

# Lunch with the FT: Susan Wojcicki

**M** [medium.com/financial-times/lunch-with-the-ft-susan-wojcicki-c34304693f65](https://medium.com/financial-times/lunch-with-the-ft-susan-wojcicki-c34304693f65)

The Financial Times

December 12, 2016

## Over tofu in Palo Alto, the YouTube boss talks about reinventing TV and how Silicon Valley would benefit from employing more women



The Financial Times

Dec 13, 2016

When Google purchased YouTube for \$1.65bn a decade ago, the deal for the then one-year-old video-sharing site was described by dotcom veteran entrepreneur Mark Cuban as moronic.

Today, “prophetic” seems a better description: 400 hours of video a minute are uploaded to the site, which is watched by more than 1bn people, or a third of the world’s online population. Thanks to YouTube, kids who started fiddling with video cameras in their bedrooms have become stars with millions of viewers and, in some cases, their own television shows, books and clothing lines. More people use it to stream music than use Spotify and Apple Music put together.

In fact, I tell Susan Wojcicki, who took over as chief executive in 2014, YouTube is shaping popular culture and disrupting industries across the globe in a way that makes it sound a lot like, well, Google. “Google is pretty big,” she says, “but I look at YouTube and I feel like it’s Google 10 years ago – and I see the potential for it to grow.”



We're meeting at Tamarine, an upmarket Vietnamese establishment in Palo Alto that resembles a hotel bar. Wojcicki, dressed in a black sleeveless top and wearing hexagonal hoop earrings, waves through the picture window before entering, and beams as she greets me. A group of men on the next table are insisting that start-ups need "process" – the restaurant sits quietly on University Avenue, where the epicentre of the global technology industry is disguised as a suburban high street. Wojcicki, 47, first ate on this street 17 years ago, when Google, a start-up that was initially based in her garage at home, moved to its first offices nearby.

Wojcicki's job must be the envy of the world's teenagers, even if most of them have never heard of this low-profile tech leader. For years, hidden at headquarters, she ran Google's advertising business, one of the most important jobs at one of the world's largest companies. Yet she says that because she was a woman, people assumed she worked in advertising sales, rather than developing the advertising product.

"I just don't fit their stereotype in any way and so they're confused," she says. "And then when I say I have five kids, they're even more confused." Wojcicki, who was pregnant with her first child when she joined Google in 1999, had her youngest after she became YouTube chief executive. This January, while at the World Economic Forum in Davos, she tweeted a picture of breast milk stored on a balcony to keep it cold.

When she arrived at YouTube, Wojcicki was charged with building a business by luring advertisers from TV and expanding the site: her innovations have included subscriptions, original content and virtual reality. "It is definitely different from the ads role, for sure. But I love the creativity of the YouTube role. I think it's fun, I embrace it and I love getting to know all the creators," she says.

So how does she get on with YouTubers such as [Tyler Oakley](#), the excitable gay entertainer who has 8m subscribers, or Swedish gamer [PewDiePie](#), whose "Bro Army" fan base runs to 43.6m? "I think a lot of people just ... they don't realise it is actually a company with people running it, an actual CEO," she laughs. "But I think they're excited, they're nervous, they want to know how we can help them. Sometimes there are little jokes like 'Don't turn off my channel'."

The starters arrive. Wojcicki has four plantain turnovers, similar to empanadas. My scallops crudo look like a table centrepiece at a wedding, but scattered with strawberries instead of flowers. Wojcicki, who has been talking with her hands, picks up chopsticks and begins using them to emphasise her points.

Outsiders surprised by Wojcicki's move to YouTube were unaware she had been one of the drivers of Google's purchase. At the time, YouTube had outpaced Google's own video site, which she ran. When it became clear there were other bidders, Google moved fast. Wojcicki wrote the business model to make the case for the purchase. "I had to do that model really, really quickly. I probably spent an hour on it," she says.

