business. Since we don't store data, we can't personalize the advertisements companies place on our site – which is why we only get 25 percent of the amount Google would get for placing an ad.

But your company has got to know what I search for?

Your data gets deleted immediately. In addition, we equipped our search engines with a couple of other features – a so-called proxy, for instance, which allows users to not only search, but browse anonymously. For example, if your search takes you the site of the

Frankfurter Allgemeine [Translator's Note: A German national newspaper], the company behind it will be aware of your stay. If you do not want that, all you have to do is click on the 'Proxy' field located below each result. This way your query will be forwarded to our server before being passed on to the site, meaning only our IP address will be visible. To the F.A.Z. [Translator's Note: Acronym for 'Frankfurter Allgemeine'], you are invisible. And we don't install cookies on your browser, either.

Searching anonymously does have its drawbacks. The results aren't tailored to the user.

This is true. However, this also means you won't get flooded with ads each time you browse the internet, which can get rather annoying.

Is it even possible to earn money using this model?

It is profitable. For nine years we've been reinvesting our profits in the platform. Therefore, we don't depend on external investors. Of course they come and ask if we need money every once in a while, and there's the occasional bid as well. But for the leading internet companies, we're not attractive – because we don't collect data.

How many employees do you have?

We are a small company with a staff of about 30 to 40. Right now, our main focus lies on Startmail. It's a service

which allows users to send encrypted e-mails that can't be read elsewhere even if the recipient doesn't have an encrypted e-mail program of their own installed.

After all the revelations surrounding the NSA spying scandal and the BND, there must be a great demand for Ixquick, Startpage and Startmail.

We experience bursts of growth each time "big data" becomes a topic of public interest. During such periods, we do indeed count more queries than usual.

And yet people here seem – to put it mildly – rather unenthusiastic when it comes to questions of privacy. Why is that?

Google offers great products. And all from one source. The search results are excellent, and then there's Pictures, Maps, the enormous speed and, of course, Google's instant feature that immediately provides users with suggestions what to search for. We try to get better in that regard.

Startpage takes its results directly from Google. Do you get them for free?

No. We do pay for them. As for maps: In one or two months we're going to offer Openstreet Map on our site. What we try is build a platform one can use to discreetly and effortlessly obtain information or communicate.

Is communicating discreetly that complicated?

Sending an encrypted message means more than just writing an e-mail and clicking the 'Send' button. Our encryption is complex. My teams work on simplifying the process in a way that allows users to have their e-mails encrypted with just one click.

Doesn't the recipient need any encryption software as well?

That would be ideal, but the world isn't quite there yet. And because of that, it requires a little more effort on the sender's part to protect their content.

We managed to develop a reasonably user-friendly solution to this problem – a question-answer system. It works similar to providing a security question in case you lost your password. That way, if I wanted to send you an encrypted e-mail, you could read it without anybody else being able to, even if you're using Gmail – the Google service where nothing stays private. Google can't decipher the text. Encryption will be an important topic for the next decade.

How do you know that?

There are many startups who work eagerly on simplifying the procedure. If there's anything that might pose a threat to leading internet companies, it lies here.

Do you think it's still possible to topple the market power of big internet corporations?

This is something I can't predict. But thanks to the network effect, it won't be easy. Network effect means: The more people are using a service, the greater the benefits for all parties involved.

Is it of benefit that your servers are located in Europe?

Of course. Here in Europe there's no general surveillance program, after all. Whoever searches within Europe does so accessing European servers in Amsterdam.

Do you yourself still use Google?

Very rarely. And if I do, then just so I can see what new features they might have. Ever since I've become a market player and learned how powerful data is, I started being a little bit paranoid.



Robert Beens

Photo Andreas Pein

The interview was conducted by Inge Kloepfer.