

## Book Review

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**K. Auletta, *Googled: the end of the world as we know it*, The Penguin Press, 2009, 384pp.**

**D. Soskin, *Net profit: how to succeed in digital business*, Chichester: John Wiley and Sons Ltd, Paperback, 2010, 301pp.**

The relentless advance of the Internet has now revolutionized society as the invention of the printing press did in its day. The World Wide Web is the product of a digital revolution now linking the entire world. It has engendered the growth of organizations the likes of which have never been seen before, such as not only *Google*, but pacemakers such as *Amazon*, *eBay* and *Facebook*, to name but a few. ‘Soft’ knowledge-based organizations, with very innovative human systems managements, made the running over ‘hard’ ones. It all happened in the US – both Europe and Japan did not produce anything truly comparable, apart from a few exceptions. Emerging both in hardback and paperback is a vast collection of books on the digital world and all its implications for business, economy, management and society. We now turn to a couple of recent user-friendly ones which exemplify the above.

First up is an account of how *Google* came into existence, prospered and grew. As the author, *Ken Auletta*, an eminent business journalist, points out in his subtitle, this is ‘the end of the world as we know it’. This work covers its ground in 17 detailed chapters. It is mostly descriptive with little theoretical underpinning but nonetheless accomplishes its remit very well. The Internet according to *Google’s* chief economist, *Hal Varian*, ‘makes information available’; *Google* ‘makes information accessible’. Auletta unpacks the organizational history of how this almost unique firm made it all happen.

Whilst not an academic business history, this book tells us how *Google* came into being, expanded exponentially and now covers a vast array of business

activities. It provides web-search, news aggregation and email, to name but a few. From its origins in the late 1990s, it is now a multibillion-dollar entity, bringing fame and fortune to its founders, *Larry Page* and *Sergey Brin*, two brilliant Stanford doctoral graduates in engineering. The author takes us through a breathless narrative, unfolding the *Google* saga, in its past, present and future dimensions, having had unprecedented direct access to its founders. Indeed, he reveals the company, warts and all, including their alleged predatory challenges to touchy areas, such as copyright and privacy. But the company relentlessly rolls on and now aspires to be the world’s first \$100 billion dollar business.

Second, we look at a book on how entrepreneurs can convert their so-called brilliant ideas into web-based hubs that generate profits. *David Soskin*, the author, is an experienced Internet entrepreneur and business commentator. His new book in eight well-structured chapters covers the commercial history of the Internet from its early years to the present day – with genuflection to the future. He seeks to show the reader how to link the customer to the digital world and how different types of revenue models can create value-added. The various chapters are very specific in their focus, zeroing in on such categories as *the product*, *the skills*, *the cash* and so on. A very useful chapter, the sixth, concentrates on marketing and seeks to inform the potential entrepreneur how to ‘drive traffic to your website’ [p. 171]. The author concludes with ‘Afterword’ [p. 266] offering a set of sensible maxims about setting up a digital business, finding its customers and making it pay.

Comparing the two books, the former has many advantages over the latter. The book on *Google* is an enjoyable and informative read, clearly written throughout. The other is set out in very short paragraphs, which look like they were dictated and is directed at a 'hands-on' readership. Whereas the Auletta book is quite well referenced with detailed footnotes and index, the Soskin one has only a one-page bibliography, although it has an adequate index.

What are the academic lessons to be derived from the above? As far as conventional management theory is concerned, we find a world turned upside down. The most innovative of these start-ups simply do not obey the rules. A number of the initiators did not even finish college, let alone go to business school – and indeed, you will not find many MBAs amongst them. Indeed, do not look for conventional organization here, as strict hierarchy and formal structure is not the order of the day. *Google* to some represents what we might call 'organized anarchy', with flat organizational structures,

providing a most unorthodox matrix for idea-generation and application. Most employees are given a day a week, or 20% of the time to work on projects they feel keen on. They are very well-rewarded for their loyalty and their zeal. Stock option grants to employees total over \$1 billion.

This is not a run-of-the-mill US corporation. It breaks all the rules but while *General Motors* and *Ford* faced bankruptcy in the recent Great Recession, *Google* continued to prosper and expand. As the author, Auletta, concludes: 'no one can write with certainty where *Google* and the digital wave is heading, where it will crest, or who it will flatten. But it will be hard to find another company that has swept so swiftly across the media horizon' [p. 336].

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