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FINANCIAL REVIEW

Where my ideas come from | Michael T Jones

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Michael T Jones of Google: 'Our products are used every day by more than a billion people'

THEO CHAPMAN

AT GOOGLE, we have one plan – and that is our mission to organise all the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful. That is a policy neutral, politically neutral, ambivalent thing. If people are sick we want them to use Google to get medical advice in their language.

The number-one thing on my mind is the evolving role of companies like Google in international events, where we're drawn in because people on all sides use our products and services.

For example, the role of Google maps in Syria. Sometimes there are revolutionaries who use the internet, which makes it seem like a tool of revolution but it is not a policy of the tool to be revolutionary. Or there's the question of

whether internet domain names should be blacklisted by the Australian government. Google has no authority over the Australian government but we know things, technically, that would help them make wise decisions and so we get drawn into the conversation.

Political leaders are inclined to make bad decisions about technology; it's not that they're bad leaders. Governments are built around how things used to be and technology is about what things are going to become; the gap is so great that laws are almost always unwise. Being Google we have a chance to be heard.

I have a parental love for Google Earth [Jones was part of the team that created the program, which was bought by Google in 2005]. We had a vision that all the schoolchildren in the world would finally know where things were. It bothered me that 20 or 30 per cent of American schoolchildren couldn't find the Pacific Ocean on a globe. I was ashamed of my country in that regard.

Now it's used in the grown-up world by police, by the military, in court cases, the TV news. Many of the most interesting uses are a total surprise to me.

I met this man, Professor Lee Berger, from South Africa. He and his son discovered the oldest known human fossil.

He's an anthropologist and archaeologist. He decided instead of just looking around South Africa for bones he would look at all the things that had been discovered since the 1930s and look at the kind of places where they had been discovered – what was the land like, the hills, the shape, the rivers, the geophysical character of places that ancient people liked to live – then look for those places on Google Earth and then go there and look for bones. And they looked and they found bones right on the surface.

Our products are used every day by more than a billion people. I'm very proud every time people use our products. It means they like them.

I make time for photography. When I go on business trips I try to get half a day to do my photography right at the end of the trip. I use the early part to look at the world to decide where I want to go back on the photography day to get the picture.

Photographers look at the world differently from everyone else. Photographers look at light and the interplay of light-colour contrast. All kinds of little things that are subsets of what you'd look at when you look at a building or a person. I found photography exposed me to a regime of extreme attention to minute details. That's why I like photography – it sensitises me to really appreciate the beauty of nature and the detail of buildings. It heightens my sensitivity to what's going on.

The real next big thing will be when everything is connected: in the future the wallpaper talks to your desk and desk talks to the chair and the chair talks to the

floor. All the things you see around you will be chatting about things like, what's the temperature, is it unusually humid over here? All these things around you are going to be smart, a smartness behind the scenes.

That creates a fascinating world, not a *Star Trek* world of dinners that cook themselves magically. A world of much more awareness – so if you imagine hundreds of helpers then all of the things would be done on time and wouldn't be forgotten and always be in good shape – that's going to happen for the poorest of people.

It's easy to do once you know what's happening. The problem is, if you don't know what's happening, how can you take intelligent action?

That's coming, so I think that will have a huge impact on crime. If people can't break into your house surreptitiously, you won't lose things. If you don't know where your pen is, it will tell you. It's an interesting possibility space. It will make a huge difference in how humans lay out their cities.

Michael T Jones will address Creative Innovation 2012, November 28-30, Sofitel Melbourne. www.ci2012.com.au

Michael T Jones spoke to Theo Chapman

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