

Julian Assange

An interview with the Wikileaks founder about his cautionary tome on the new ruling empire — Google



REUTERS/SUZANNE PLUNKETT

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Think of a hugely powerful company getting too close to government and security agencies and you might, post hacking trial, think of the Murdoch empire. Julian Assange wants you to think about Google.

Murdoch's empire used technology to spy on people and developed profitable relationships with the top echelons of government, with the disgraced former News of the World editor going on to be an adviser to David Cameron.

Google is much worse, says Wikileaks founder Assange.

"There are some parallels with phone hacking, but the Google case is much more severe," says Assange over a poor phone connection from the Ecuadorean Embassy, his home for the past two years.

"Google collects the world's data using services as bait, storing, indexing it and selling it — rather like the National Security Agency does to the U.S. government. The Murdoch empire only hacked 5,000 people some years ago.

"The Murdoch empire got close to senior people in government and low-level police officers but there wasn't a proper integration, unlike with Google and the NSA, where the company is very much seen as part of the defense-industrial base — a big company with vital services that are classified — as contracts going back to 2002 show."

Assange has Google in his sights because of a meeting he had in 2011 with Google chief executive officer Eric Schmidt and Jared Cohen, director of Google Ideas, who had recently joined the company from the U.S. State Department.

The pair wanted to interview him for a book they were writing about global technology and political power that they were provisionally calling "The Empire of the Mind," and came to meet him in rural Norfolk, where he was under house arrest

while he fought a Swedish extradition warrant over alleged sexual offenses.

The Google book came out two years later, now called "The New Digital Age: Reshaping the Future of People, Nations and Business," and was endorsed by the likes of Tony Blair and Henry Kissinger. But there was no endorsement from Assange.

By this time Assange had spent a year in the Ecuadorean Embassy in London, having sought asylum after losing his appeal in the U.K. Supreme Court against extradition, angering some of his supporters who had posted bail for him.

Now beginning his third year in the embassy, he says the Google book was a means to cement the technology giant's influence with the U.S. government.

"Google saw itself as Washington's geopolitical visionary, tracking how the world was evolving, collecting the data of billions through Gmail, advertising and searches. You can argue that Google was answering the question where America would go next.

"Google wanted to be close to leadership and have proximity to traditional U.S. power structures in the State Department and intelligence agencies. It wants a seat at the White House Situation Room because it feels — and rightly — that it is running America."

Not only that, but the Google book misrepresented Assange's words, he says, and Schmidt and Cohen conclude it would be "unfortunate" if organizations like Wikileaks were to take advantage of the new openness that the Internet offers. U.S. authorities are said to be considering bringing espionage charges against Assange because of Wikileaks' revelations about U.S. forces in Iraq and Afghanistan and the release of more than 250,000 U.S. diplomatic dispatches.

Stung by the accusations, Assange has now written a book of his own. "When Google Met Wikileaks" is essentially a transcript of his 2011 meeting with Schmidt,

Cohen, Cohen's partner — from a think tank with ties to the U.S. State Department — and the prospective editor of the Google book who became another State Department adviser. But Assange's biting additional commentary adds much to the book.

The delegation he met was "one part Google, three parts U.S. foreign policy establishment." Cohen, who had met contacts in the Middle East during the Arab Spring, is described by Assange as Google's "director of regime change" and "possessed of that relentless conviviality that afflicts career generalists and Rhodes scholars." Schmidt is already firmly embedded at the point where the "centrist, liberal and imperialist tendencies meet in American political life."

Assange found them quite likeable as people and there are humorous moments, such as when he corrects Cohen over the name of the encryption software Tor, which Cohen calls Thor. Assange adds: "And Odin too." But he writes: "Nobody wants to acknowledge that Google has grown big and bad. But it has."

In our conversation, Assange says: "Not that Schmidt and other Google senior executives are evil. It would be far too easy if they were Dick Cheney types. But they are part of a uniquely American neoliberal centrist provincialism with no perspective on the rest of the world that doesn't share their view of U.S. exceptionalism."

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Since 2012, Julian Assange has been living inside the Ecuadorean Embassy in London, U.K., while challenging extradition to Sweden, where he is under investigation over alleged sex offenses. Assange denies these claims and fears extradition to the United States to face charges of espionage.