She recalls the moment in 2005 when she realised there was a [business in homemade videos](#). "There were these kids singing in a dorm room to the Backstreet Boys and they were in China. And there was their roommate in the background doing his homework and it ... was

[YouTube's] first big hit and I could just see, wow, other people really wanted to watch this.”

---

Today, YouTube has more viewers aged 18 to 49 than any US cable network. The question is, how is she going to hook older people? Her answer: teach them how to fix things.

“So usually when I meet an older demo[graphic], they’ll tell me the story of ‘Wow, I learnt how to fix my car’ or ... this one woman told me: ‘My husband died and I’ve had to learn how to fix things in the house which I had never done’.” Wojcicki says she too recently relied on YouTube when the battery in the key for her Toyota hybrid died and she couldn’t start the car.

I ask her if she’s ever thought about having her own YouTube channel. “So I actually thought it would be really fun to do a show about women in business because that’s what I do and there are women in business out there that would be interested. But the reality is, I just don’t have enough time to do that well. So maybe later when I’m in semi-retirement,” she enthuses.

As YouTube experiments with video – from its new subscription service Red, which viewers can pay \$9.99 a month to watch without advertising, to its Red Originals series such as *Prank Academy*, in which celebrity guests are taught how to perform practical jokes – Wojcicki is explicit about the company’s desire to “reinvent TV”. With TVs in their pockets, the three to five hours a day Americans spend watching could be increased as they watch on the subway or in the supermarket, she says excitedly.

---

“We’re thinking about, well, how does TV work for the next generation? Now that we have new ways of distributing, now that we have the internet, what should TV look like? We’re going to enable it to be global, and social, and across divides, and on demand – that’s a big area,” she says.

Hollywood and the music industry also see YouTube as a rival. The big movie studios have tried to see off the threat by investing in online multi-channel networks that showcase their stars. Music labels have vilified YouTube, complaining they make little money from music videos streamed on the platform and criticising the system it uses to identify copyrighted music uploaded by users.

Wojcicki pauses at the mention of YouTube’s problems with the music industry, as tense negotiations over new licensing deals approach.

Putting down her chopsticks, she prefers to focus on what she sees as new opportunities for the music industry. “The ad business, for example, is new for the music industry. I think the advantage that we see is that now they can actually generate revenue from all of their users, whereas in the past, generally their revenue was mostly from the top 20 per cent that would pay for [music].”

She makes no claim that adverts on YouTube will make up for falling album sales, but says the new ad-free subscription service is “really big for us”.

Wojcicki has yet to finish her starter but the main courses are here. I have a small slice of lemongrass and garlic-encrusted sea bass, served with mango and cilantro glass noodles. She has a mountain of tofu. “Wow, that’s a lot of tofu,” she exclaims. Hovering a bowl of coconut rice above the dish brimming with tofu, she asks: “Am I supposed to put this on top of the tofu? I’ll be creative.”

---

Today, according to Forbes, Wojcicki has a fortune of \$300m. But her initial encounter in the late 1990s with Google’s founders, Larry Page and Sergey Brin, came about because she was worried about paying her mortgage. Wojcicki had just graduated from business school, with student loans to repay, and was only recently married, so she rented her garage and a couple of rooms to the pair at what she admits was a “slight above-market” rent of \$1,700 a month. “It was fair. We all agreed,” she insists.

Although Google was holed up in her garage for just five months before moving into an office in Palo Alto, Wojcicki was excited by the potential of the internet and quit her job at chipmaker Intel to join them. “I started looking at internet companies that were innovative, that were exciting, that were doing something that seemed meaningful to me, and I obviously had known Google because they had been at my house for five months.”

What was it about Page and Brin that made her want to work with them, I ask, expecting a flood of flattery. “Well, I wasn’t ... ” she laughs and pauses. “When I first got there, just to put it in perspective, I was older than them and I had a business school degree and I had actually worked somewhere. So I was a little cautious about working for two students. That’s how I saw them at the time: students who were doing their first company.” But now, after years of working together, she says she often hears their voices in her head when she approaches difficult decisions.

