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Week 0 Asynchronous Task Alpha: Ethical Article Summary and Analysis

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/13/technology/google-education-chromebooks-schools.html>

This article describes how Google encroached upon and came to dominate the education technology space with the promise of low-cost to free devices and services. By strategically targeting receptive audiences (namely educators and administrators at the school level), Google was able to initially bypass central bureaucracies and build grassroots support for their products, eventually making the adoption of its services a fait accompli. This ran counter to traditional ed-tech strategies, which tended to court the central bureaucracies first, leading to top-down adoption. The ethical concerns raised in this article involve the lack of transparency in how Google uses student data, especially once students transfer their accounts to private ones. The more transparent strategy of getting students to buy-in to the Google ecosystem while they are young so that they stick with it once they are adult consumers is also ethically problematic. One more concern gets to the aims of education itself. Google wants to promote a tech-literate student population that they can draw from when they enter the workforce, but what of the non-utilitarian aims of education?

Despite being someone who is circumspect about the motivations and eventual designs of corporations, I have to admit that the convenience and the low-cost nature of the Google ecosystem have made me a captive audience, especially as a teacher in a high-needs school. By proxy, my students are also fully ensnared in the Google ecosystem from the Chromebooks I purchased (from back in the days my school claimed not to have funds for devices) to the G Suite they use on a daily basis, especially with the advent of remote learning. Like Google's own initial strategy in entering the education space of moving fast, bypassing bureaucracy, often without transparency, I also pushed past an administration living in the past in my first years of teaching, going around their budgets and even starting our school domain behind their backs. I just saw the immediacy of the digital divide our students were on the wrong side of as the priority. What I didn't realize, until I read this article, is how I much more of a pawn I am in Google's strategy than I initially thought. I started college at Arizona State University in 2006, which also happens to be the year ASU replaced its costly internal email service with Gmail. At the time, not knowing any different, I just saw it as the natural course of things, but apparently I was a pawn in the frontlines of Mr. Casap's "firestorm," where ASU officials then evangelized to other universities, which eventually cascaded to the K-12 education sector.

I suppose another perspective is that a well-designed product that "organically" gives rise to user-generated testimonials should be celebrated as a triumph in a free market. As long as consumers continue to benefit from well-designed, user-friendly, low-cost products, what is there to complain about? Indeed, that is the type of counter-antitrust argument tech giants like Amazon employ. The problem is whether what consumers tout as the clear "choice" today will even be a "choice" moving forward, and when the choice space narrows to one, then the general public has much less power to demand such things as data privacy. Does all this mean our school will stop using Google products? Unfortunately, I don't know if we have much of a choice.