Goomics

Google's corporate culture revealed through internal comics

Volume II

2015 – 2020

Disillusionment

Drawings and text by Manu Cornet

*For everyone at Google who could have fired me over the
drawings in this book, and didn't. Yet.*

Foreword

I loathe forewords, and I'm sure you do too. So let's make this quick.

- Reading "Goomics, Volume I" (great value, tell all your friends about it) is a plus, but not necessary. The glossary on page 133 is here to help.

- Words that have an entry in the glossary are printed in color the first time they appear in a chapter.

- Feel free to jump around and read the chapters in any order you want—there should be enough context and cross-referencing in case anything is unclear.

- Under each "episode", you can see its number in the sequence, along with the date when it was published on Google's internal network.

- If you are looking for an unbiased, objective, and balanced opinion on Google over the years 2015–2020, this isn't it. Of course I am trying my best to be as accurate and factual as I can in the text, but comic strips as a means of expression are almost by definition rooted in exaggeration. And comics that are entirely positive are seldom funny.

- Some of the stories in this book may sound familiar and bring back some bittersweet memories. In the spirit of accountability, I'm going to take credit for the sweet and blame Google for the bitter.

Happy reading!

A is for Accountability

WHAT happened? It was a slow, inexorable decline. Google's transparency and accountability used to make us proud to work there. Every once in a while I would have a guest at the Googleplex, show them Charlie's Cafe where TGIFs were held for as long as I could remember, point at the stage and say proudly: "Every week, the CEO and the founders get up on stage and any employee can walk up to one of the two microphones in the audience and ask them tough questions". My friends, family members, and acquaintances were impressed at this level of openness. That sure wouldn't be possible at *their* workplace.

Those were the good old days. Larry Page and Sergey Brin would alternately take top questions from Dory (an internal site allowing employees to post their own questions and vote others up or down) and from the audience. They would answer with candor, and sometimes with a touch of humor. Even Eric Schmidt, who was obviously well-versed in the Jedi mind-trick of making interviewers believe he had answered their question, would sometimes provide his refreshingly honest insights.

So, what happened? Perhaps providing some partial answers to this question is what this book is all about: What is it that causes a company's culture to go downhill over the course of just a few years (see in particular chapters "Leaks", "Opacity", and "Normal Company")? Whatever the reasons, one visible effect was that executives on the TGIF stage gradually stopped believing that they were accountable to an audience of normal employees. Chances are that "media training" had more and more in common with "TGIF stage training"—and maybe with dodgeball practice.
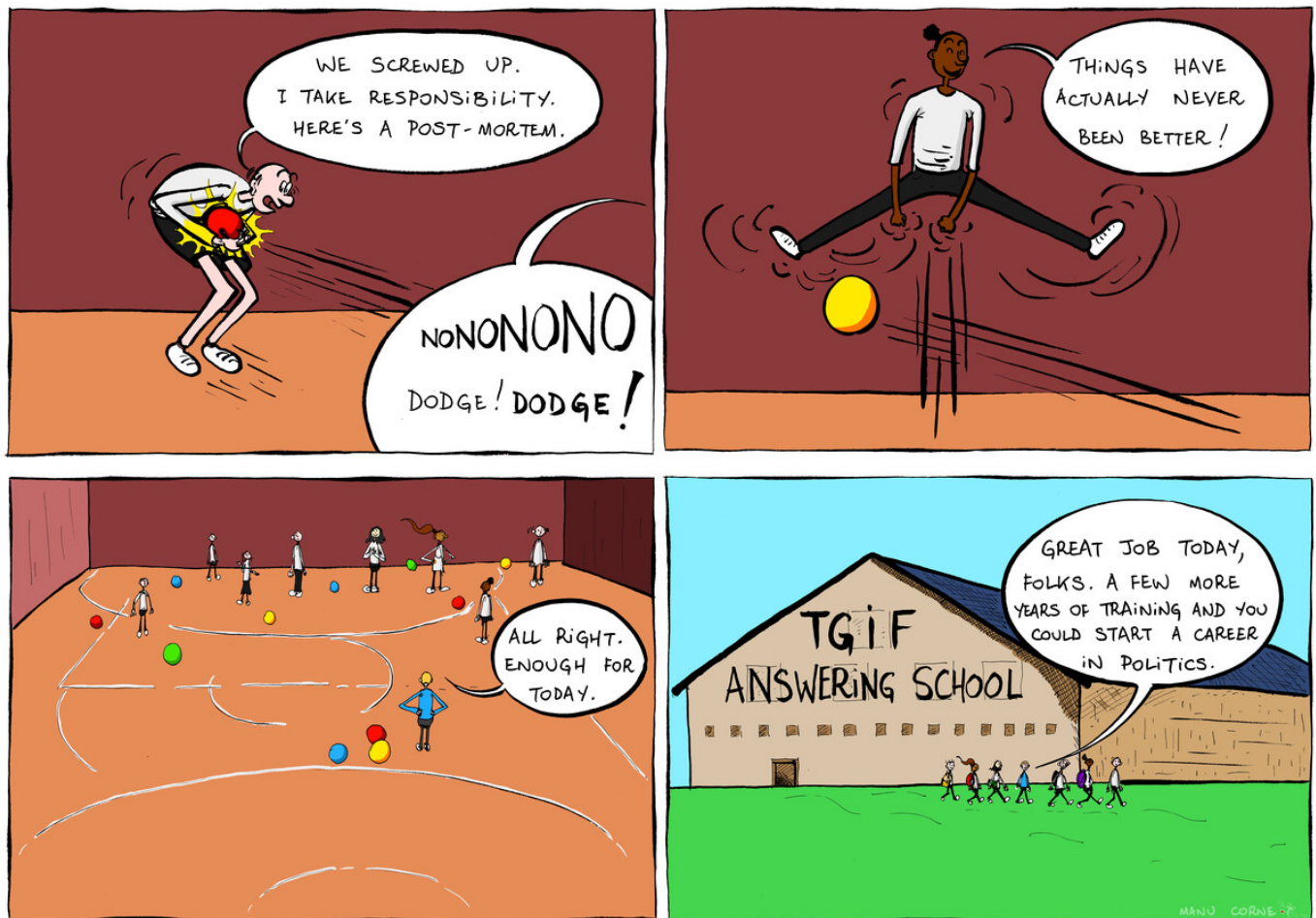
Episode #255   2018-05-24

Such inconclusive answers would, at least for as long as one of the company's founders was still present on stage, get punctuated by a facial expression that seemed to say, "yeah, that didn't make much sense to me either, but oh well". Something like:

Kent Walker, Google's chief lawyer, was the only one who was able to both provide a weaselly answer *and* wrap it up with his own facial expression:

THAT PRICELESS LOOK ON KENT'S FACE AFTER HE ANSWERS A TGIF QUESTION: "I KNOW I DIDN'T GIVE YOU A VERY SATISFYING ANSWER, BUT IF I DID, I KNOW ALL TOO WELL WHAT THE LEGAL CONSEQUENCES MAY BE."

Episode #241 (I once left a print of this drawing on his desk. Don't think he was amused.)   2018-01-23

Originally, unsatisfied employees could walk up to a microphone and ask a follow-up question to try and pry a real answer out of the people on stage. Yours truly did that once (see chapter "M").

But then, as time went by, everything that could hold leaders' feet to the fire was taken out of the process. Live questions were removed (on the pretext that this wasn't fair to employees who were tuning into the session remotely), leaving only written questions for which answers could be prepared in advance. And then even those were, let's say, *curated*. The "official" way for lowly employees to send feedback up the chain was Googlegeist, a yearly survey whose numerical scores could give a hard and fast sense of how people were feeling about their employer. The final nail in the coffin was that after a few years, those numerical scores were only compared to the previous year's, lest employees be disheartened by the steep downward slope over a longer period.

B is for Border Control

Speaking of accountability, there was one set of questions that leadership was particularly twitchy about towards the end of 2019.
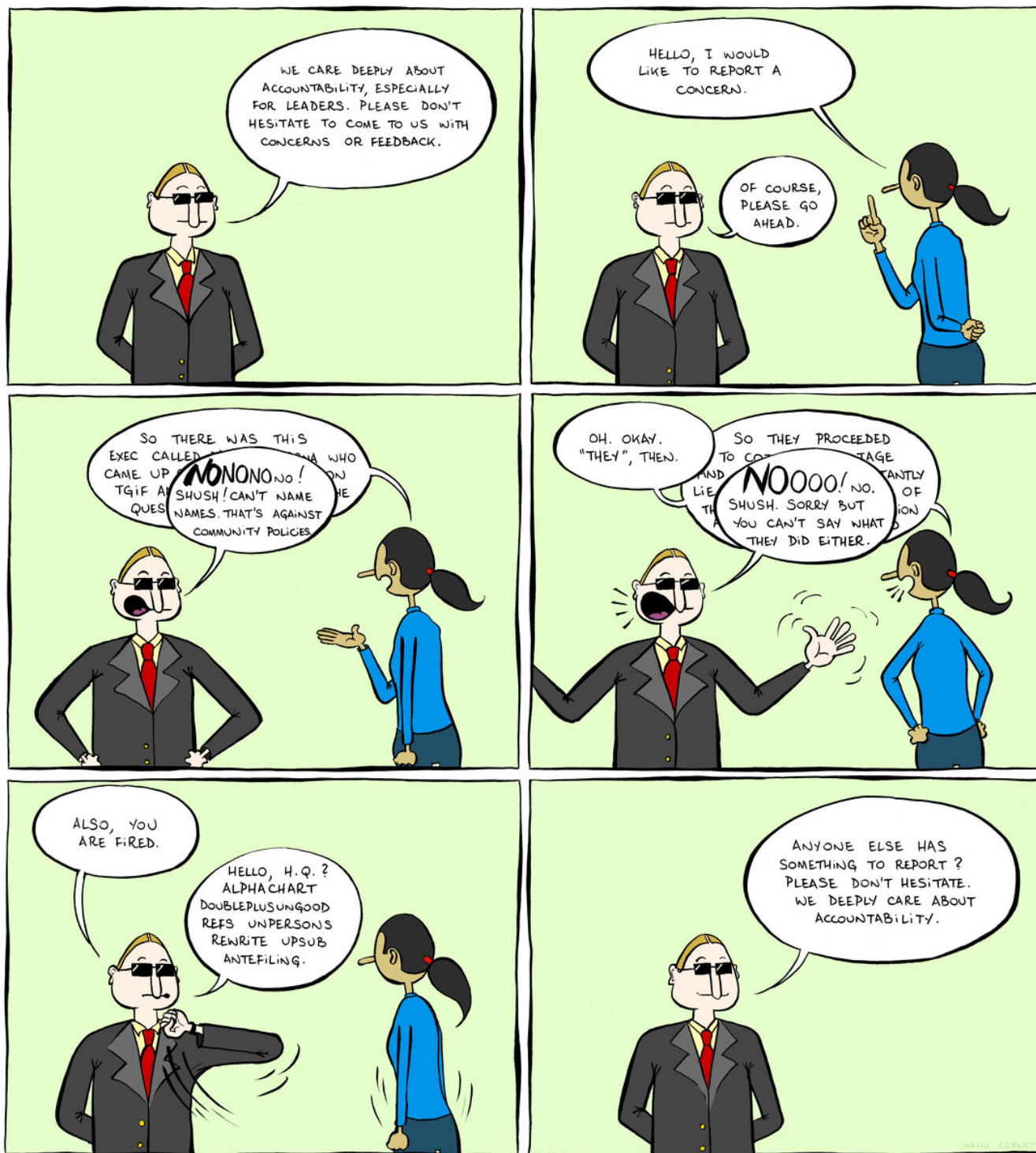
What was this sensitive topic? It turns out that on 17 September 2019, Google hired one Miles Taylor, formerly Chief of Staff to US Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen (under President Trump) who was directly involved with a policy to separate children from parents accused of illegally crossing the US–Mexico border.

