

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMITTEE ON SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

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March 30, 2007

Dr. Eric Schmidt
Chairman and Chief Executive Officer
Google, Inc.
1600 Amphitheatre Parkway
Mountain View, CA 94043

Dear Dr. Schmidt:

I read media reports today that Google has “resurrected” the City of New Orleans by replacing post-Hurricane Katrina satellite imagery on its Web site with images taken before the storm. As the Associated Press reported, “Scroll across the city [of New Orleans] and the Mississippi Gulf, and everything is back to normal: Marinas are filled with boats, bridges are intact, and parks are filled with healthy, full-bodied trees.” “Google Goes Back to Pre-Katrina Maps,” Associated Press, March 29, 2007; <http://www.boston.com/news/nation/articles/2007/03/29>. If current Google Maps satellite imagery is to be believed, Hurricane Katrina never struck New Orleans, there was never any flooding and thousands of people do not need to be living in trailers because their homes are still habitable.

According to the AP, Chikai Ohazama, a Google Inc. product manager for satellite imagery, said the maps now available are the “best the company can offer. Numerous factors decide what goes into the databases, ‘everything from resolution, to quality, to when the actual imagery was acquired.’” By this letter, I am requesting that Google provide a full briefing to the Subcommittee staff within the next week to respond to the following questions raised by Mr. Ohazama's comments:

1. What criteria were used by Google to determine that pre-Katrina satellite images would replace post-Katrina images on the Google Web site? Who made that decision?
2. Was there any communication between Google employees and/or officials of the City of New Orleans or any other representatives of the city before making this change?
3. When did Google Maps last update the satellite imagery for the New Orleans region?
4. What imaging sources did Google use to supply images for the New Orleans region between August 29, 2005, and the most recent revision?

5. In the article, Mr. Ohazama stated that he personally received no request for a change in the imagery, but "he added that Google gets many requests from users and governments to update and change its imagery." How does Google deal with such requests, and how do such requests affect Google's decision to update imagery?
6. Was Google contacted by the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the United States Geological Survey or any other entity of the federal government concerning any changes or revisions of the satellite imagers for the New Orleans region? If so, when were those requests received, and from whom?

Digital technology has any number of benefits, as Google's healthy balance sheet demonstrates. However, experience also has shown that such technologies pose a particular threat to photography as a representation of reality. While we can understand that Google would prefer the most recent imagery of the New Orleans region for its Web site, to use older, pre-Katrina imagery when more recent images are available without some explanation as to why appears to be fundamentally dishonest. The entire country knows that New Orleans is a great American city struggling to recover from an unprecedented disaster. Google's use of old imagery appears to be doing the victims of Hurricane Katrina a great injustice by airbrushing history.

Please have your staff contact James Paul, Subcommittee professional staff, at (202) 226-3639, or Edith Holleman, Subcommittee staff counsel, at (202) 225-8459 to arrange for a briefing within the next week.

Your prompt attention to this matter is greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,



BRAD MILLER

Chairman

Subcommittee on Investigations and Oversight

cc: James Sensenbrenner, Jr.
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Investigations and Oversight