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## W ON NEWSSTANDS NOW

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# Inside the Soul of the Web

**24 hours watching the world look for answers at Google.**

Pg 1 of 2 >>

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By Michael S. Malone

Mankind's questions unscroll day and night on a computer screen in an office hallway in Mountain View, California.

Workers here at Google were once fascinated to watch the queries climb up and off the screen, two per second, 173,000 per day. But they rarely stop to glance anymore. Most Google employees long ago lost interest in the words and the astonishing numbers they represent: Each of these questions, culled randomly from six giant server farms scattered around the world, represents 1,500 inquiries, totaling 260 million Web searches per day.

**Tucson, Arizona > Krispy Kreme Donuts**

**Stamford, CT > Rhumba**

**Canberra, Australia > Naturist Boy**

**AOL, US > How to Pray to the Rosary**

The display sits on a shelf on the second floor of Google's headquarters, which bears a college laboratory meets frat house look. Code writers wander down the corridor in shorts and sweatshirts, often pushing a bicycle or walking a dog. There is a big red ball partially blocking the passage. On the door of the office directly across from the screen, an engineer has posted his doctoral thesis, which was recently accepted by UC Berkeley.

In the two years since it was installed, the monitor has acquired a collection of tchotchkies, like tiny offerings. There's Crash Bandicoot riding a bomb. Gromit in an airplane. A Dilbert M&M's dispenser. A Japanese toy chicken inexplicably wearing a blond wig. A Linux plush penguin. A Halloween spider. And the toothed mechanism from the inside of a music box that, when cranked, plays "As Time Goes By."

**Haiti > Jeune et democratie**

**Princeton, New Jersey > Fishnet stocking**

**Soldotna, Alaska > Poem procrastination**

**Iran > Pulpotomy**

The computer screen is divided horizontally. On the bottom, the Google queries, 10 visible at a time, stream up and, after 5 seconds, disappear. Each also carries the location of the questioner, often down to the city, but sometimes only the country, the Internet portal (e.g., AOL), or, when the source is untraceable, just question marks. To honor good manners, the program filters out obscene requests. Whether out of ignorance, faith, or belief in the safety of numbers, an estimated 52 million people around the world, 42 percent of all search engine users, entrust the site with some of their deepest, most vulnerable thoughts and desires.

**Alexandria, Virginia > Marijuana for sell  
Netherlands > Hottest young boys for free  
St. Louis, Missouri >Attracted to my professor  
Holmdel, New Jersey > Horse + penetration**

The top half of the screen displays a map of the world that shows where it's day and night. Tiny colored dots twinkle on and off across the continents, each representing a different language and a burst of several thousand questions. Europe, Japan, Israel, Korea, and most of North America are dense, nearly permanent galaxies of dots. In Africa, the Middle East, and South America, the dots are so few that you can often identify precise locations - Brasília, Caracas, Johannesburg, Nairobi, the airport in the Cape Verde Islands.

It becomes apparent that this is a map not just of Google's users but of the spread of technology, and thus of prosperity in the new century. In an imprecise but important way, it is also a measure of human freedom.

**AOL > Eminem  
Dallas, Texas > Walden Pond  
Calgary > Anti flag lyrics  
??? > Emancipation Proclamation  
Sao Paolo > Politics federal de menuas  
Bloomfield, Michigan > Wine + Las Vegas**

When you first study the queries, they seem random and inexplicable, an infinite melange of the technical, the perverse, and the trivial. But after a few hours, as your eyeballs begin to rattle from the endless vigil, patterns emerge. Even in cyberspace, there is morning, afternoon, and night.

It is early morning now in Mountain View. In three-hour stretches over the next several days, I will watch the equivalent of an entire 24-hour cycle. On the map the sun is over the Amazon Basin. On the East Coast it is mid-morning, and the queries arriving from there have the crisp earnestness of caffeine-fueled commerce. There are interminable searches about software upgrades, network servers, definitions of financial instruments; and, inevitably:

**Orlando, Florida > Ulcer symptoms**

In the wall behind the display, there is a cut-out section, like a drive-up window. Just beyond sits Greg Rae, one of three engineers who created this program two years ago. Now, as the site's log analyst, he devotes much of his day to studying the ceaseless scroll. Wearing gym shorts, T-shirt, and wire-rimmed glasses, Rae is a very tall man in his twenties who looks ready for a workout followed by a long night in a university library. He has now watched several million queries roll by.

**Michigan > Honda 400 ATV shocks**

**? > Fat brides**

**Honolulu, HI > Timid dog**

**Bombay, India > Tarot shops in New Delhi**

**Atlanta, GA > Mario chick wit da braids**

As the day progresses, the workday questions move west. Three o'clock slides across the continent, and students make their way to the Net. The searches suddenly shift into the land of midterms, research papers, and innumerable misspellings of Britney Spears.

**Cambridge, Mass. > King and Queen of Spain**

**Houston, Texas > The Odyssey Homer sparknotes**

**Sunnyvale, Calif. > Diet of merchants during the Enlightenment**

**Berkeley, Calif. > Church in Weimer Bach cantatas**

**Honolulu, Hawaii > Magna Carta**

**AOL > Nicole Kidman + boots**

Meanwhile, the other half of the globe is blanketed in darkness, entertaining the fever dreams, health fears, and recriminations that come with night. Over their keyboards, lonely souls submit questions into the ether, praying that answers lie somewhere in the vast network - and, if not resolution, then at least succor.

**Melbourne, Australia > Urine cervical specimen chlamydia**

**Belgium > Couple voyeur**

**Tokyo, Japan > Battlefield 1942**

**Finland > Cuckold wife**

Darkness crawls across the Atlantic and makes landfall in the Western Hemisphere. On the screen, the West Coast of the United States is ablaze with dots, while only insomniacs and night owls are still typing away in Europe. The noonday sun is now over Indonesia.

This may be the strangest time of all. The predawn monsters of European imagination meet the late-night desires of North America - then all are nearly buried by a deluge of business questions, most in kanji, pouring out of Asia. Amid this flood there are also anxious queries, perhaps from emergency room

doctors short of reference books and journals.

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[Page 2 >>](#)

[Previous Story: MOUNTAIN BIKES](#)

[Next Story: MATRIX<sup>2</sup>](#)

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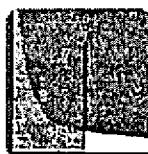
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