Employees all around the world expressed their concern about such a hire. At TGIF, most questions on the topic were struck down before they could be answered (on the pretext that *ad hominem* attacks were against the rules). Those that weren't struck down were met with a very special kind of answer on stage: "alternative facts", developed during the Donald Trump era. In normal English: lies. Namely, that Miles Taylor had never been involved with the inhumane border protection policies.

This was significant because it was (to my knowledge) the first time Googlers were actively lied to by someone on the TGIF stage. Sure, fuzzy answers and corpspeak were one thing. Statements tha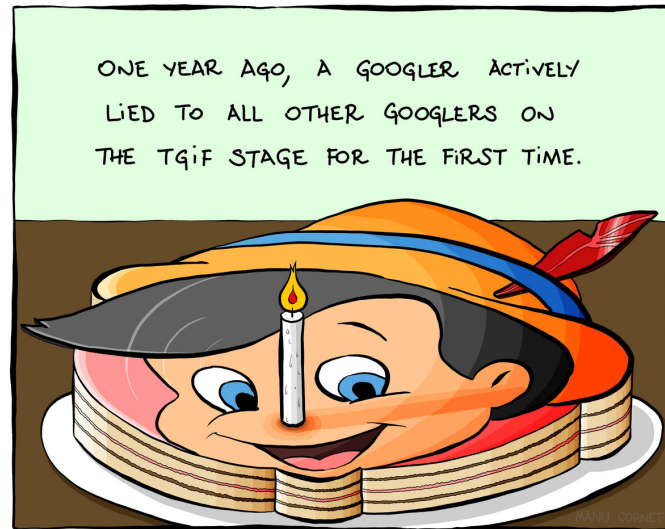t the speaker (in this instance, Karan Bhatia, head of public policy and government relations) knew to be demonstrably false, were another.

Episode #350   2020-10-22

As a French proverb says, "only imbeciles never change their mind", and so Miles Taylor, to his credit, eventually got around to turning against his former administration. Still, the children who had been separated from their parents and put in cages at the border had some minor leftover qualms.
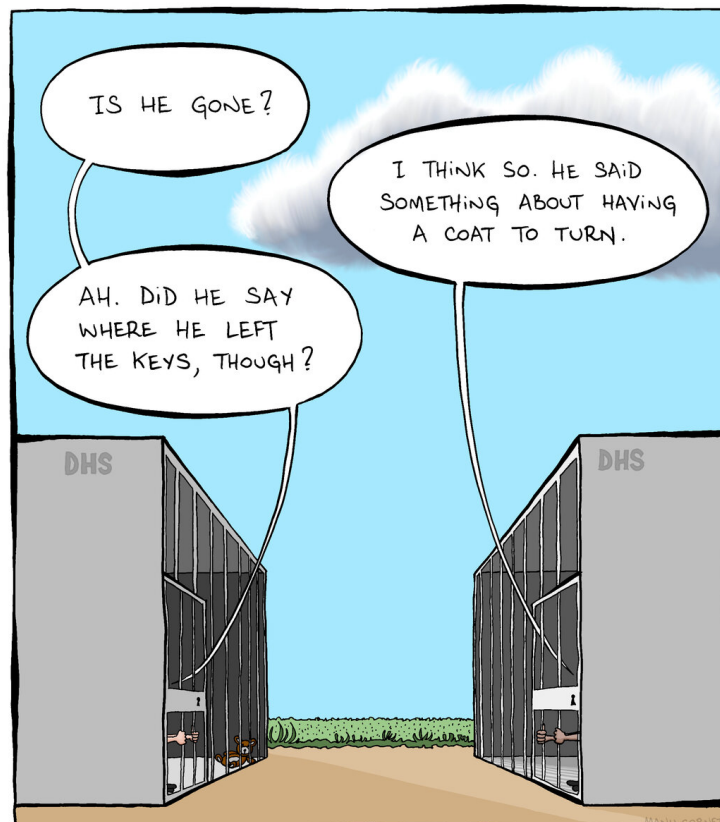
Episode #354   2020-11-09

And this wasn't even the only way that Google was getting involved with CBP (Customs and Border Protection). Google's Cloud division (newly taken over by Thomas Kurian) was aggressively pursuing government contracts, including one with CBP, using free trial periods and other standard sales practices (which was quite different from passively letting that organization use an off-the-shelf software solution). "Don't be evil", eh?

Episode #301   2019-08-22

This wasn't pretty business, and Google was contributing to it, even if indirectly. Was there a historical analogue? Well... there goes Godwin's law (and we're not even at the third chapter yet).
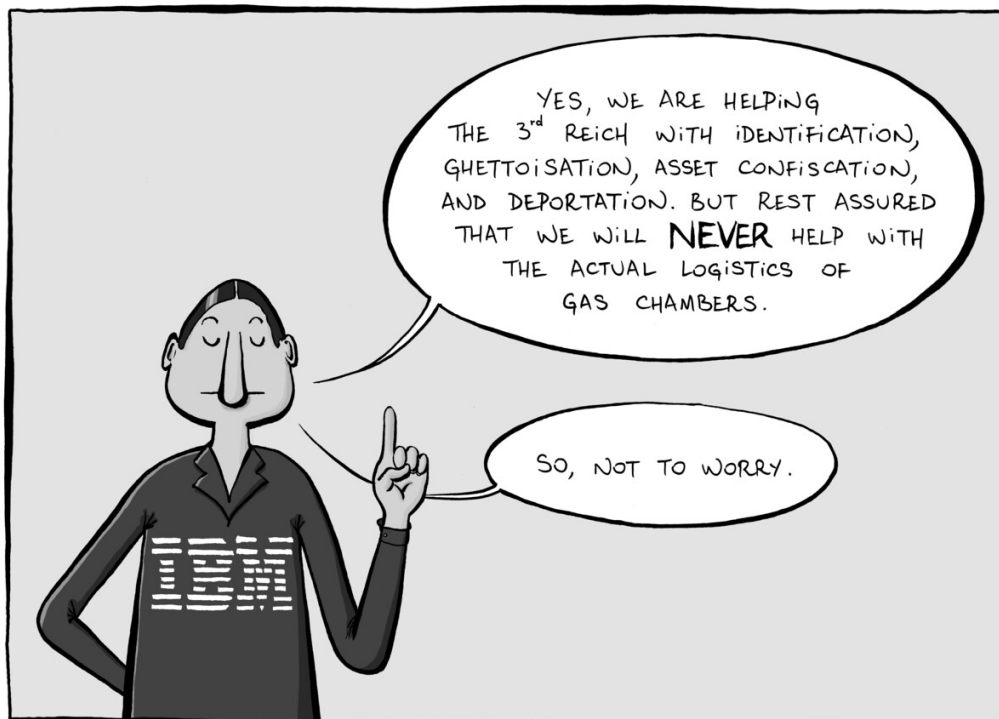
Episode #302   2019-08-26

(Boy, did I ever get in trouble for this drawing, especially with "Jewglers", as Jewish Googlers call themselves.)

C is for Corpspeak

I may be too much of an avid George Orwell reader, but I believe manipulating how people think begins with manipulating how they communicate. What better way to discourage an employee from doing something you dislike than by gradually removing the associated words from their vocabulary? In Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, isn't "thoughtcrime" the mother of all crimes? Instead of allowing employees to have a clear view of what's going on, let's drip feed them blurry, long-winded, roundabout speech in place of tangible, straightforward information. To prevent "thoughtcrime", here comes "newspeak". Okay, maybe that's pushing it a little. But whenever language starts to get dumbed down, it's got to be a bad sign.

That evolution was certainly not unique to Google. But with some amount of optimism (and maybe naivety), one would have doubted its rapid propagation within this company that had once vowed to remain "unconventional". Alas, the 2010s saw the unmistakable signs flourish. Straight talk was giving way to euphemisms, litotes, and periphrases. There were more words, and less meaning.

One such euphemism is the use of the title "An Update on…" to announce a discontinuance or depreciation, like Google's blog post announcing the death of Google Wave in August 2010 ("Update on Google Wave"). Good job corpspeak, now every Joe Googler who decides to quit the company sends their farewell email with the subject "An update on Joe". It's one of those things that started as a joke and that people now use without necessarily knowing where it came from.

