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## As Google Prens in Paris, France Briefly Becomes the Focus of Digital Optimism

By [ERIC PFANNER](#)  
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PARIS — [Eric E. Schmidt](#), Google's executive chairman, and President Nicolas Sarkozy of France acted like old friends. [Karl Lagerfeld](#), the head designer at Chanel, introduced a new online-only fashion brand. The Ting Tings gave a private concert at the Louvre for a gathering of the global digerati at the LeWeb technology conference here.

For a few days last week it seemed that France had stopped worrying and learned to love the Internet.

Mr. Schmidt demonstrated Silicon Valley's proficiency for multitasking, shuttling between Brussels, where he met with European Commission antitrust regulators, and Paris, where he opened the Internet giant's new headquarters for southern Europe, the Middle East and Africa.

Google's move from a plain office building into a palatial, 107,640-square-foot building that once served as the headquarters of a French railroad is the most visible sign of the company's campaign to woo Mr. Sarkozy and other French politicians, who have often complained about the disruptive effects of the company's technology.

All that, Mr. Sarkozy said last week, is "the past."

"Why am I here?" he said during a talk with Mr. Schmidt, to celebrate the opening of the site. "Why, as president, have I come to Google? It's a big deal. It wasn't easy. But I greatly admire American vitality. I have been criticized enough."

The good feelings, at least as they were expressed publicly, seemed to be mutual, with a beaming Mr. Schmidt declaring at one Paris appearance: "We love France."

According to Mr. Schmidt, the bonhomie extended to Brussels, where he met with Joaquín Almunia, vice president of the European Commission, who is leading an antitrust investigation of Google concerning complaints that the company has abused its dominant position in the Internet search market. Far from being adversarial, Mr. Schmidt said, the tone of the talks was "very pleasant."

Since the investigation was opened last year, Google has stepped up its efforts to demonstrate its contributions to the French — and European — economy. The new Paris headquarters, acquired at a reported cost of 100 million euros (\$133 million), will house a new international cultural institute and a research and development center.

Mr. Schmidt wasted few opportunities to point out that, at a time when the European economy was being dragged down by a debt crisis, the technology industry was one of the

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Nicolas Sarkozy, left, with Eric Schmidt of Google, center.

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few potential sources of growth. Google has said it is in the process of hiring dozens of people in France, where it already has more than 300 employees, and hundreds more across Europe.

Mr. Schmidt also found time to drop in on LeWeb, a technology conference held Wednesday to Friday in a suburb of Paris, where the atmosphere was similarly upbeat.

At various times the stage was taken over by dancers, a magician and even a man who had run the Tokyo marathon with a Rube Goldberg-style device that helped him carry four iPhones, a laptop computer and other technology, all of which enabled him to stream the entire race, from multiple angles, live over the Internet.

Mr. Lagerfeld also disclosed a love for technology — or, at least, for the accessorizing potential of certain kinds of gadgets. In an appearance at LeWeb, he said he had no time for e-mail, but added that he owned dozens of iPhones, iPads and iPods.

Natalie Massenet, founder of the online retailer Net-A-Porter, said her company planned to introduce a new fashion brand in partnership with Mr. Lagerfeld. The brand, Karl, will become available in January, she said.

Much of LeWeb seemed to be devoted to extolling the potential of “social local mobile” technology, also known as SoLoMo to the initiated. This is a reference to services like Foursquare, a mobile application that helps people round up their friends.

George F. Colony, chief executive of Forrester Research, went so far as to declare that the World Wide Web, as used on a PC running a browser, was a “dying technology.” Mobile applications, running on smartphones and other devices, are the future, he said.

If there was a familiar ring to this idea, it may have been because many of the presenters at LeWeb — and a not-insignificant portion of the audience — had flown in from Silicon Valley, where the “death of the Web” is already an old chestnut.

Many of the presenters made no secret of their purpose at LeWeb: to try to raise funds. While venture capitalists in Silicon Valley might have heard their pitches before, there were at least a few European moneybags in attendance, too.

Niklas Zennstrom, a co-founder of the Internet telephony company Skype, picked up on a comment by Mr. Schmidt, who had said at LeWeb that he thought it would be good if a rival to Silicon Valley might emerge elsewhere. Mr. Zennstrom, a Swede, said more than half of the investments by the [venture capital](#) firm he runs, Atomico, were in Europe, though he added that he was looking elsewhere, too.

“Every day, the likelihood of great companies coming from other places around the world is increasing,” he said. “If you look ahead five years, the growth won’t be in Europe or the United States but in emerging markets.”

*Liz Alderman contributed reporting.*

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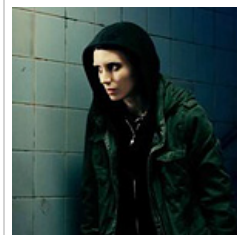
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