

Internet & Democracy Blog

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This is the team blog for the Internet & Democracy Project, a research initiative at the Berkman Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University.

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Google Earth on Darfur

August 7th, 2009 — Scott Hartley

Despite the global implications of what has been called the “21st Century’s Genocide,” online interest on “Darfur” is predominately regional, with primary interest stemming from [East Africa](#). In an attempt to expose the crisis to 200 million users of Google Earth, the “Crisis in Darfur” Initiative on Google Earth coordinates with the [United States Holocaust Museum Memorial](#) and uses data from the [U.S. State Departments Humanitarian Information Unit](#) to show 3,300 destroyed villages. For 200 locations, it even features before and after photographs. The “Crisis in Darfur” Initiative exposes the decimation of more than 100,000 homes, and is the first of forthcoming joint projects to map Genocide. Exposure of the crisis cannot alone impel action, but perhaps exposure to 200 million Google Earth users will deepen understanding, help citizens exercise a democratic right, apply political pressure, and change policy. The broad use of Google tools is empowering citizen activism, and helping policymakers understand citizen interests.

Behind the Internet news [Meme curve](#), the New York Times last week published an editorial on the topic “[Are We What We Search?](#)” in

which author Eduardo Porter considers the scope of the Google oracle:

“Polls are a useful indicator of people’s tastes because they ask people what they like. Prediction markets require players to forecast. Google searches offer a roundabout impression of the world: what people want, what they fear, what they expect. It’s harder to tell what they mean.”

Google Earth and Internet search analytics do require an understanding of user demography, linguistic preferences, user behavior, and search query context, but understanding what people do on Google provides insight into the geographic concentration and amplitudes of interest. Search context will determine the scope and direction of interest. Google Earth is relevant in that it extends access to information, and provides citizens with the knowledge that empowers their democratic voice offline. Porter concludes that polling is more readily comprehensible than search, yet polling is notoriously deceptive and unreliable. In Indonesia, polling indicated that Jusuf Kalla would contend for second place in their July Presidential elections. Google Trends contended he would place third, and the latter [got the election ordering correct](#). In this case, Internet search analytics proved more accurate than polling. While certainly not yet confirmation of “the oracle at Mountain View,” one must also question what polls can truly tell us. As the Carnegie Council’s [Devin Stewart](#) puts it, “Polls only tell us how people answer polls.”

The advent of enhanced transparency via Google Earth in Darfur, and Google search brought into Larry Summers’ second-floor West Wing office, has created an emerging field of [Web Ecology](#). The mouse may yet become mightier than the pen, and many are anxious to understand in what ways, and to what extent.



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Posted in [Africa](#). Comments Off

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