By 2016, when Alphabet wanted to announce that the Google Fiber effort was going to be drastically reduced, "An Update on…" was perhaps too obvious already, so the time came for the title "Advancing our amazing bet" instead.
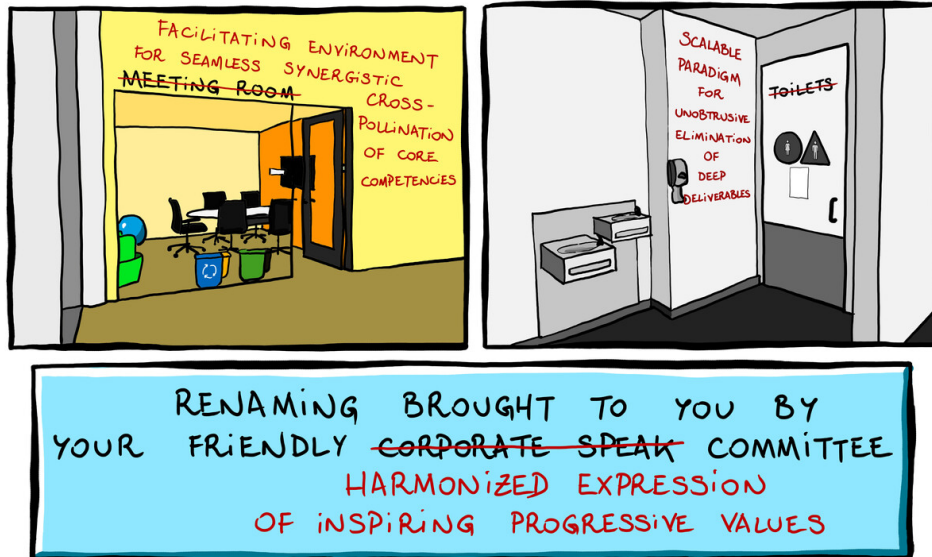
Sometimes the corpspeak level was so high that things ceased to make sense. Sundar Pichai once sent an email whose subject read "The voice of the user". The email itself had nothing to do with users or their voice. Instead, it was just announcing a bit of a reorganization, with Jen Fitzpatrick, Prabhakar Raghavan and Ben Gomes taking on new roles (have you received those kinds of emails where the sender assumes you care, but not only are you clueless about what this changes for you—you don't even know any of the people referred to by their first name?). It was as if Sundar had been delegating the writing of his emails and their subjects to different departments, with a third department being responsible for matching emails with the proper subjects—and people in that department had had a little too much wine that day.
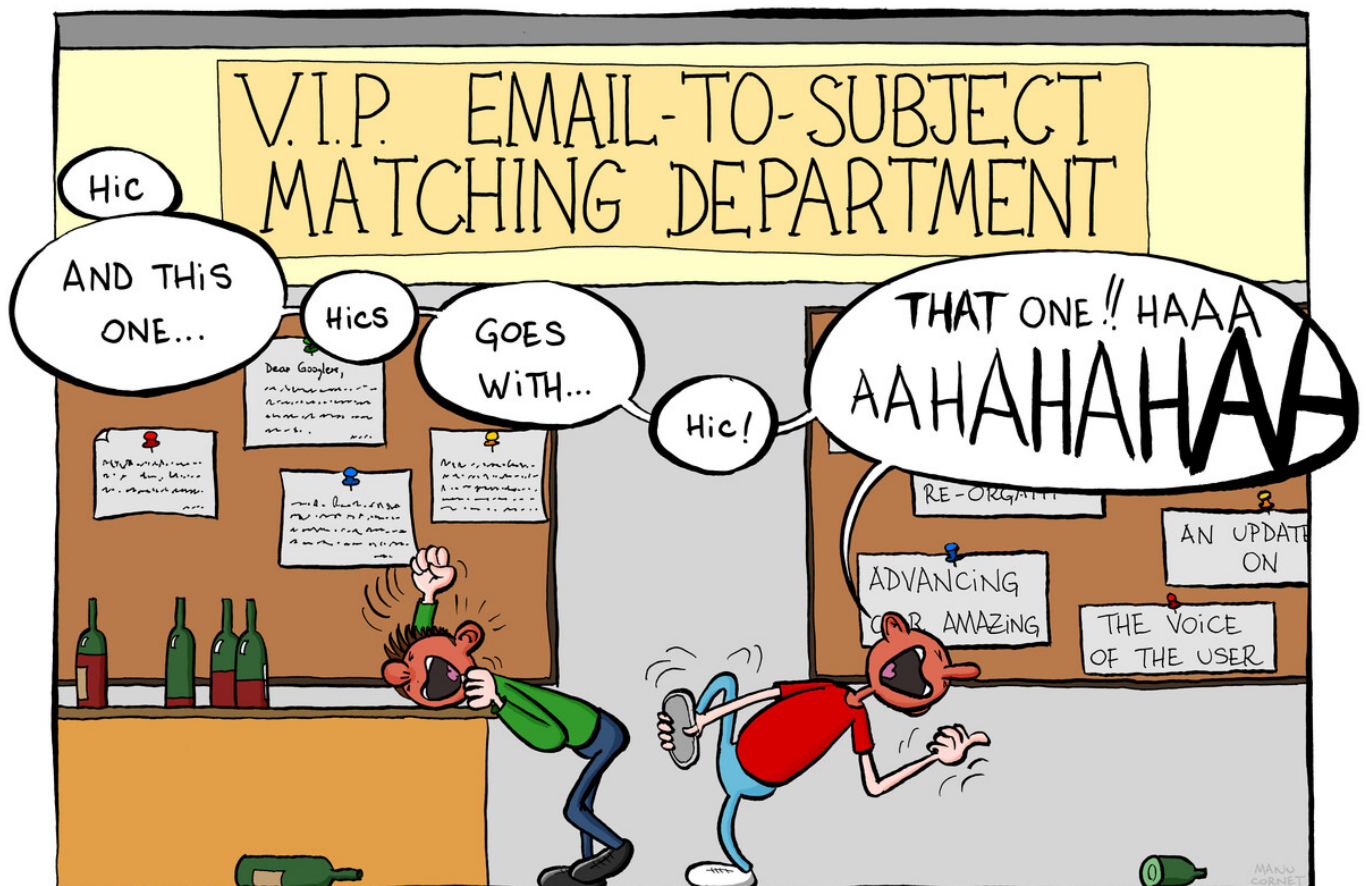
Even engineers, who should have been last to let convoluted expressions contaminate their to-the-point lingo, were starting to use euphemisms to avoid showing their ignorance.

PHRASE	TRANSLATION
"I DON'T KNOW."	I DON'T KNOW.
"I DON'T REALLY KNOW."	I DON'T KNOW.
"I'LL GET BACK TO YOU ON THAT."	I DON'T KNOW.
"I'M NOT SURE."	I DON'T KNOW.
"I'M NOT 100% SURE."	I DON'T KNOW.
"I'M NOT ENTIRELY SUPER DUPER SURE."	I DON'T KNOW.

Episode #300   2019-08-21

But if lowly employees also started to master the power of empty words, what would come next? It is safe to assume that management wouldn't have liked to see their own weapons turned against them.

Episode #332   2020-05-01

But of course, what better location for witnessing the corpspeak takeover of the company than... you guessed it... on the TGIF stage. When pretending to answer questions from Googlers, it was as if executives were competing against one another to see who could speak the longest while actually providing the least amount of information.
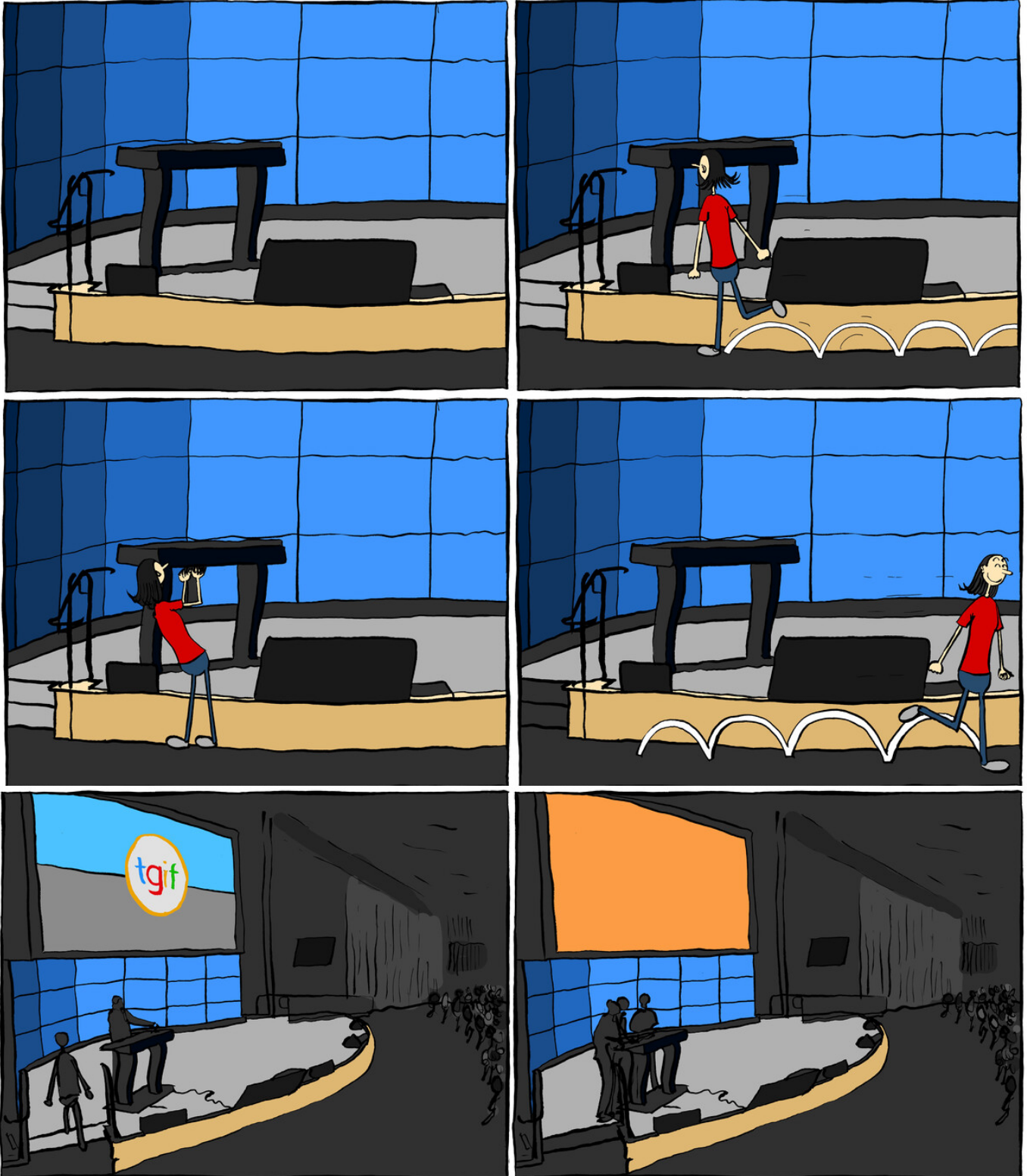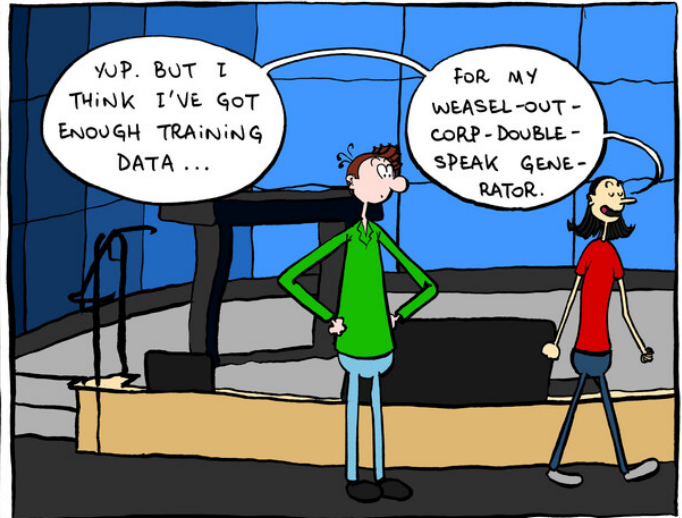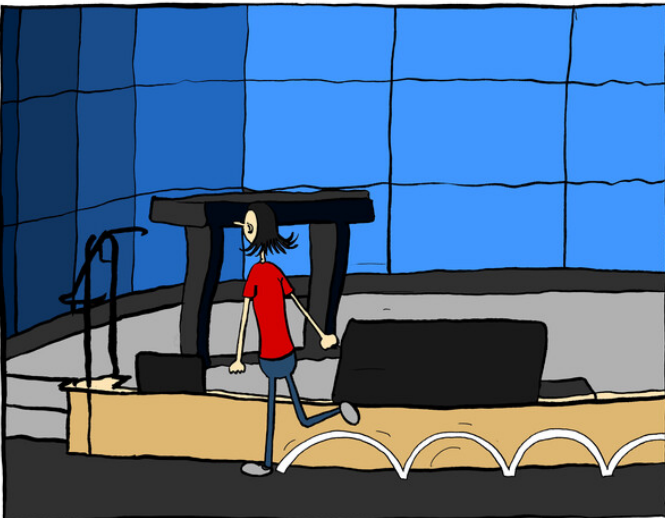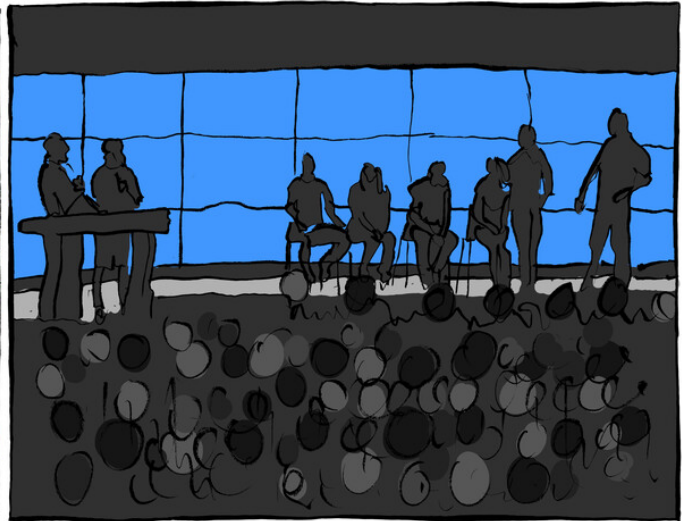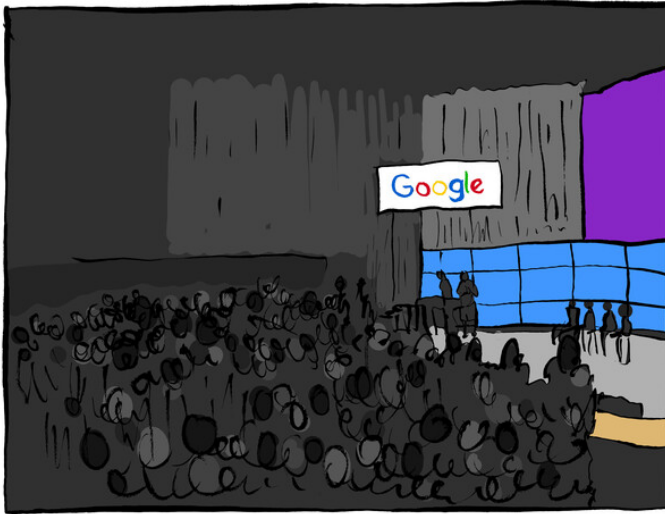
And at that game, Sundar certainly had some skill. However, his own flavor of corpspeak was a little lacking in the variety of expressions he used. He was particularly fond of "deeply committed" and "thought-fully" (so much so that when he was once presented with a difficult matter, he said he would think about it very thoughtfully).

