

# Google – One of the Largest Monopolies in the World

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## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Google monopolizes several different markets, including search and advertising. Bing, its closest web search competitor, has just 2% of the market; Google has 90%
- › Google also controls 60% of the global advertising revenue on the internet. One of the primary reasons smaller advertisers cannot compete is because they don't have the user data Google has
- › While not the sole threat to privacy, Google is one of the greatest. It catches every single thing you do online when using a Google-based feature, and builds powerful personality profiles of all users
- › Evidence suggests Google's Android operating system circumvents a customer's decision not to share location data by tracking the addresses of nearby cellular towers instead, and sharing that information with Google
- › Monopolies like Google pose a serious threat to democracy and basic liberties. Take back control by boycotting Google-based services, including Gmail, Google search engines, Google Docs and Chrome

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Google is undoubtedly one of the largest and clearest monopolies in the world. In fact, the company monopolizes several different markets, including search and advertising. Bing, its closest search competitor, has just 2% of the market – hardly a significant

threat to Google's 90%.<sup>1</sup> Google also controls about 60% of the global advertising revenue on the internet.

One of the primary reasons smaller advertisers cannot compete is because they don't have the user data Google has. As noted by digital media expert Jonathan Taplin, "They know who you are, where you are, what you just bought, what you might want to buy. And so, if I'm an advertiser and I say, 'I want 24-year-old women in Nashville, Tennessee, who drive trucks and drink bourbon,' I can do that on Google."

Indeed, what many fail to realize is that Google's primary business is the harvesting of user data, and this data gathering goes far beyond what most people realize was even possible. Google catches every single thing you do online if you're using a Google-based feature, and this data is then used to build powerful personality profiles that are sold for profit and used in a variety of different ways.

## **Google Has You Pegged**

As previously reported by Gawker:<sup>2</sup>

*"Every word of every email sent through Gmail and every click made on a Chrome browser is watched by the company. 'We don't need you to type at all,' [Google co-founder Eric] Schmidt once said. 'We know where you are. We know where you've been. We can more or less know what you're thinking about.'"*

If that level of "mind reading" sounds far-fetched, it's worth considering that Google also owns DeepMind, the world's greatest artificial intelligence (AI) company, which has more than 700 AI researchers in its employ. With all this AI power on the job, it is not hard for them to sort through all your data with their deep learning algorithms to detect patterns that can be exploited for profit.

As noted by Gary Reback, a prominent antitrust lawyer who has taken up the battle against Google's monopoly, "People tell their search engine things they wouldn't even tell their wives. It's a very powerful and yet very intimate technology. And that gives the company that controls it a mind-boggling degree of control over our entire society."

# **The Power of Google**

Reback is featured in a recent "60 Minutes" report focused on the power of Google – a company currently worth more than three-quarters of a trillion dollars – the power and wealth of which is built on its enormous data gathering capabilities. Alphabet, the holding company that owns Google, has over the past 14 years also acquired more than 200 other companies, further expanding and diversifying its monopoly over our everyday lives. This includes:

- YouTube, the largest video platform on the web
- Android, which operates about 80% of all smartphones
- DoubleClick, one of the largest digital advertising companies

As noted by CBS News, these acquisitions barely raised an eyebrow with regulators in Washington. How come they were not more closely scrutinized by the Department of Justice's antitrust division? According to Reback, "Some were investigated, but only superficially. The government just really isn't enforcing our antitrust laws. And that's what's happened. None of these acquisitions have been challenged."

## **Google Circumvented Antitrust Action in 2011**

In 2011, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) investigated antitrust complaints against Google. Yelp, Microsoft, Amazon, eBay, Expedia and Yahoo all said their business had suffered due to Google's anticompetitive behavior.

A confidential memo leaked to the Wall Street Journal reveals FTC staff had recommended filing an antitrust suit against the company, noting that "Google is in the unique position of being able to 'make or break any web-based business' and has strengthened its monopolies over search and search advertising through anticompetitive means and forestalled competitors' and would-be competitors' ability to challenge those monopolies."

According to CBS News, "It specifically cited Google for stealing competitors' content, and imposing restrictions on advertisers and other websites that limited their ability to utilize other search engines." In the end, the recommendation to litigate was rejected and the case was closed. Reback and others suspect this illogical outcome was due to Google's political clout.

The company spent more money on political lobbying in 2017 than any other corporation. It has no less than 25 different lobbying firms working on its behalf. Google is also funding 300 trade associations, think tanks and other important groups with influence over government policy.

According to Reback, Google has "a seat at the table in every discussion ... They know about developments that we never even hear about. So, their influence, from my perspective, is very, very difficult to challenge."

