

Whether 'tis nobler to sacrifice privacy...

To Google or not to Google?

Now one of the biggest and most varied online presences there is, Google's offerings have become far too large and diverse to be adequately described merely as a **search engine** anymore, though it is still certainly that. Since 2009, its homepage has been the most visited site on the Web and it serves up ads on pages all around the planet.

A search engine, however, may be just what's needed to find out all the services Google produces. Wikipedia lists at least **25 different kinds of search tools** alone that Google runs. The complete roll of all products they offer, have ever offered, or are currently in development is mind-blowing, ranging from such things as **Hotpot**, a restaurant evaluator, to **3D Warehouse** to host 3D models, **Picnik** online photo editing, various web development and statistical tools, desktop apps, **Google Wallet** for buying through cellphones, translation apps, and on and on.

Services include detailed **maps** of Earth, the Moon, Mars, and the sky; **calendars**, profiles, voicemail, file storage, publishing apps and many others. Products that Google created or acquired that are well-known in their own right include **Android**, **Blogger**, **Chrome**, **Gmail**, **Picasa**, and **YouTube**. They are expanding into **social networking**, going up against Facebook with Google+ and Orkut. Now they're even getting into **hardware**, as well as experimentally providing **low-cost broadband** in Kansas City.

It might be easier to list the few things that Google *isn't* into at this point. By now, the corporation is well on its way to completely dominating the Internet. Could it get too big, too ambitious? Such things have happened before.

Well, the company's reassuring motto, "Don't be evil" was apparently quietly dropped in 2009 when it hired a PR firm to change its image. But the real cause for concern is what pays for all these marvelous, seemingly free, services.

Everybody knows that nothing is *really* free; what Google wants in trade for their services is your **personal data**. In fact, Google wants to know *everything* about you. Everything, that is, like where you go online, what you buy, your likes and dislikes, and all your friends and their interests, too. There's nothing necessarily sinister in all this; the corporation does not care about you individually any more or less than the millions of other people they are following.

Google is discreet; they need not tell anyone why they collect all that information or what its purpose is. One major use is clearly **advertising**. They share your personal preferences with merchants who pay them handsomely for it. You can see the results in action by simply going to a big online retailer to look at something you are interested in. You may then find ads for that item dogging you from website to website until you check out something else.

This is based on one of the many still unproven assumptions in **online marketing**. The idea is that if you've ever demonstrated interest in something, you're more likely to buy it when you see it again. But maybe you didn't bite because of some flaw in the item, and repeated exposures will only make you more determined to avoid the product, not to mention the annoying merchant as well.

Ads will also follow you around *after* you buy something. But if you just purchased an item, why would you buy another or something similar? The entire concept that **number of viewings equals advertising success** is suspect. For one thing, after years of constant exposure to magazine and TV ads, we've all become as adept at ignoring irritating distractions as hunter gatherers of yore.

Other techniques, like **site suggestions** based on what other people have bought, are equally scattershot and dubious. Yet the solution has been not that the model is wrong, but that the data needs closer attention. And so Google wants ever more and studies it ever more deeply.

Whether or not it all goes horribly wrong some day, there's good reason for consumers to exercise caution. History shows that it's never a great idea to put all one's eggs into one basket. Or you may just be interested in something you don't want advertisers to know. Who likes to be followed around by hair restoration ads – or worse?

One subtle hazard is that, *only* seeing the world through a haze of comfortably familiar viewpoints, you may develop an arrogant case of **tunnel vision**. Who knows how much this may be responsible for the radical polarization that seems to afflict everything these days?

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Isn't the Internet too valuable as a versatile communications tool and engine of learning to be used just as a mirror of our own trivial and petty preferences?

Limiting Exposure

Google's **Terms of Service** are probably no more examined before the required agreement than anybody else's. Fortunately, there's a new website, **Terms of Service Didn't Read** (<http://tos-dr.info/>), that does. It rates terms of many places, not just Google. Compared to some companies, they're not bad, but you should be aware that **all content you post to Google may be used for all their current and future services**. Yet another thing to consider before putting embarrassing videos on YouTube...