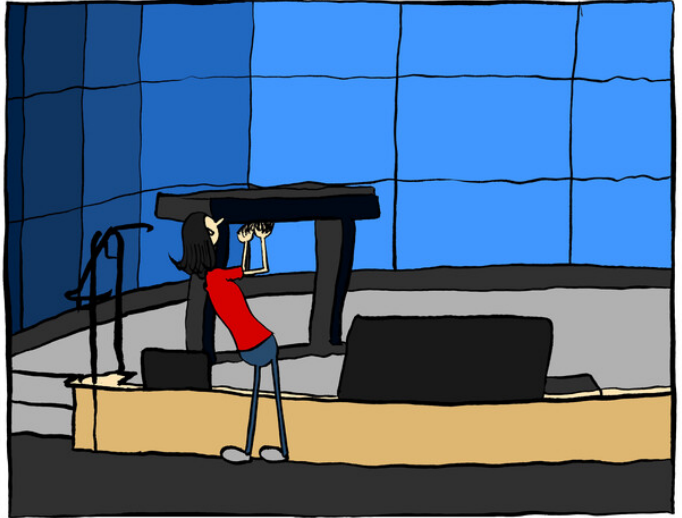You know how YouTube has an automated "takedown" process (dubbed "Content ID") that recognizes when a video's contents or music has been copied from an existing source? It was easy to imagine this

process being applied to the repetitive speech of Alphabet's own CEO, effectively plagiarizing his own empty words over and over again.

Episode #290   2019–03–07

Interestingly enough, this drawing offended a few employees: they mentioned how it was unacceptable that Sundar was "literally being tied up and carried away against his will". I think they might need a refresher on the meaning of the word "literally" (hint: if a person is made of colored pixels or paper and ink, chances are it isn't an actual person).

So maybe the solution to avoid being taken down by the Content ID overlords was to make sure that each canned response was only being used a small number of times for each TGIF session. Those could be limited use phrases in a game for people on stage: "first-person corpspeaker"?
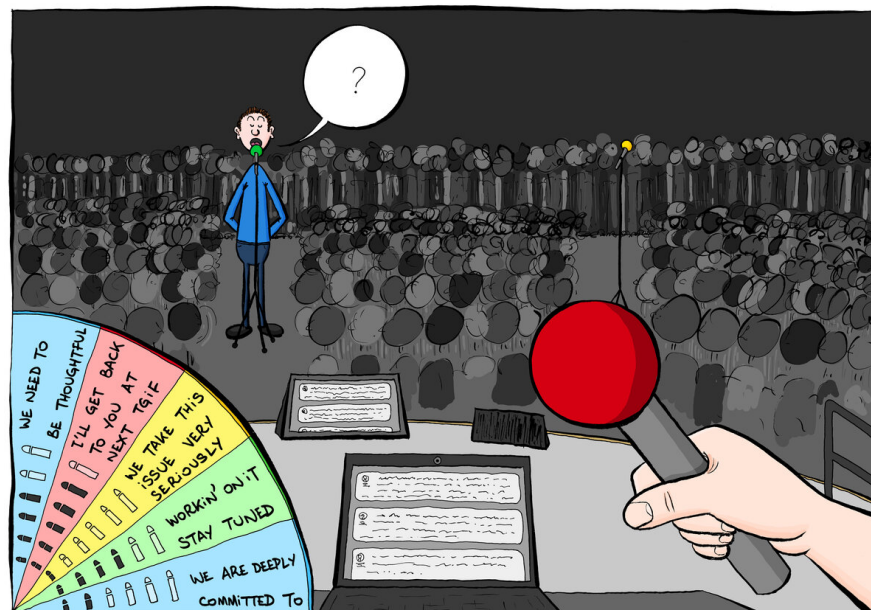
Episode #284   2018–12–03

But wait... isn't there a problem with this plan, avoiding addressing problems head-on and pretending everything is going well through the fog of flowery language? What if the company's image is worsening in the outside world? How do you not let your employees get affected by that? Thankfully Google had its own propagand... errrrrr... newsletter, called the "Daily Insider", whose purpose was to give employees a summary of what was happening in the wonderful world of tech (especially Google).
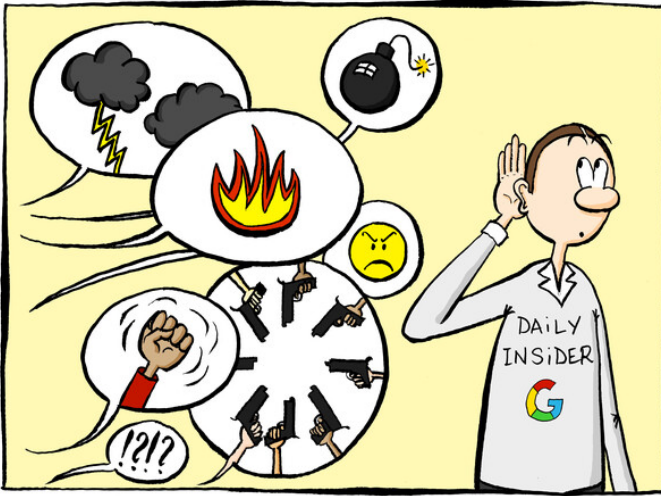
Episode #319
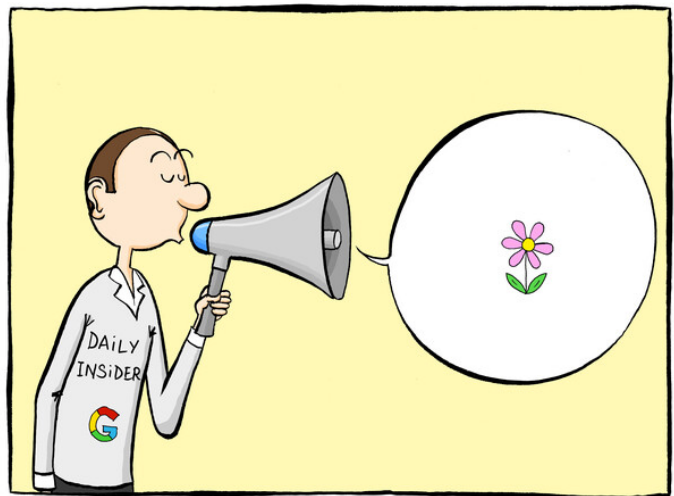
2019-12-05

Problem solved.

D is for Design

"CAN Google get better at design", the saying went, "faster than Apple gets better at web services?". Apple had always been better at design, and in the 2010s Google was definitely closing the gap. But it was perhaps trying a little too hard. Well, they were certainly redesigning things. For sure. Constantly.

... AND NOW, IF I ... WHAT THE... YOU GUYS HAVE CHANGED EVERYTHING AGAIN?! I WAS JUST STARTING TO FINALLY BE ABLE TO USE THIS PROPERLY! YOU GOTTA STOP REVAMPING THINGS ALL THE TIME!!

HMM, THAT'S FAIR. LET ME SEE WHAT I CAN DO.

SORRY, NO CAN DO. NOT ENOUGH PEOPLE WOULD GET PROMOTED.

