

We are not the customers but the product

Hostage to the Tech Giants

Wonderful conveniences abound on the internet, but most of them seem to come from just a few giant enterprises. The most popular devices are made by Apple and Microsoft, while the most used apps are provided by Google, Facebook, and Amazon.

Collectively, these titans know almost everything there is to know about us. The manufacturers know the devices we use, Amazon knows what we buy, Facebook knows who all our friends are, and Google knows our interests and location. Meanwhile, these massive companies quietly suck up personal information and are continually scheming to get more.

What could possibly go wrong?

All these companies put enormous efforts into making their products easy to use. They want to make usage so convenient that relying on these things becomes effortless. Their goal is to become monopolies as vitally essential to the 21st century as the phone company was to the 20th, and in this they have succeeded beyond their wildest dreams.

The difference, of course, is that Ma Bell was not allowed to listen in. The company could still determine people's contacts and the times they were at home. But these modern communication companies have both freedom and capability to watch and listen to *everything* online *all the time* (and there are **some reasons** to fear that they physically listen, too). All the data they constantly collect is giving their competing **artificial intelligence systems** the power to predict and influence how we think, feel, and act.

Only due to foreign interference in our elections are we appreciating the social costs of these amenities, and how easily they can be turned against us and our way of life. It is vital that we grasp what has been done to us, if we wish to retain basic human liberty.

If we don't, we could awaken in a dystopia darker than an Orwellian nightmare, neatly wrapped up in glittering illusions and faux happiness. Or are we there already?

Too prevalent to avoid

Both the size and the scope of these firms are incredible. Half of everything **sold online** comes from Amazon; even groceries now that it owns Whole Foods. Meanwhile Alexa, its vocal AI assistant, waits to **take orders** from 8.2 million people. Amazon also owns **Twitch.tv**, a major online game and video provider. But all this pales beside Amazon Web Services.

AWS is the net's biggest cloud provider. Its vast **network of servers** hold 23 million IP addresses, playing host to many prominent websites and services, including government agencies. Even its rivals, Netflix and HBO, and tech giants such as Oracle depend upon Amazon Web Services. Last year, Bezos **made \$17.5 billion** off of AWS, which even during the holidays provided 73% of Amazon's earnings.

Here's a sample of **what Amazon knows**:

Amazon feels free to gather "any information you enter on our Web site or give us in any other way." Some data is necessary, like your Amazon password, name, address, phone numbers, credit card info, the contact info of people you've had purchases shipped to, plus reviews and emails to the firm.

Some info is gathered to help improve Amazon. They collect session information and your purchase and product search history, including through Alexa and paid listings. But they also get your credit history, financial information, Social Security and driver's license numbers, IP addresses used, your computer system, location, and unique device identifiers.

Amazon claims that it never sells that data, but may share some with partners like Starbucks, Office Max, and various telecom companies. But as was seen with **Facebook**, once info goes out, there is no telling where it ends up or how it could be used.

Although smaller than Amazon, **controlling** "only" 8.7 million IP addresses, Google knows even more about you than the online store does. Its profusion of services, including search, email, maps and YouTube, along with its ad services, AI assistant, the Chrome browser and laptops, Android phones, and Nest home appliances all gather personal data.

Continued on back

Google admits it collects: what you search for, videos you watch, ads viewed or clicked, your location, websites you visit, apps and devices you use. And if you have a Google Account: name, birthday, gender, phone number, emails to or from Gmail, photos and videos you save online, documents you make with Google Drive, plus comments, contacts, etc.

Google's use of all that data is totally opaque, as are its data protection measures. While the European Union has put data protection into law with the GDPR, the **General Data Protection Regulation**, there has been no sign that those safeguards will be honored here by Google, Amazon, or Facebook.

Not only do these companies collect data on their own sites, but they track users' web surfing. Plus their software products secretly send information back to their server farms all the time.

For their homepages are just where the data gathering starts. Over *27 million websites* out there rely on **Google Analytics**, thus allowing Google to track users and site usage all across the net. From IP addresses, map searches, and Android phones, they can pinpoint your physical location and travels, too.

One journalist, Kashmir Hill, found that during one week her devices tried to connect with Amazon *300,000 times* using *38,000 IP addresses*. Google did it a mere *104,000 times*, mainly trackers, ads, and resources. Hill's **attempt** to cease all use of the tech giants for a month was difficult, but highly informative. She was able to stop most contact with effort but **discovered** that they were almost too embedded in society to avoid using. Google's now where we find things, Amazon's where we buy them, and Facebook is where we share them with friends.

Because data has not yet been used in an overtly sinister manner, most people shrug their shoulders and carry on. But monopolies, by their very nature, stifle, subvert or steal innovation to control prices.

For example, one of Amazon's attractions is that it hosts independent sellers. The small merchants get the benefits of the site, but to survive, their prices must be in line with Amazon, which has the advantage of size allowing them to negotiate lower costs.

Since Amazon collects all these guest companies' data from the site also, they can easily crush would-be competitors with cheaper prices anytime they choose. It has done much the **same thing** with AWS, seeking out promising start-ups there to invest in.

Meanwhile, Facebook is busily mining the world's social data. This huge site has equally huge problems and keeps making more for itself. See why some are calling for its break-up at our blog.

Turbocharged Web Hosting

Our "webfarm" platform provides fast, secure, and reliable web hosting. But advancing website technology presents new challenges as websites keep getting more flexible at the cost of performance.

The web is now a rich tapestry of dynamic applications. Frameworks such as WordPress and Drupal allow site owners to produce great content on the fly. You concentrate on what you want to say, without fussing over a mountain of technical details to do so.

Older dynamic web sites might have used *10-15 files* to generate each page view, but modern sites are churning through *300 or more files per page view*. This extra processing for each site requires more computing resources. It's easy to allocate them for sites that have an expensive dedicated server, but harder to do so with shared hosting systems like our webfarm.

We have cracked that nut with our new "Boosted PHP" feature for our "Pro" web hosting sites. Boosted PHP utilizes additional servers for processing the demanding needs of today's rich web applications.

It's only needed for more complex sites, like those with discussion forums, galleries, or ecommerce. "Boosted PHP" will speed those up nicely. If you are on the Pro hosting plan already, just ask us. There's no additional charge. We can also enable it for you to try out on upgraded sites before you commit to it.

The main caveat is that Boosted PHP only supports the most recent versions of PHP. It is definitely compatible with Wordpress and Drupal, and we can help with any compatibility issues that might arise. If you have any questions about Boosted PHP, please email us at help@swcp.com.

WordPress Work Alongs

WordPress version 5 just came out with significant improvements but users may be confused about how it works now. **Ideas & Coffee** holds WordPress Meetups on Thursdays, 6:30-8:30 PM. to help out with just such problems. Check the Event Schedule, <https://www.swcp.com/events/> for dates.



Southwest Cyberport

New Mexico's Expert Internet Service Provider since 1994

505-243-SWCP (7927) • SWCP.com • Help@swcp.com

5021 Indian School NE, Suite 600, Albuquerque, NM 87110

Portal editor/chief writer, Jay Nelson jnelson@swcp.com
Click on **blue terms** in PDF file to open links.