For whatever reason, you may want to limit the amount of information you pay Google for its services, even while continuing to enjoy them. This is not as easy as it once was. This spring, the company changed its privacy policy, and combined and expanded user profiles across the board. Whereas once you could have had a blog, a YouTube account, and Gmail, and one hand would not know what the other was doing, as it were, no longer. But unlike Yahoo, you do *not* have to use your real name.

Here's a few simple things to limit disclosure that can easily be done without getting extreme about it:

1. **Use alternative search engines.** Google is the biggest but that does not mean it is necessarily the best. And among others: **Ask.com**, Microsoft's **Bing** "decision engine", **DuckDuckGo.com**, and **Yahoo!** is still around, too. There are also plenty of dedicated alternatives for map searches, such as **Mapquest.com**. Or use **proxy services** such as **Startpage.com**. To hide your data the **Firefox browser** also has a number of free add-ons to manage your Google connections for convenience and privacy. While both Firefox and Chrome have private surfing modes, they may leave traces on your device if you stream down media.
2. **Use different service providers.** Gmail might be handy but it's a wide-open book to Google. Here's where **SWCP's** own services can help deny them a full picture of you to maintain some personal privacy. We furnish quality inexpensive **email, mailing lists, online backup, and website hosting**. In all cases, the customer entirely owns the content: the only times we ever go near it is to make sure connections and services are working, or when required by law.
3. **Divide up your data.** If you feel you must use Gmail, you can still set up different email addresses for various purposes. Have a **primary account** that you give out to people, and others you use for special purposes – say, one for Picasa and another for their news gatherer. With SWCP, you can not only keep your email entirely private, you can set up **free email aliases and filters**, so that mail is automatically screened and sorted as it arrives in your inbox. This allows you to keep it all together yet usefully organized. **Free email forwarding** is another helpful service we offer.
4. **Use different browsers.** Google's **Chrome** was intended to make all of Google's services easily available, but it also lets them see everything you do.

Whenever you're logged into a Google service, all your searches, even in that browser's other tabs, are logged, too. So use multiple browsers. You can have one logged in to separate accounts, or only one.

5. **Don't forget your smartphone and tablets.** Limiting Google exposure on a cellphone can be tricky even if not on an **Android** device. Gmail and Google Contacts integrate closely with the phone and you can't log out. But some mobiles allow you to use multiple accounts or choose what information to share with them. So use alternative browsers, search engines, and map software while on your smartphone. Turn off the locator to save power. Similar precautions may apply to tablets.
6. **Turn off your Google Web Search History.** This feature supposedly gives you personalized search predictions based on your preferences, so while a minor convenience, it also limits what you see. Sign into your Google account and turn it off, but remember that they will retain the information for profiling anyway — just in case you ever have a sudden unfortunate urge to look up "rat poison."



Slow DSL Connections?

Let us know if you need more speed. Calling CenturyLink will cause them to automatically switch you from SWCP to their own service provider without even asking you. So if you would like to upgrade your connection, let us deal with it for you and save you time, hassle, and expense.

If your DSL link has suddenly slowed down, however, requesting a **speed change** might not help. It likely occurred because the technology in your neighborhood has changed. Copper wires are being gradually replaced by faster **fiber optic** cables in many areas. Unfortunately when it happens, as it must, it will *permanently degrade* your DSL speed. Happily, however, you should now be able to get higher speeds than ever possible before.

The solution is to upgrade to **LightSpeed**, SWCP's own **premium broadband connection** using DSL and fiber for homes and small businesses. Like other broadband services, it's always on and available at any time, but this kind is faster and more reliable than other forms of DSL.

LightSpeed is still not available everywhere yet, so **prequalification is necessary**. Also, it is a **stand-alone service** requiring an unused phone line. However, if one is not handy, we may be able to bring one to your location. Check swcp.com or call for details.



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