Episode #366   2021-04-12
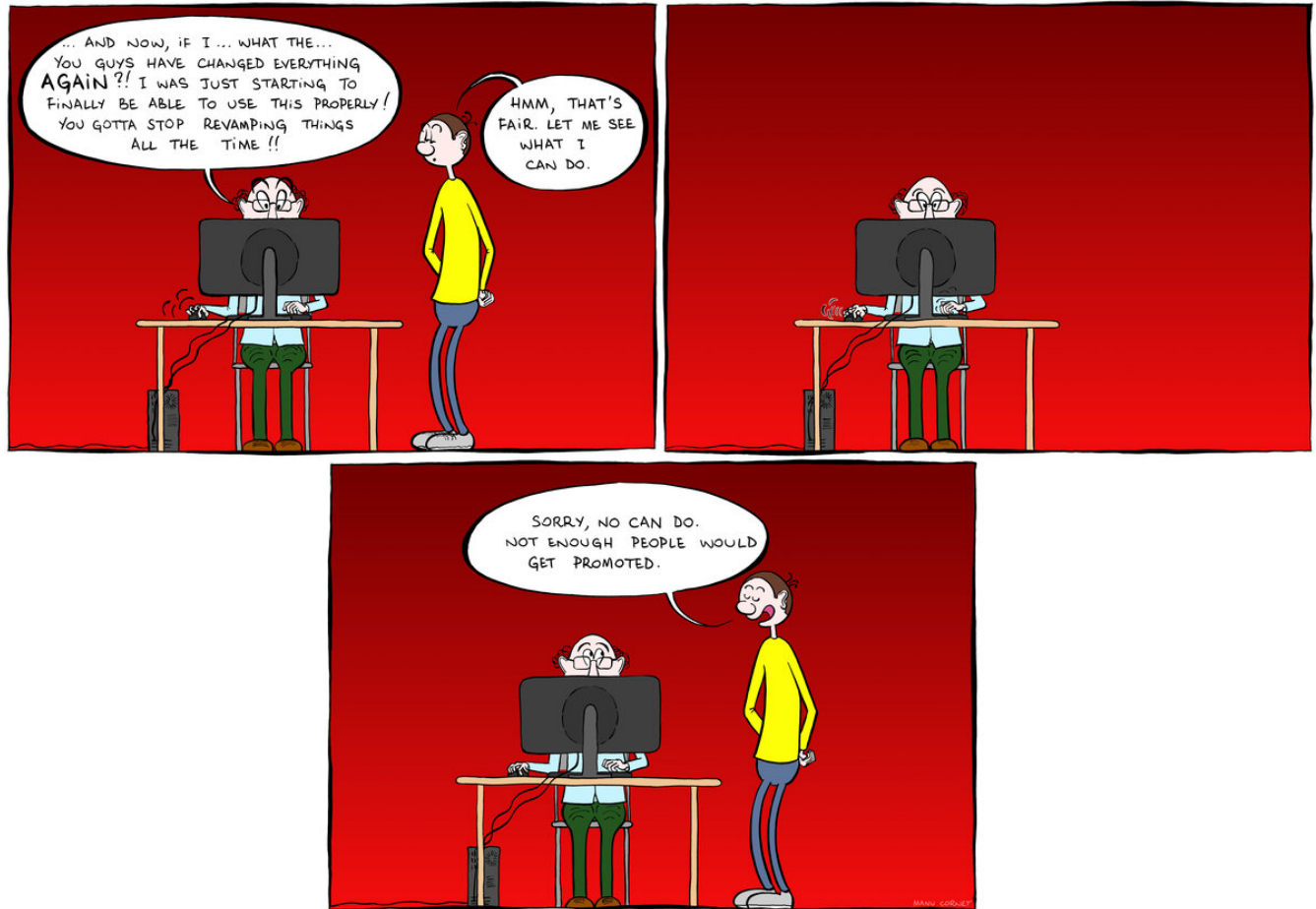
The most prominent redesign was that of Google's own logo, towards the end of 2015—and I thought the new design would be particularly liked by Yoshka, Urs Hölzle's dog, and the first Google dog (or "doogler") back in 1999 (Urs Hölzle was Google's 8th employee).

HEY LARRY, REMEMBER WHEN I TOLD YOU IT LOOKED LIKE COLORED CANDY?... FRIENDLIER, YEAH... WELL YOSHKA DEFINITELY AGREES IT'S THE MOST LICKABLE SO FAR...
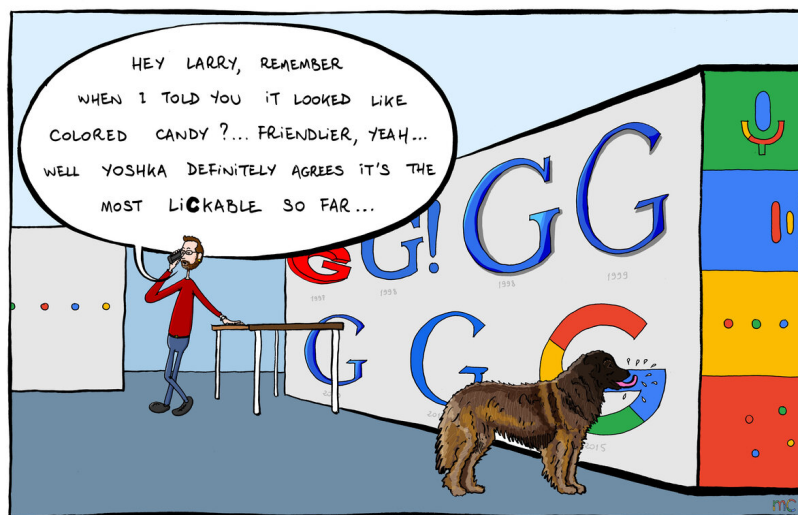
Episode #201   2015-09-03

Alas, I was soon corrected. Yoshka passed away in 2011, and the NoName cafe in the Googleplex's building 43 was renamed to Yoshka's Cafe.

Of course, Google didn't rest there with their repetitive rondo of redundant redesigns. As soon as you got used to an application's logo on your smartphone's homescreen, you could bet that another change was around the corner. And in late 2020, they were all redesigned to include the four vivid colors. In theory: more consistency across the company's products. In practice: indistinguishable icons, worse accessibility, and a renewed dose of mild annoyance from their users.
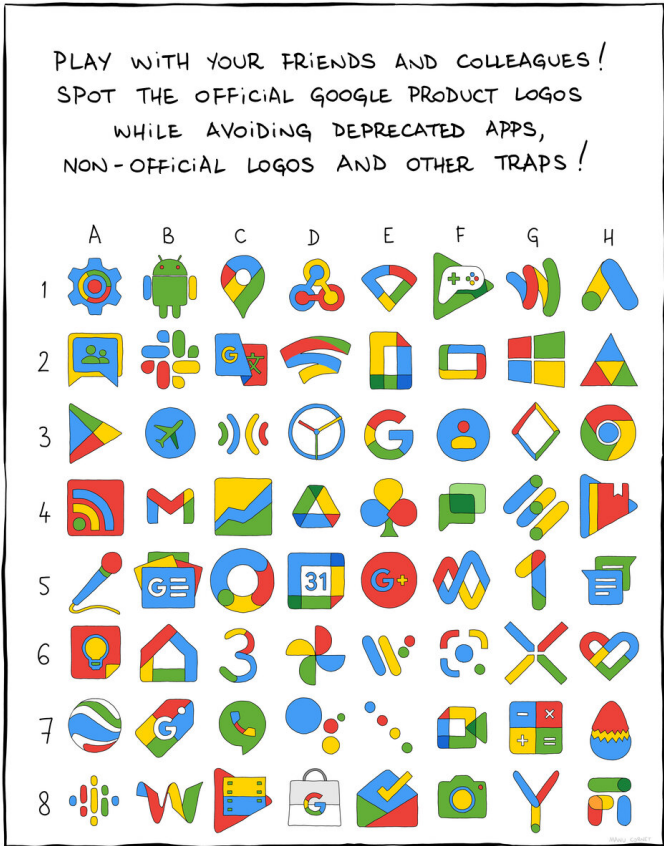
Episode #352 (see answers p. 132)   2020-10-29

If using too many similar colors was confusing, maybe relying on monochrome shapes would work better? Would that also remove the need for pesky textual labels? Hmm, maybe not.
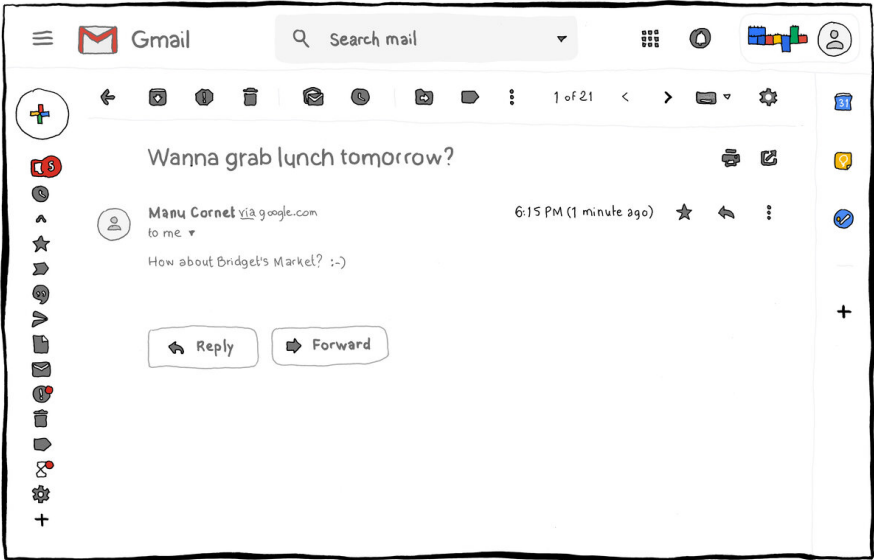
FUN FACT: REAL GMAIL USERS HAVE DONE 8 YEARS OF EGYPTOLOGY AND STUDY OF HIEROGLYPHS.

