

DON RICARDO'S REPORT FROM THE HIGH RHINE... SELLING MEANINGFUL ASSISTANCE... JUNE 2014

Google, a name that requires no introduction, has unveiled more plans for reaching into the lives of its users worldwide. Speaking at a Developers Conference in San Francisco last week, founder and CEO Larry Page said: “we’ve been talking about a multiscreen world for a long time.... I think you’ll see it culminating in something that’s a great experience...” In this experience as envisioned by Mr. Page, Google’s Android, the company’s mobile operating system, and Chrome, its web browser, will operate as a kind of “glue” that will connect all our personal and household devices. New Google services will improve how computers work by combining personal data and information gathered from sensors to create “context aware” experiences in order to “truly start assisting people in a meaningful way.”

As an example of this meaningful assistance Sundar Pichai, Google’s executive in charge of Chrome and Android, suggested how a person’s smartphone Android would communicate with the system in his car: “If I go and pick up my kids, it would be good for my car to be aware that my kids have entered the car and change the music to something that’s appropriate for them.”

Referring to a system in which your computer detects your presence nearby, Mr. Page offered another example of meaningful help. In this scenario your Android equipped watch will tell your computer to turn on, thus saving you the trouble of typing in a password: “It just makes a lot of sense.... That’s a big hassle today.”

Appearing in the June 27th edition of the International New York Times, the forgoing report does not mention the obvious motive for providing this meaningful help—money to be made. In an article titled “Special Report: Homes for the Future,” Time Magazine estimates profits of \$12 billion annually within five years. Homes of the future will be rich in context aware experiences. A four year old company called Nest Labs is credited with helping to kick-start the boom in connected gadgets. The brain child of Tony Fadell, ex senior vice president at Apple, (Fadell is known in Silicone Valley as the Godfather of the iPod), Nest has been purchased by—you guessed it—Google, which acquired the company in January for \$3.2 billion.

Google makes software for any number of devices, and gives the code away for free to third-party manufacturers. To become context aware these devices need a lot of data mining to function. Fadell points out that Nest operates independently of its parent company, and that data it collects from these devices “won’t be shared without customer’s explicit permission.”

Maybe so. I can’t help feeling skeptical about a person whose helpful assistance ushered in the era of free music downloads, helping bring about the end of the music business as we knew it, resulting in disaster to thousands of musicians and songwriters, and copyright owners in general. (Of course, it was an earlier generation of technology—record players and radio—that made making a living from songwriting possible back in the early decades of the 20th Century. Technology gives and it takes away).

I sense some irony here, along with the fact that this information is coming to me via old-fashioned print media. I grew up reading Time Magazine, and I’ve been a steady reader of the New York Times since university days. It’s worth noting that the computer revolution and the Internet have also brought about the demise of journalism as we knew it, and much chance of making a career there. Along with this has come the demise of reliable delivery service: That’s what I call a big hassle today. I didn’t get my weekend edition of the Times again Saturday. I guess it will come Monday. Who wants yesterday’s paper? I paid for it and it didn’t arrive. Tough luck.

Nobody is asking me what I think of all this: A relic from the past, a dinosaur sinking into the tar pit, howling imprecations and singing the blues, I think it's all a snipe hunt, a pig-in-a-poke. Let's be honest: It's the money, stupid. Not satisfied with their billions, these tech wizards are all busy looking for the Next Big Thing so they can acquire more by reaching ever further into our lives. I would like to propose a truly meaningful experience: buy independent art, and music and help support the individuals who make it. Buy a book, or a CD. It doesn't have to be one of mine. Turn off your TV. Make your life and your home more joyful and inhabitable by supplying your own context.

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What's going on in Switzerland? Some much needed rain and a quiet Sunday at home. The amazing news is the Swiss team is still in the World Cup games in Brazil, winning two out of three games. I believe the USA team is in the same position. Researching my book about the Galveston Storm of 1900, I've been locked in the late 19th Century America. (I've been Googling, in fact). One thing I've discovered: then as now, people were coping with a dizzying array of new technology—electric lights, trolley cars, typing machines, telephones, the first wireless transmission of radio signals. The last was too late in coming to warn the citizens of Galveston. If ships at sea had had radios, they might have alerted them to just how bad a storm was headed their way.

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