

Google's Jigsaw project has new ideas, but an old imperial mindset

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Google's new holding company, [Alphabet](#), has [announced the latest piece](#) in its [corporate restructuring](#) plans: Jigsaw. It's the jovial [rebrand of Google Ideas](#), the web giant's controversial diplomatic arm, founded in 2010 and headed by ex-US State Department policy wonk Jared Cohen. Jigsaw's stated mission is to use technology to tackle geopolitics.

Just another move in the exuberant tech industry, you might say; in a sector that's reported as if it is the fashion business, not the oil trade. But what Google is doing (and it is Google, despite the [niceties of Alphabet's organigram](#)) has far-reaching social, economic and political implications.

Six months ago, [Google created a new super-company](#), Alphabet. The core suite of Google Search, Ads, Gmail, Android, Apps and YouTube are still packaged as Google, which remains the formidable information-centralising, clicks-for-ads business that drives all of Alphabet's subsidiaries.

And [what are those subsidiaries](#)? To start with, Calico wants to hack death, [Nest](#) wants to stream-mine your home, Google Capital wants to fund all the [Ubers-for-firstworldproblems](#), and [Project Loon](#) wants to be [unshackled](#) from the realities of terrestrial infrastructure. And now, there's Jigsaw, "to expand access to information for the world's most vulnerable populations and to defend against the world's most challenging security threats".

What does Jigsaw do?

[Jigsaw](#)'s product line is pretty limited at the moment. A [Chrome extension](#) to prevent you from being duped into revealing your Google login, some [provisioning](#) for Google access to sites that have been subject to hacking attacks, and a [business information scraping tool](#) designed to assist money laundering investigations. Along with this, Jigsaw claims it's working on tools to counter [terrorism](#) and censorship, and to substantially reduce [online hate and harassment](#).

Notably, all of these tools are in Alphabet's financial best interest, and most also weaken governmental capacities to regulate the sprawling corporate group. They are accompanied by a broader diplomatic armoury that sees Alphabet deeply enmeshed across [government](#), academia, media and non-governmental organisations as a funder, partner, beneficiary and agent of soft power.

Acknowledging this pervasive influence, it's worth lingering for a moment on the name, Jigsaw. Brands matter, and the tech industry, with its lust for monopoly power, knows this better than anyone. Google's executive chairman, Eric Schmidt, [announced Jigsaw by saying](#) it "acknowledges that the world is a complex puzzle of physical and digital challenges", and that "collaborative problem-solving yields the best solutions".

And why does Jigsaw exist?

At its best, Jigsaw would be the humble cooperator implied by Schmidt's words. It would make available information – particularly aspects of its [own, internal, zealously-guarded data stores](#) – to researchers and public interest organisations.

But there's another reading of this development – one that is borne out by the history of Google's international policy interventions and its [uncomfortably close ties with Washington](#). And it's one that, jarringly, harks back to the [origins of jigsaws](#) in the late eighteenth century, as [dissected maps of the British empire – cultural objects of imperial ideology](#).

The deep, existential problem with Alphabet is an ancient one. In short, [whoever controls information controls the game](#). And Alphabet's activities all build on centralising, controlling and mapping information – information that, increasingly, comes from the intimate sphere: our unfiltered questions, our bodies, our genes, our homes.

We understand implicitly that information is derivative; that the trace is not the person; that the map is not the territory. But the business of tech is to collapse these distinctions. And this is why Jigsaw's involvement in geopolitics is so problematic. [Alphabet](#) wants to open, flatten, map and mine the world and its people. Along the way, variations in cultural and social sensibilities, in history and legal traditions, in the demands of institutions both legitimate and illegitimate – these are all frictions; problems to be solved.

In their excellent book, [The Real Cyberwar: The Political Economy of Internet Freedom](#), Shawn Powers and Michael Jablonski describe Google's unprecedented dominance of the contemporary data economy. Drawing attention to the irregular regulation of the global data trade, when compared to all other commodities, they note “the power of the internet-freedom agenda to legitimise a particular set of economic practices”.

Can geopolitical problems be tackled by a for-profit company?

This internet-freedom agenda is at the heart of Jigsaw's pitch. By billing untrammelled digital connectivity as a development solution for billions of people, Google insulates itself from much more reaching questions about both its own wealth, and about the sources and solutions to poverty and inequality. The reality is that tech-based solutions [completely fail to address that poverty and inequality are, at their heart, about the distribution of power](#).

To keep checks on power, it is crucial that we have [legitimate, effective regulation of competition and antitrust](#), that [consumers are protected](#), that [multinationals don't evade tax](#), and that [fundamental rights are respected and protected](#). In short, it requires not that companies *cooperate* – but that they *comply*.

What is the missing piece in the coverage of Jigsaw? Only the most important thing: that human development and flourishing is too important, too complex, and too culturally diverse to be left to profit-driven companies, acting of their own initiative.

“While it seems clear that Googlers do genuinely support freedom of expression as a fundamental human right,” state Powers and Jablonski, “there is little evidence that this is the

reason the company pursues greater global connectivity.” Instead, “Google’s interest is in spreading access to the internet exclusively on its own terms.” And to this end, users – that is, us, people – are disposable: “Google is simply a transaction platform whose primary purpose is to match buyers and sellers”.

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