Episode #267   2018-08-14

You know how some companies are known (accurately or not) to favor a certain role? At Google, you'd want to be an engineer; at Apple, a designer; at L'Oréal, you'd certainly want to be in the marketing department. As Google focused increasingly on design, and being an engineer myself, I had to express my pitiful jealousy by taking cheap shots at some common designer traits—such as their tendency to disregard anything that doesn't conform to their design...
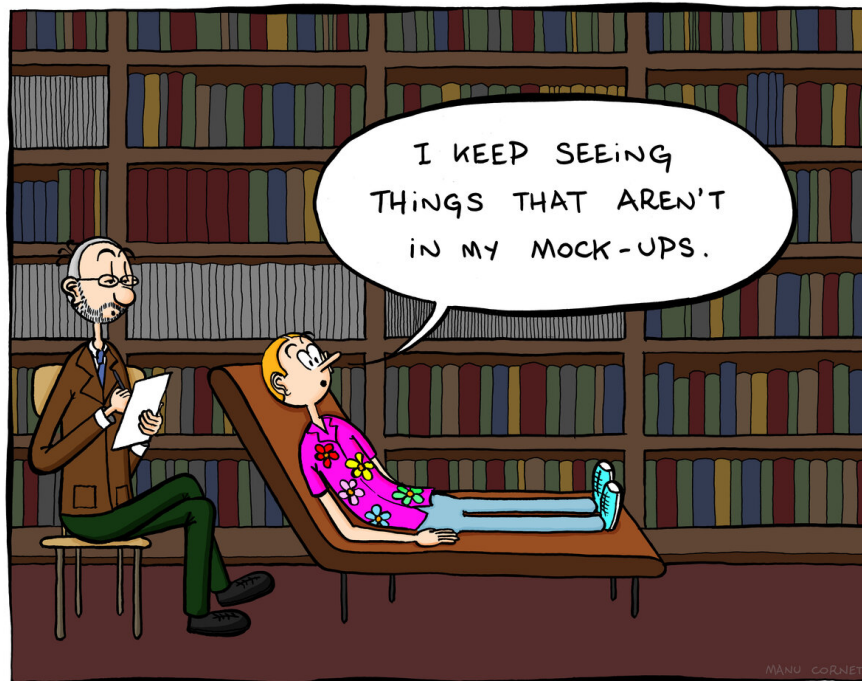
Episode #359   2020-12-29

... or their unfortunate habit of drastically changing plans halfway through a project.
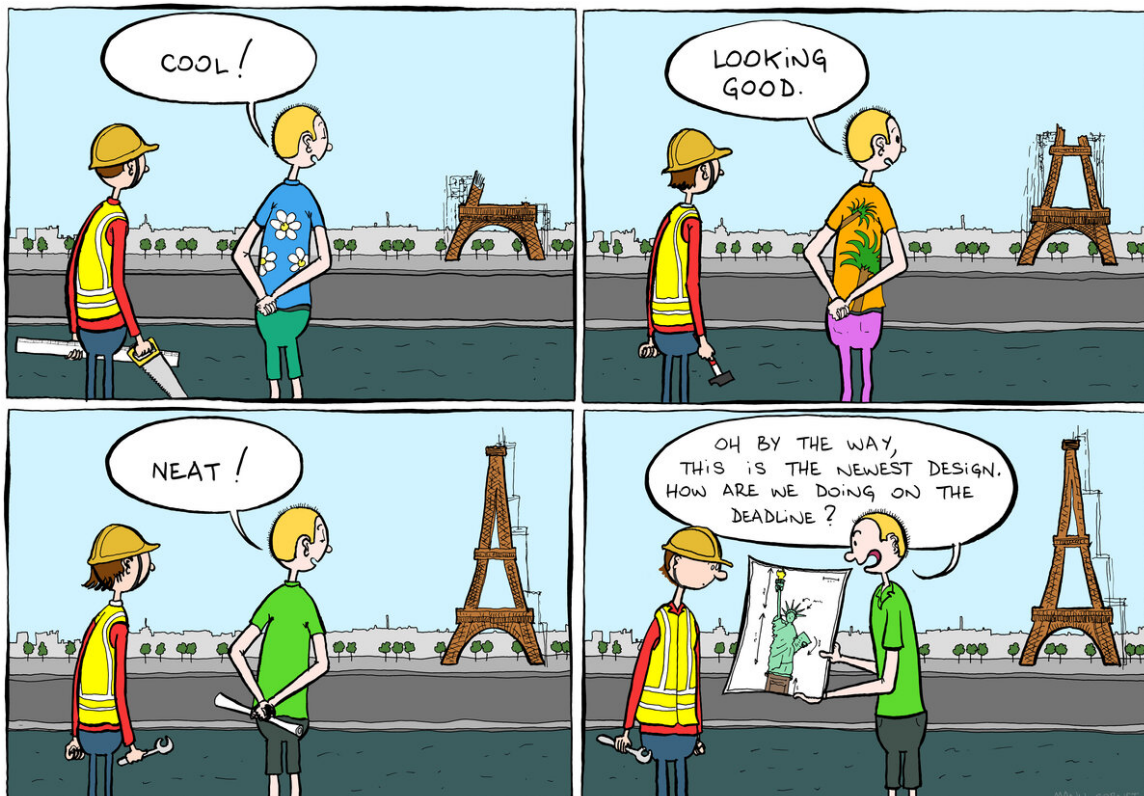
Episode #344   2020-09-15

Regardless, Google's growing emphasis on design was there to stay, and despite all of the above, I do think that was for the best.

E is for Evil

Google's motto started as "Don't be evil" before evolving (in late 2015) to "Do the right thing". It would be difficult to deny that the company's net impact on society has been positive. For example, Google has always been fairly ambitious with its goals to reduce its environmental impact.


Episode #307   2019-09-19

Now that was a nice drawing. Cool. Did it make you laugh? Yeah, I didn't think so. Why don't we focus on all the evil stuff that Google was doing instead?

Let's start small, with their stance on political proposals for internet governance. Google used to distinguish itself from other big players (such as telecommunication companies who have long since tried not to appear evil) by opposing changes that would hurt users in the long run, like SOPA and PIPA (but I won't bore you with the details). But when "net neutrality" (rules to prevent service providers from making some bits go through their tubes more easily than others) was threatened, Google was surprisingly quiet. Perhaps because the company would have benefited from the change?
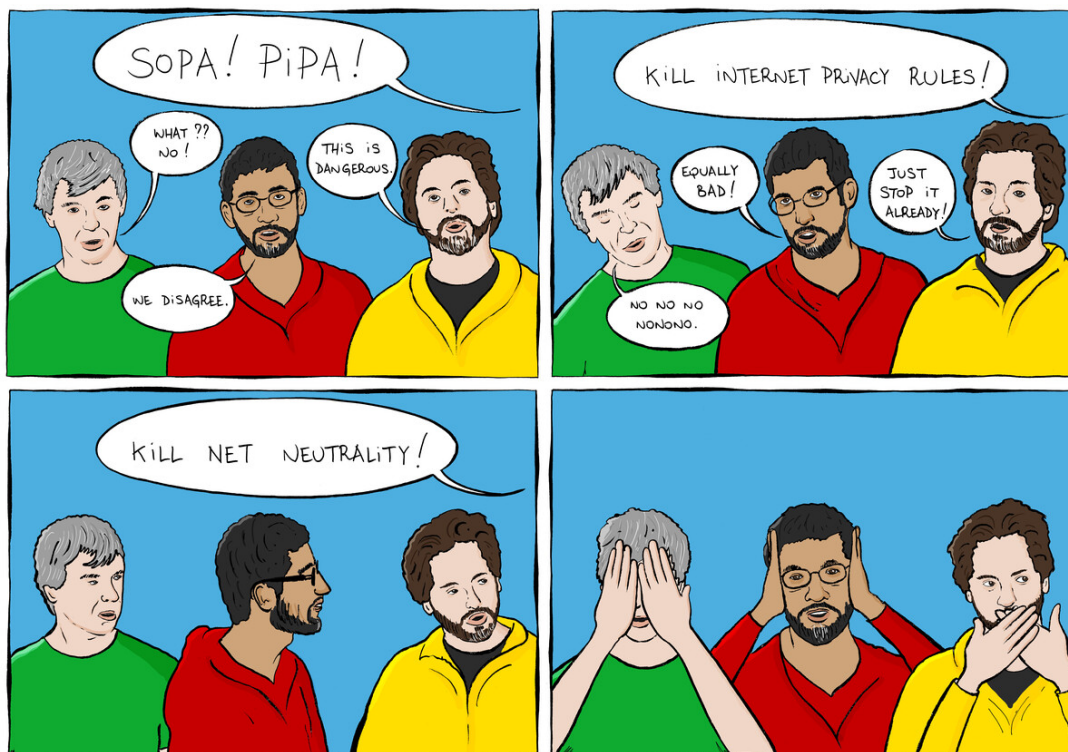

Episode #237   2017-12-18

Okay, still not *very* evil. How about this: towards the middle of 2018, there were persistent rumors that Google was planning to re-enter the Chinese market, with a version of their search engine (codenamed "Dragonfly") that would fully enforce the Chinese government's censorship requirements.

The project was extremely secret, even within Google. A brave employee spent time investigating, and produced a very well-researched internal document exposing Dragonfly to his coworkers. Security and HR asked him to delete it. Googlers who had made copies were asked the same, and saw their document deleted for them when they didn't comply fast enough. The memory hole's slurps are inexorable.

Under the barrage of employee questioning at TGIF, executives claimed that this project was purely "exploratory". In reality, according to several employees who worked on it directly, the project was in advanced stages and was planned to launch within a year. Sergey Brin expressed his surprise that there was such a "kerfuffle" about this. Given Sergey's history with the Russian regime, and his passionate involvement in the Google-China relationship many years prior, that was mildly disturbing.
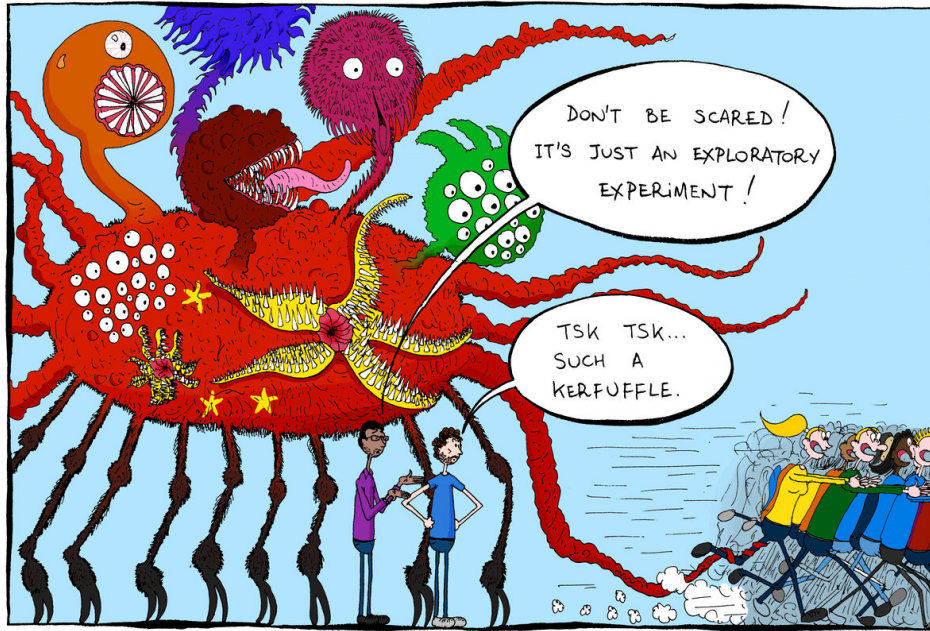
Episode #270   2018-08-21

Sundar Pichai attempted to defend the move by recalling Google's mission, "Organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful", and pointing out how much of the world's population was in China.