## **FTC Urged to Investigate Android Data Collection Practices**

Last month, Sen. Richard Blumenthal (D-Conn.) and Sen. Ed Markey (D-Mass.) urged the FTC to investigate the data collection practices of Google's Android operating systems. Specifically, they want the FTC to ascertain "whether Google has deceptively collected location data on Android users, even when such services are disabled," and to examine "the potential deceptive acts and practices used by Google to track and commoditize American consumers."<sup>3</sup>

The call for an investigation appears to be in response to a November 2017 Quartz Media report,<sup>4</sup> which discovered Android would circumvent a customer's decision not to share location data by tracking the addresses of nearby cellular towers instead, and sharing that information with Google — a practice that appears to have begun in early 2017. According to The Hill:<sup>5</sup>

*"The result is that Google ... has access to data about individuals' locations and their movements that go far beyond a reasonable consumer expectation of privacy," the Quartz report says. The report said the inability to turn off the*

*location services in Android poses a risk for individuals who want to conceal their location for security purposes, like law enforcement officials and victims of domestic abuse."*

## **Challenging Google's Illegal Activities**

One brave individual who has taken Google and other monopolies to task is Margrethe Vestager, competition commissioner for the European Union (EU), who during the last four years fined Facebook \$122 million for a merger violation, ordered Apple to cough up \$15 billion owed in Irish taxes, and fined Google \$2.7 billion for illegal anticompetition activities.

Vestager says she wants Google to stop its illegal behavior, saying there's proof the company is on the wrong side of the law. Using its proprietary search algorithms, Google promotes its own products and services while burying its competitors so far down the list that most people will never find them. According to Vestager, "It is ... the algorithm that does it. Both the promotion of Google themselves and the demotion of others ... And it is illegal."

## **Chinese Tech Giants Dwarf All Others**

In related news, The New York Times<sup>6</sup> recently highlighted Tencent Holdings and Alibaba Group — two Chinese tech giants vying for title as Top Titan in an ever-growing number of areas of Chinese life, ranging from online education and bicycle rentals to brick-and-mortar supermarket chains.

According to the NYT, the two "have competed in messaging, microblogging and delivering takeout. They go head-to-head in video streaming and cloud computing. Today, their fiercest fight is over digital money kept on smartphones ... [I]n the internet realm, China ... offers a spooky potential vision of the future, one in which online behemoths like Tencent and Alibaba become the gatekeepers to the entire economy ..."

Raj Rajgopal, president of digital business strategy at the consulting firm Virtusa Corporation, predicts the EU's stricter new privacy laws might encourage the U.S. to follow, in which case Google and Facebook would have to find other ways of making money besides hoarding and selling user data.

Once that happens, they may just decide to follow the playbook of China's reigning duopoly, the primary goal of which is to lock as many people as possible into their respective payment systems.

## What Kind of Data Does Google Really Have on You?

In a March 30 article for The Guardian,<sup>7</sup> Dylan Curran took a deep dive into Google's data harvesting, and the results are far more extensive than you might have suspected. Here's a summary list of the kind of information Google collects, tracks and stores on each individual user:

**Extremely detailed location tracking** — If you have a Google-enabled device on your person that has location tracking turned on, it will store the exact details of where you are at any given moment, and this data accumulates from the first day you started using Google on the device. To review the details of your own data, see this [Google Maps Timeline](#) link.<sup>8</sup>

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**Complete search histories on all devices** — Google keeps tabs on everything you've ever searched for, on any device, including search histories you've deleted from an individual device. To check your own search data, see [Google's MyActivity page](#).<sup>9</sup>

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**Personalized advertisement profile** — Based on your data profile — location, gender, age, work and private interests, relationship status, income, health concerns, future plans and so on — Google creates personalized advertisements that might interest you.

Have you ever done a search for a particular product or service and suddenly found yourself flooded with ads for that precise thing? That's your data profile at work. To

see your personalized ad profile, see [Google's Ads Settings](#).<sup>10</sup>

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**App usage** – Do you use apps and extensions? If so, Google knows which ones you're using, how often, when, where and with whom you're interacting when you do. To see your app usage data, check out [Google's Security Permission Settings](#).<sup>11</sup>

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**YouTube history** – Much can be gleaned from the types of videos you're interested in, and Google keeps tabs on every single one you've ever searched for, watched and commented on. To review your own data, see your [Youtube Feed History page](#).<sup>12</sup>

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**Clandestine microphone access** – Disturbingly, Google (as well as Facebook) has the ability to access your microphone without your knowledge.

If you suddenly find yourself on the receiving end of ads for products or services you just spoke about out loud, chances are one or more apps are linked into your microphone and are eavesdropping. Below is a video by Safer Tech describing how to disable the microphone on your device to prevent Facebook and Google apps from listening in.<sup>13</sup>

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**Clandestine webcam access** – Your built-in webcam on your phone, tablet, laptop or computer can also be accessed by various apps. To learn more about app permissions, see "How to Master Your App Permissions So You Don't Get Hacked – The Full Guide," by Heimdal Security.<sup>14</sup>

As noted in this article, "For a long time, app permissions were something the regular PC user had no idea about. When installing new software on a computer, we were never asked if application X could access our web camera, our list of contacts, etc. ... App permissions may seem like a nuisance, but the better you know how they work, the safer you can keep your data."

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**Event tracking** – By tracking your Google calendar entries, combined with your location data, Google knows what events you've attended, when and for how long.

