

# Googlization: For Better or Worse?

**By Wayne Visser**

I have been intrigued by the twittering and gnashing of teeth over the past week or so over Google's launch of its Street View maps for 25 cities in the UK. This case illustrates the CSR-related dilemmas faced by many companies today. In this blog, I look at the basic facts, the pros and cons and the implied questions for CSR.

What is Street View?

Street View is a 360 degree photographic panoramic view of the streets, which can be accessed through Google Maps in the cities in which it is available. The photos are about a year old and faces and number plates are blurred out. Google believes this is simply an evolution of mapping, giving people more useful and accurate information about their travel routes and destinations. Although new to the UK, it has, I believe, been available in the US for some years already.

What are the Objections?

A number of thematic concerns have emerged in the post-launch hulabaloo:

1. Privacy - The most common objection is that this represents an invasion of privacy and a commercialisation of public space. Somehow, people feel vulnerable, even violated, by having photos of their homes, cars and in some cases themselves or their children, made public.
2. Security - There are concerns that Street View creates a tool for criminals (burglars and perhaps paedophiles) to search for, target and study their victims homes - do they have a burglar alarms, where are the windows and doors, are there children playing in the garden?
3. Consultation - Individual members of the public were not consulted, or asked for permission, before Google took photos of their home. They did this using a modified car, with a special mounted camera that drove down each street taking 360 degree photos.
4. Googlization - There is a deep mistrust among some portions of the public who believe Google is somehow taking over the world, invading our lives, like some sinister, evil meglomaniac - the latest in a long line of corporate colonisers and cultural imperialists, like Coca-Cola and McDonald's.

What is Google's Response?

Google is anything but apologetic. It doesn't believe it is doing anything wrong. Here are their reasons why:

1. Privacy - Since the photos are not live, they are taken in a public space, faces and number plates are blurred out and house owners have the right to request that their house image is removed from Street View, Google believes it is not infringing on people's privacy.
2. Security - Besides the pictures being more than a year old, any criminal could walk down a street and view the same house details without breaking any laws. Criminals use mobile phones and cars to help them commit their crimes, so should we ban mobiles and cars? Why should maps be different?
3. Consultation - There is nothing in law that requires anyone to get permission to take photos in a public space. Also, Google consulted with all the relevant UK authorities (including security and police departments) and got given the green light.
4. Googlization - Google believes it is popular because it offers useful products and services for millions of people. Google's motto is to "do no evil" and its vision is to make all knowledge freely available to everyone on the planet. It also has ambitious plans to make renewables cheaper than fossil fuels. Is this the picture of a monster?

What are the CSR Implications?

This all raises fascinating questions for CSR, for example:

- Legal Compliance - Google is not doing anything illegal, but CSR is about going beyond the law. What does "beyond compliance" mean in this instance? Does giving house-owners the choice to remove their images go far enough?
- Transparency - The launch of Street View came as a surprise (a shock even!) to most people in Britain. Where was the public information, let alone consultation, in the lead-up to the launch? Would there have been less reaction if the public was made more aware?
- Governance - Do companies need to consult stakeholders individually on every issue (surely this is impossible)? If the government is meant to represent the public, is it enough for companies to consult government agencies? Would it have worked better if other stakeholder groups were consulted?
- Power - At what point does corporate power and influence become dangerous? Google is providing vast free-to-the-public knowledge resources, but at the same time we are placing increasing reliance on one corporation to look after our personal details and private documentation. Isn't this risky?
- Demand - Isn't it hypocritical to demand that Google change, when consumers are clearly demanding and enjoying their services? Surely a public harm would need to be clearly demonstrated (the equivalent of poor labour conditions for low-cost

retailers, or health risks for fast-food chains)? Even then, government intervention is difficult in the face of widespread public support.

Google seems content to ride out the public mini-storm, confident that Street View will survive and thrive on its own merits, as it has done in America and elsewhere. But there seem to be some clear CSR lessons they could learn about consultation, transparency and increasingly worrying perceptions of their "Big Brother" mantle.

**Source:**

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