Episode #273 (see chapter "C" for how the "update" word is used)   2018-08-27

Was it then time for an "update" of Google's mission statement and, perhaps, its motto?

E

~~Don't be evil.~~
~~Do the right thing.~~
Pray that nobody notices.
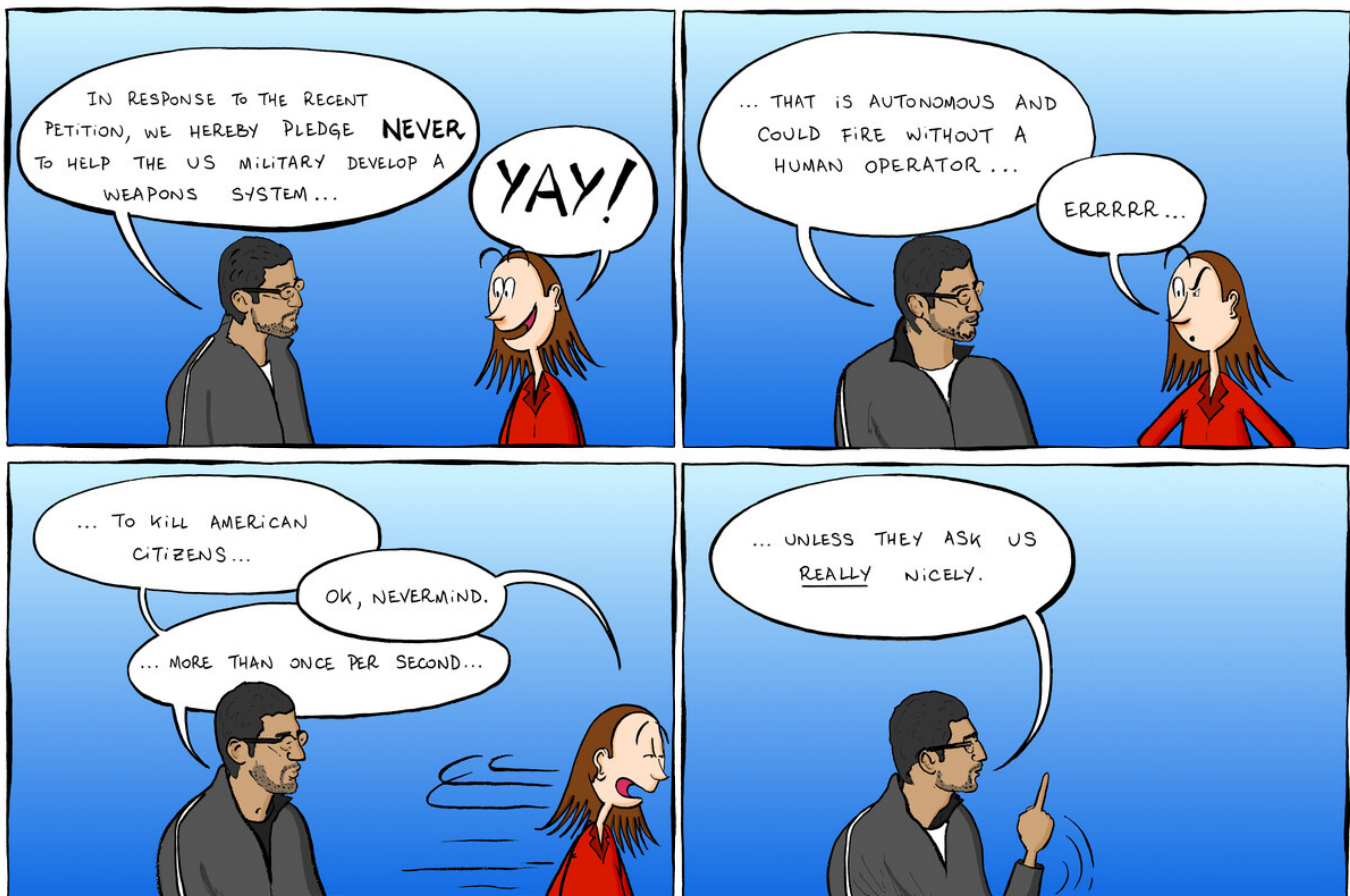
When the outside world also found out about the project, Google faced criticism from all sides. Staring at the damage being done to its image, the company cancelled project Dragonfly, thereby placing its ethics above its bottom line. For now.

Also in 2018, Google started using their machine learning tools to help US military drones identify humans in video footage. This time the project (codenamed Maven) wasn't just a rumor, and the more peace-loving Googlers didn't fail to express their concern at TGIF and elsewhere. But this was only for defense purposes—at least that's what leadership told their alarmed workforce. Somehow that wasn't really enough to silence the growing criticism.

IN RESPONSE TO THE RECENT PETITION, WE HEREBY PLEDGE **NEVER** TO HELP THE US MILITARY DEVELOP A WEAPONS SYSTEM...

YAY!

... THAT IS AUTONOMOUS AND COULD FIRE WITHOUT A HUMAN OPERATOR...

ERRRRR...

... TO KILL AMERICAN CITIZENS...

OK, NEVERMIND.

... MORE THAN ONCE PER SECOND...

... UNLESS THEY ASK US REALLY NICELY.

But let's fantasize for a minute here: What if Google was unapologetically in the business of war? Wouldn't their killing drones at least be cool and fluffy and colorful? If I'm going to be killed by a missile, I'd rather it be a cool shade of Google's trademarked "not pink" and with rounded corners.
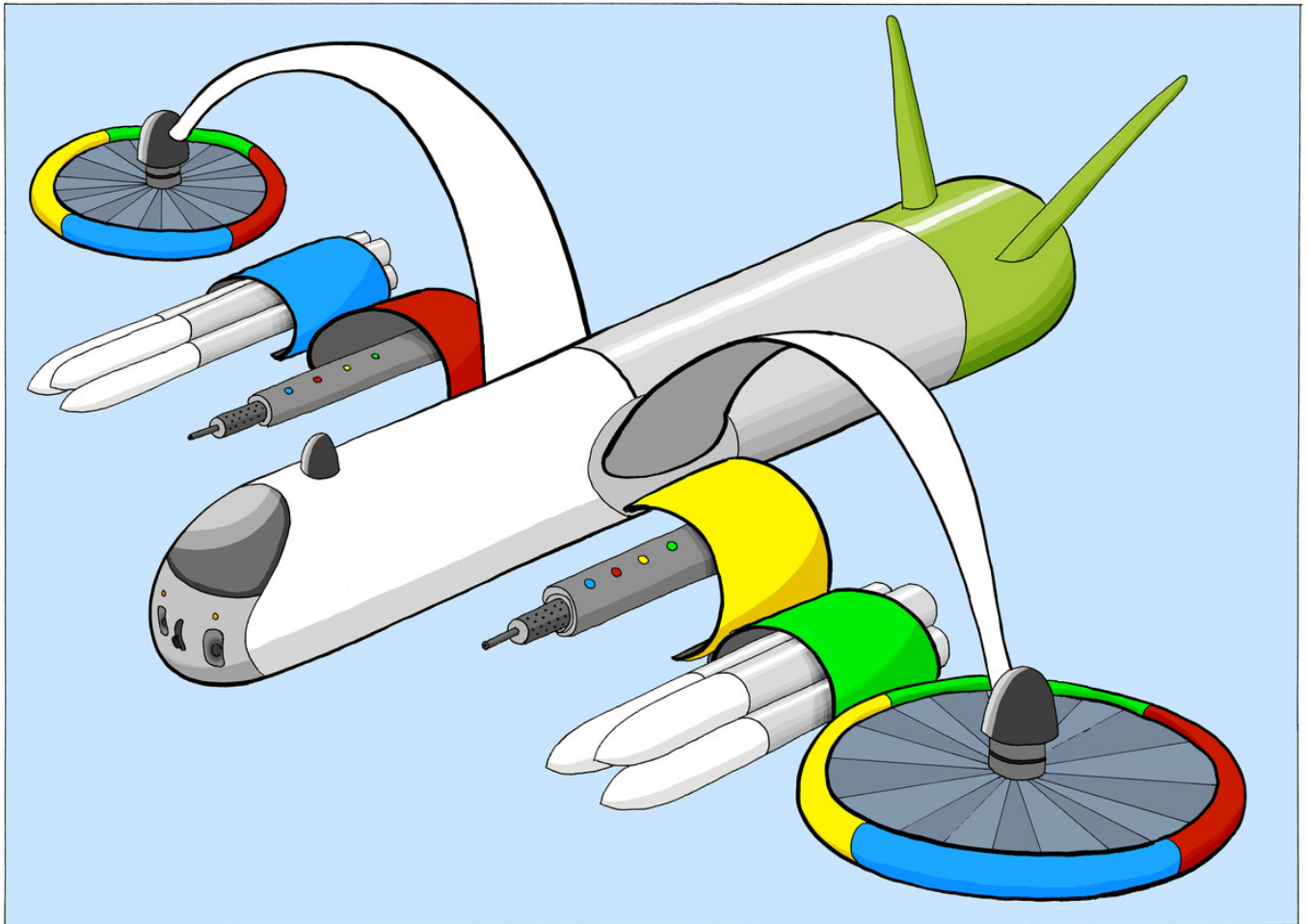
In any case, project Maven was cancelled just like project Dragonfly. But that would likely not be the end of the story: Kent Walker told the Pentagon, in November 2019, that Alphabet was "eager to do more".

What the heck was going on? Google used to have such a strong sense of ethics...

Episode #268   2018−08−15

Was this maybe all just a dream? Or maybe it was just a prank played on Googlers to test their reaction, a little like this yearly event called DiRT that tested the solidity of Google's infrastructure by simulating failures?

Episode #266 ("TensorFlow" was one of Google's machine learning tools)   2018−08−10

And the worst thing was that Google *seemed* to care about ethics. Employees were encouraged to list "citizenship" contributions during their performance reviews; in 2020, managers were asked to make those encouragements more explicit.


Episode #326   2020−02−25

All in all, it was undeniable that Google's image with the general public was taking a serious hit that no amount of sugar-coated corpspeak was able to hide.