Despite growing up in Silicon Valley, Wojcicki says her only contact with the technology industry was taking a shortcut to high school through the Hewlett-Packard car park. Her family was not steeped in technology. Her father, Stanley, was a professor of physics at Stanford University; her grandmother ran the Slavic department at the Library of Congress during the cold war. But she sees working at Google as following a family tradition that values the free flow of information.

Google became part of her family. Her husband, Dennis, worked there and her sister, Anne, chief executive of [genetics start-up 23andme](#), was married to Brin before the couple separated in 2013. Asked whether this was a difficult time for her, Wojcicki is unruffled, saying she never mixes work and personal life, which is “just good practice”. Plus, she reported to Page, not Brin. “Any separation is hard for any family, but from a work perspective it really didn’t make any difference,” she says.

I ask how she feels about talking about her family. “I do talk about the fact that I have five kids because I think a lot of women are really embarrassed and [don’t] want to talk about it because they’re worried it’s going to hurt their career – and that’s really unfair for women,” she says.

I agree it is unfair but suggest she probably has more resources than most to help her combine work and family. “Yes, that’s true but that wasn’t true for me when I first got started: I didn’t have any special resources—I was renting part of my house. It is true now I have more resources, but I also have a lot more kids than most people,” she laughs.

Female leaders are scarce in the technology industry, where women often make up less than a fifth of technical employees at large companies. Wojcicki reels them off on one hand: Meg Whitman at HP, Ginni Rometty at IBM and her former Google colleagues Marissa Mayer at Yahoo and Sheryl Sandberg at Facebook.

Where Sandberg has created a platform encouraging women to “lean in” at work, speaking up and negotiating hard, Wojcicki uses her position to campaign for paid parental leave, saying it is “crazy” it is not a legal requirement in the US, and to encourage more women into software engineering.

At Harvard University, she majored in history and literature, only discovering just before her senior year that she wanted to learn to code and taking an engineering class. “Coding is like writing, and we live in a time of the new industrial revolution. What’s happened is that maybe everybody knows how to use computers, like they know how to read, but they don’t know how to write. So what would literature look like if only 20 per cent of the authors were women? Well, we would have a lot less great books,” she concludes.

Having hardly touched the tofu, Wojcicki returns to the plantain turnovers. “I think you ordered the better meal,” she says, before praising the tofu and asking if I want to try some. I decline.

We’ve been talking for an hour and a half and, although she seems relaxed, I’m conscious she has to be somewhere. Before she goes, I’m eager to hear what she thinks is the future of online video—are we all going to be living in a live-streamed, 360-degree, virtual reality world?

YouTube is investing in all three technologies but Wojcicki is realistic: VR can be “really compelling” but it will start by being a novelty, not the norm, she says. “We don’t go to the movies all the time yet it really influences our opinions. We don’t go to amusement parks but when we go it’s a highlight. I think VR can really transport us in a way that a trip can or going to a movie can, and I believe it’ll be a really important part of storytelling in the future.” YouTube’s enthusiastic, verging on screechy, creators would be compelling in VR. And just possibly a little terrifying.

Folding her napkin neatly, Wojcicki thanks me and the waiter. We discuss meeting again at VidCon, an annual conference in California where teenagers gather in a modern-day version of Beatlemania to meet their favourite YouTube stars. I ask her if she ever brings earplugs, recalling an episode when I was squashed against the walls of a lift by a gang of noisy tweenage YouTube fans. “Oh no, I have screaming teenagers at home,” she says, laughing again.

*This article was first published on FT.com on April 29, 2016. The author, Hannah Kuchler is an FT correspondent in San Francisco. The illustration is by Luke Waller. Read the article [here](#).*

Sign up for a FT.com trial for only \$1 [here](#).