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**Your fitness routine** — If you use Google Fit, all the details about your fitness routine and workouts, down to how many steps you've taken on any given day, are recorded and stored.

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**A lifetime of photographic evidence** — Twenty years ago, photos were a private matter, reminisced over in photo albums and displayed around the home. Today, people's lives are on public display online, and Google captures it all. When combined with facial recognition software and other technological identification applications, including metadata detailing the time and place of each snap, your photos are a treasure trove of private information.

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**A lifetime of emails** — Google also has every single email you've ever sent, received and deleted.

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**Deleted files and information** — You probably delete files and information every now and then for the sake of safety, right? You might decide to delete that list of passwords from your phone, for example, in case you lose it or it gets hacked. Well, Google still has all of that information.

As noted by Curran, showing a screen shot of his downloaded Google data, "This is my Google Drive, which includes files I explicitly deleted, including my resume, my monthly budget and all the code, files and websites I've ever made, and even my PGP private key, which I deleted, that I use to encrypt emails."

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**If you've done it or researched it, Google has a record of it** — Google allows you to download a copy of the data they have stored on you. Curran's personal data cache from Google was 5.5GB big, equal to about 3 million word documents. Essentially, your Google account contains a detailed diary of everything you've ever done or planned to do, and where you were when you did it. To download your own Google cache, see [Google's Takeout page](#).<sup>15</sup>

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## How Is Your Personal Information Used?

As noted by Curran, "This information has millions of nefarious uses. You say you're not a terrorist. Then how come you were Googling Isis?" Indeed, the 2013 article, "What Surveillance Valley Knows About You,"<sup>16</sup> is an eye-opening read that may be well worth your time, describing just how grossly invasive this data collection and distribution is, and how dangerous it can be if you end up on certain lists.

Unfortunately, many still fail to see the problem Google presents. Its services are useful and practical, making life easier in many ways, and more fun in others. Alas, the complete and utter loss of privacy is a high price to be paid for such conveniences.

Who knows how a lifetime cache of personal data might one day be used against you? If you fall into this category, I ask you to give this issue some serious thought, because monopolies threaten our very way of life, and in more ways than one.

Google's data harvesting is particularly concerning in light of its military connections,<sup>17</sup> and the fact the company has repeatedly been caught infringing on privacy rights and misrepresenting the type and amount of data it collects and shares on its users. In April 2018, more than 3,100 Google employees signed a letter to CEO Sundar Pichai, urging him not to go ahead with plans to provide AI technology to the Pentagon's drone program, known as Project Maven.

As reported by Fox News,<sup>18</sup> "Google's AI contribution could ... improve the system's ability [to] analyze video and potential be used to identify targets and civilians." The letter also urges Pichai to establish a corporate policy that disallows it from participating in "warfare technology."

Others, including former White House deputy coordinator for international communications and information policy, Scott Cleland, have expressed deep concerns about the plan to combine Alphabet-Google's data harvesting with a military 5G network.

"What could possibly go wrong with a nationalized, dual-use, military-civilian, secure 5G wireless network to centralize all military and civilian U.S. transportation traffic control and management with Alphabet-Google as the only commercial wireless ISP 'financing/anchor tenant?' Way too much," Cleland writes.<sup>19</sup>

# Protect Your Privacy by Avoiding Google

Alphabet, the rebranded parent company of Google and its many divisions, has tentacles reaching into government, food production, health care, education, military applications and the creation of AIs that may run more or less independently. A key component of many of these enterprises is incredibly detailed personal usage data.

Ultimately, your user data and personal details can be used for everything from creating personalized advertising to AI-equipped robotic warfare applications. As noted in previous articles, Google's involvement in education and health care also has far-reaching ramifications, and in these settings your personal data could potentially be used to influence not only your personal lifestyle decisions but also to shape society at large.

Today, being a conscious consumer includes making wise, informed decisions about technology, and one of the greatest personal data leaks in your life is Google. Here's a summary of action steps you can take right now, starting today, to protect your privacy. For more information, see [Goopocalypse.com's boycott Google page](#).

1. Sign the "[Don't be evil](#)" petition aimed at Google, created by Citizens Against Monopoly
2. Avoid any and all Google products:
  - Stop using Google search engines. So far, one of the best alternatives I've found is [DuckDuckGo](#)<sup>20</sup>
  - Uninstall Google Chrome and use the [Opera browser](#) instead, available for all computers and mobile devices.<sup>21</sup> From a security perspective, Opera is far superior to Chrome and offers a free VPN service (virtual private network) to further preserve your privacy
  - If you have a Gmail account, close it and open an account with a non-Google affiliated email service such as [ProtonMail](#),<sup>22</sup> and encrypted email service based in Switzerland

- Stop using Google docs. Digital Trends has published an article suggesting a number of alternatives<sup>23</sup>
- If you're a high school student, do not convert the Google accounts you created as a student into personal accounts

## Sources and References

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- <sup>7</sup> The Guardian March 30, 2018
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- <sup>10</sup> Google Ads Settings
- <sup>11</sup> Google Security Permission Settings
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