Episode #285   2018-12-17
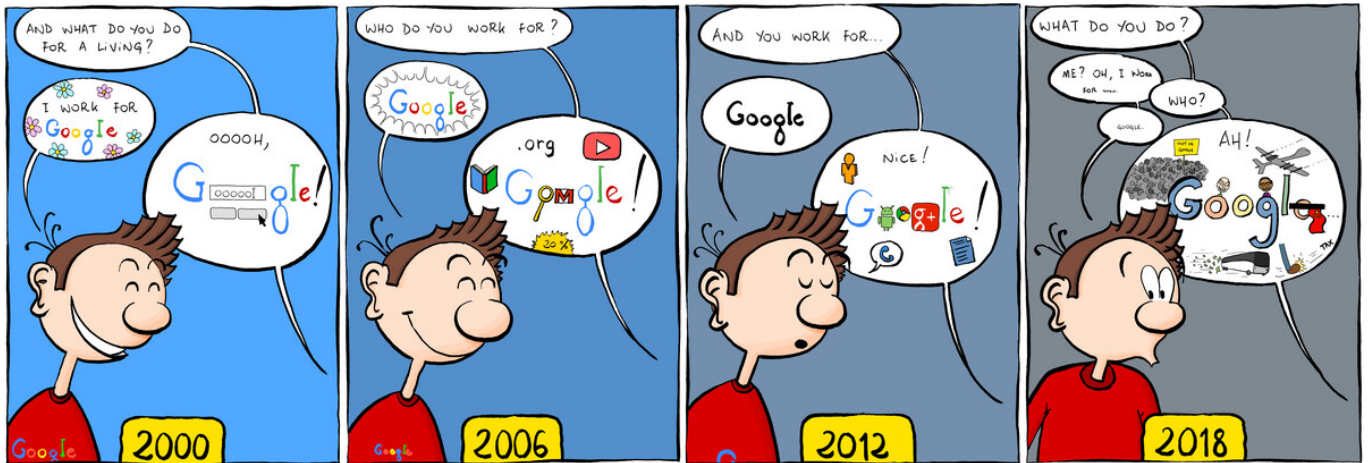
And—surprise, surprise—this evolution had a noticeable effect on the results of the yearly Googlegeist survey: employees were generally happy with their immediate teammates and managers, but the level of discontent grew steadily on the company-wide strategic and ethical issues.

Episode #283   2018-11-30
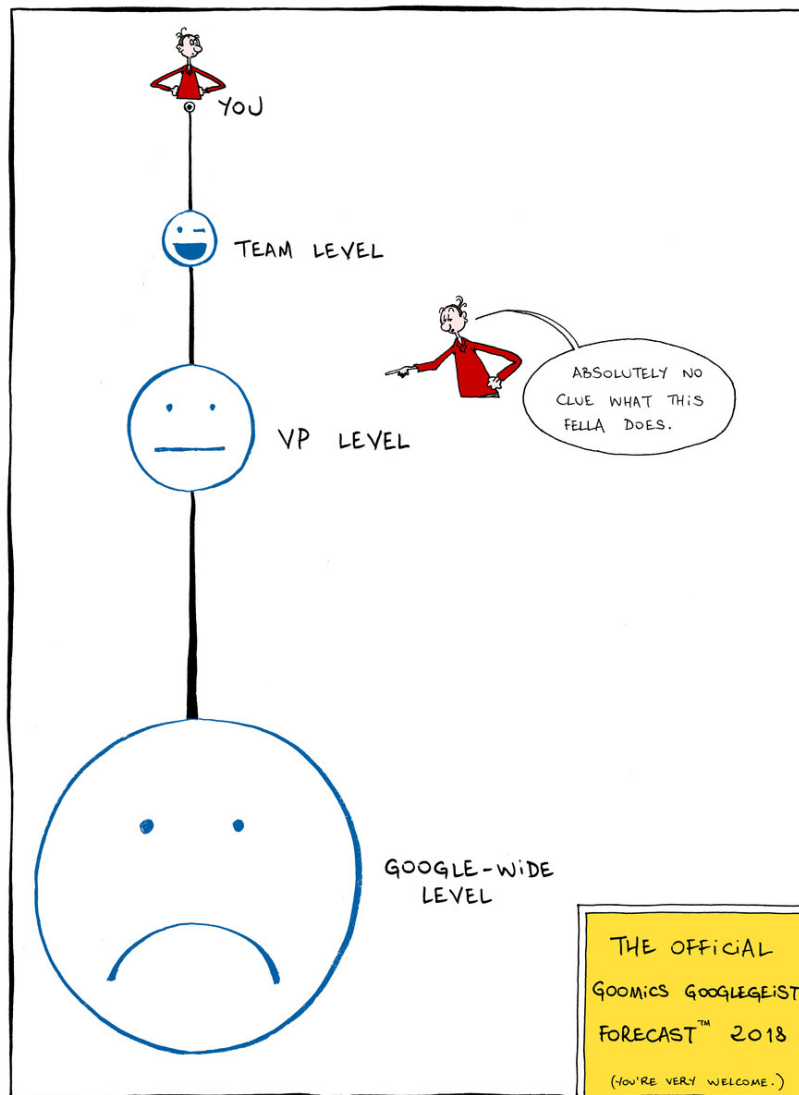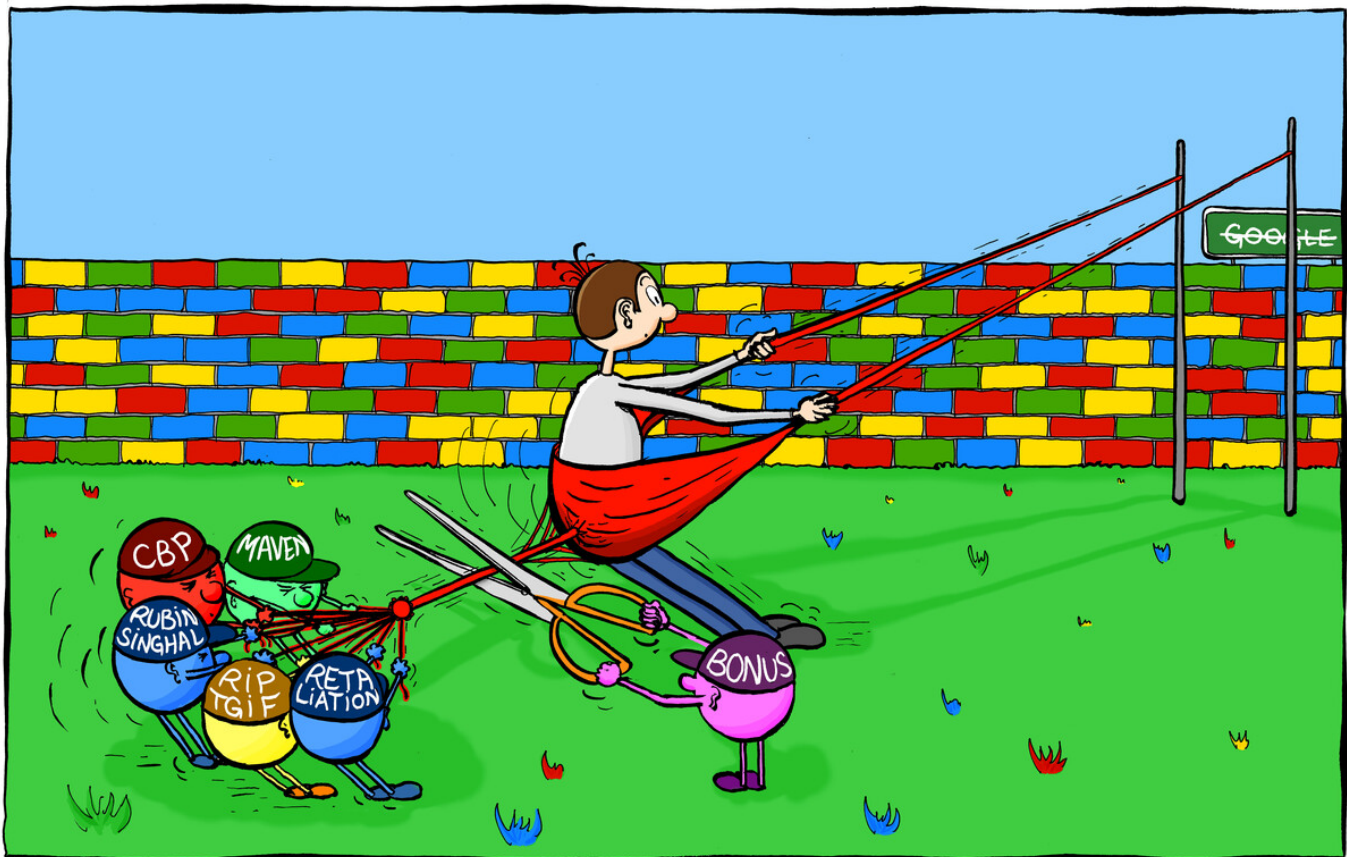
All of this couldn't possibly last forever... Didn't Googlers have their own red lines? What if the company's ethics were going down faster than they could pay employees to turn a blind eye...?
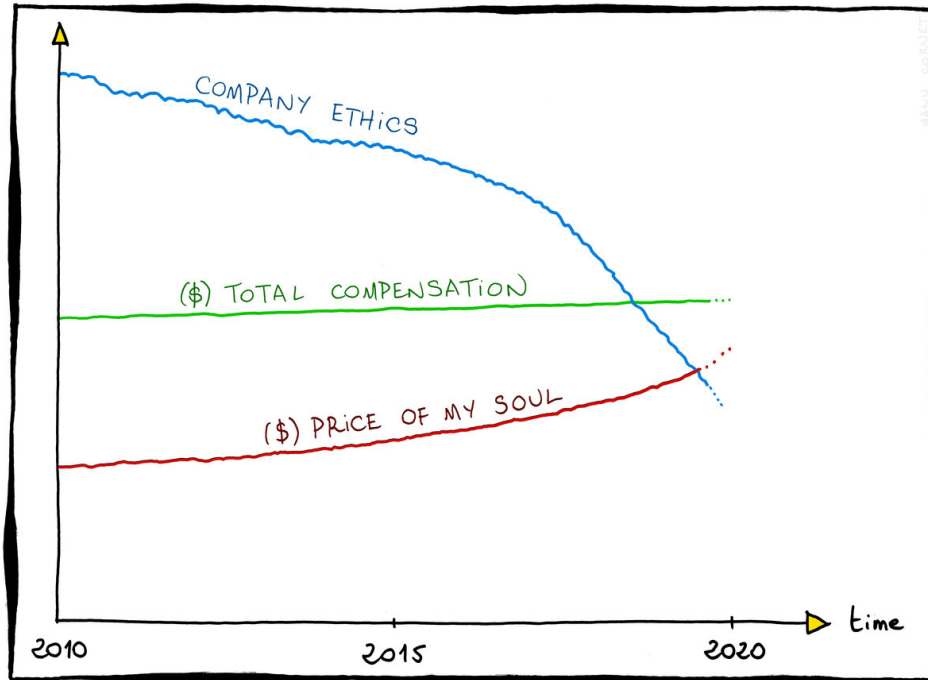
Episode #309   2019-10-24

...then there would surely come a day when the most principled of employees would call it quits. Err, after their yearly bonus had been paid, that is.

Episode #321   2020-01-17