

Steering a technology giant through turbulent times

CORNER OFFICE

Google's chief executive talks about the challenges his company is facing

BY DAVID GELLES

Google is facing more challenges today than at any time in its 20-year history. Employees are outraged about sexual harassment. Executives are under scrutiny over a secretive effort to make a censored version of its search product for China. Google will shut down its social network next year after the discovery of a security vulnerability. Political and social debates, including one about building military-grade artificial intelligence, are roiling the work force.

Yet the man responsible for leading

Google through this minefield is not one of the company's founders — Larry Page and Sergey Brin — or even Eric Schmidt, the company's former chief executive and chairman, who was ushered aside last year. Instead, the man in charge of arguably the most influential company in the world is Sundar Pichai, a soft-spoken engineer who grew up in Chennai, India.

Mr. Pichai was a voracious reader as a boy and attended the prestigious Indian Institute of Technology, then Stanford in California and the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania, where he received advanced degrees. After stints at Applied Materials and McKinsey, he joined Google in 2004.

Mr. Pichai helped develop the company's browser, Chrome, and in 2014 he took over product, engineering and research efforts for the company's products and platforms, including

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search, ads and Android. He was made chief executive in 2015 and joined the board of Alphabet, Google's parent, last year.

This interview, which was condensed and edited for clarity, was conducted in New York.

Tell me about growing up in Chennai. There was a simplicity to my life, which was very nice, compared with today's world. We lived in a kind of modest house, shared with tenants. We would sleep on the living room floor. There was a drought when I was growing up, and we had anxiety. Even now, I can never sleep without a bottle of water beside my bed. Other houses had refrigerators, and then we finally got one. It was a big deal.

But I had a lot of time to read. I was processing a lot. I read whatever I could get my hands on. I read Dickens. Friends, playing street cricket, reading books — that was kind of the totality of life. But you never felt lacking for anything.

What was it like coming over to attend Stanford?

It was the first time I had ever been on a plane. I always wanted to be in the Valley. I kind of knew that's where everything happened. I remember landing in California, and I stayed with a host family for about a week. I was in the car going from the airport, and was like, "Wow, it's so brown here." The family was like, "We like to call it golden."

When I was back at I.I.T., I had access to the computer so rarely — maybe I'd been on it three or four times. To come and just have these labs in which you had access to computers and you could program, it was a big deal to me. I was so wrapped up in that, that to some extent I didn't understand there was a much bigger shift happening with the internet.

You started at Google 14 years ago. Does it still feel like the same company you joined?

When I first joined Google I was struck by the fact that it was a very idealistic, optimistic place. I still see that idealism and optimism a lot in many things we do today. But the world is different. Maybe there's more realism of how hard some things are. We've had more failures, too. But there's always been a strong streak of idealism in the company, and you still see it today.

What's your approach to technology and screen time with your family?

When I come home on a Friday evening, I really do want to let go of my devices for a couple days. I haven't quite succeeded in doing that. At home, our television is not easily accessible, so that there is "activation energy" before you can easily go watch TV. I'm genuinely conflicted, because I see what my kids learn from all this. My son is 11 years old, and he is mining Ethereum and earning money. He's getting some insight into how the world works, how commerce works.

Every generation is worried about the new technology and feels like this time it's different. Our parents worried about Elvis Presley's influence on kids. So, I'm always asking the question, "Why would it be any different this time?" Having said that, I do realize the change that's happening now is much faster than ever before. My son still doesn't have a phone.

Why does it seem so easy for tech companies like Google to ban pornography and graphic violence from social media platforms, but so much harder for them to root out propaganda, misinformation and disturbing content aimed at kids?

There are areas where society clearly agrees what is O.K. and not O.K., and then there are areas where it is hard as a society to draw the line. What is the

difference between freedom of speech on something where you feel you're being discriminated against by another group, versus hate speech? The U.S. and Europe draw the line differently on this question in a very fundamental way. We've had to defend videos which we allow in the U.S. but in Europe people view as disseminating hate speech. Should people be able to say that they don't believe climate change is real? Or that vaccines don't work? It's just a genuinely hard problem. We're all using human reviewers, but human reviewers make mistakes, too.

How do you approach this in China, where Google is considering returning to the market with a search engine?

One of the things that's not well understood, I think, is that we operate in many countries where there is censorship. When we follow "right to be forgotten" laws, we are censoring search results because we're complying with the law. I'm committed to serving users in China. Whatever form it takes, I actually don't know the answer. It's not even clear to me that search in China is the product we need to do today.

An estimated 20,000 Googlers participated in a sexual harassment protest this month. What's your message to employees right now?

People are walking out because they want us to improve, and they want us to show we can do better. We're acknowledging and understanding we clearly got some things wrong. And we have been running the company very differently for a while now. But going through a process like that, you learn a lot. For example, we have established channels by which people can report issues. But those processes are much harder on the people going through it than we had realized. [After this interview took place, Google said Thursday that it would end the practice of forced



ERIK TANNER FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Sundar Pichai has been chief executive of Google since 2015. "Technology doesn't solve humanity's problems. It was always naïve to think so," he said.

arbitration for claims of sexual harassment.]

Is there a morale problem at the company?

There's a lot of challenges in the world, and given what Google does, we feel

like we are on the cutting edge of many of these issues. But when people say, "Wow, there's a lot of challenges," I always say, "There's no better time to be alive." I go through the exercise of placing myself at different times in the world. If you were alive during World

War I, or influenza, or the Great Depression, and there's World War II to come. If you were in the 1960s, and Martin Luther King was shot dead, and R.F.K. would later get shot dead, and we were in Vietnam and there was a Cold War and a Cuban missile crisis — there is no better time to be alive.

But having said that, I think as humanity we're increasingly dealing with bigger things. As a company like Google, we have a deeper mission, and we feel the weight of that on our shoulders. I feel like people are energized and people want to change and make the world better.

Do you worry that Silicon Valley is suffering from groupthink and losing its edge?

There is nothing inherent that says Silicon Valley will always be the most innovative place in the world. There is no God-given right to be that way. But I feel confident that right now, as we speak, there are quietly people in the Valley working on some stuff which we will later look back on in 10 years and feel was very profound. We feel we're on the cusp of technologies, just like the internet before.

Do you still feel like Silicon Valley has retained that idealism that struck you when you arrived here?

There's still that optimism. But the optimism is tempered by a sense of deliberation. Things have changed quite a bit. We deliberate about things a lot more, and we are more thoughtful about what we do. But there's a deeper thing here, which is: Technology doesn't solve humanity's problems. It was always naïve to think so. Technology is an enabler, but humanity has to deal with humanity's problems. I think we're both over-reliant on technology as a way to solve things and probably, at this moment, over-indexing on technology as a source of all problems, too.