

## TECH FIX

# It's Google's World. We Just Live in It.

Googling something was all we once did with Google. Now we spend hours a day using its maps, videos, security cameras, email, smartphones and more.



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About 20 years ago, I typed Google.com into my web browser for the first time. It loaded a search bar and buttons. I punched in “D.M.V. sample test,” scrolled through the results and clicked on a site.

Wow, I thought to myself. Google's minimalist design was a refreshing alternative to other search engines at the time — remember AltaVista, Yahoo! and Lycos? — which greeted us with a jumble of ads and links to news articles. Even better, Google seemed to show more up-to-date, relevant results.

And the entire experience took just a few seconds. Once I found the link I needed, I was done with Google.

Two decades later, my experience with Google is considerably different. When I do a Google search in 2020, I spend far more time in the internet company's universe. If I look for chocolate chips, for example, I see Google ads for chocolate chips pop up at the top of my screen, followed by recipes that Google has scraped from across the web, followed by Google Maps and Google Reviews of nearby bakeries, followed by YouTube videos for how to bake chocolate chip cookies. (YouTube, of course, is owned by Google.)

It isn't just that I am spending more time in a Google search, either. The Silicon Valley company has leveraged the act of looking for something online into such a vast technology empire over the years that it has crept into my home, my work, my devices and much more. It has become the tech brand that dominates my life — and probably yours, too.

On my Apple iPhone, I use Google's apps for photo albums and maps, along with tools for calendar, email and documents. On my computer and tablet, the various web browsers I use feature Google as the default search bar. For work, I use Google Finance (to look up stock quotes), Google Drive (to store files), Google Meet (to teleconference) and Google Hangouts (to communicate).

In my home, Google is also everywhere. My Nest home security camera is made by Google. A Google voice service rings my door buzzer. To learn how to repair a gutter, I recently watched home improvement videos on YouTube. In online maps, Google has photos of my house taken from outer space and camera-embedded cars.

By my unofficial estimate, I spend at least seven hours a day on Google-related products.

Google's prevalence has brought the company to a critical point. On Tuesday, the Justice Department sued it for anticompetitive practices, in the most significant antitrust action by the U.S. government against a technology company in decades. The government's case focused on Google's search and how it appeared to create a monopoly through exclusive business contracts and agreements that locked out rivals.

Google said in a tweet that the lawsuit was “deeply flawed.” The company added, “People use Google because they choose to, not because they're forced to or because they can't find alternatives.”

To Gabriel Weinberg, the chief executive of DuckDuckGo, which offers a privacy-focused search engine, what I have experienced was Google's plan all along.

“I don't think it was happenstance,” he said. “They've been using their different products to maintain their dominance in their core market, which is search.”

That has created a privacy cost for many of us, Mr. Weinberg said. Google, he said, collects reams of information about us across its products, allowing it to stitch together detailed profiles about our behavior and interests.

So in 2012, Mr. Weinberg broke up with Google and purged his accounts. “I got to understand the privacy implications of building massive profiles on people — and the massive harm,” he said.

But Jeff Jarvis, a professor at the Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism and the author of “What Would Google Do?,” a book about the search giant's rise, said there was still plenty of room outside Google's world. For one, we don't use Google for social media — we're on Facebook and TikTok. Artificial intelligence, even the type that Google is developing, is still pretty unintelligent, he added.

“The internet is still very, very young,” Mr. Jarvis said.

To test that argument, I decided to catalog Google's presence in our lives. Here are some results.

## Ads Everywhere

When we browse the web, we are probably interacting with Google without even realizing it. That's because most websites that we visit contain Google's ad technologies, which track our browsing. When we load a web article containing an ad served by Google, the company keeps a record of the website that loaded the ad — even if we didn't click on the ad.

And guess what. Most ads we see are served by Google. Last year, the company and Facebook accounted for 59 percent of digital ad spending, according to the research firm eMarketer. Google dominates 63 percent of that slice of the pie.

Google's ad technologies also include invisible analytics code, which runs in the background of many websites. About 74 percent of the sites we visit run Google analytics, according to an analysis by DuckDuckGo. So that's even more data we are feeding about ourselves to Google, often without knowing it.

## Phones and Computers

Let's start with Android, the most popular mobile operating system in the world. People with Android devices inevitably download apps from Google's Play store.

Android includes Google's staple apps for maps and email, and Google search is prominently featured for looking up articles and digging through device settings. Google's voice-powered virtual assistant is also part of Android devices.

Even if you own an Apple iPhone, as I do, Google looms large.

Google has been the default search bar on the iPhone's Safari browser since 2007. Gmail is the most popular email service in the world, with more than 1.5 billion users, so chances are you use it on your iPhone. And good luck finding a service other than YouTube for watching those cooking and music videos on your phone.

In fact, Google owns 10 of the 100 most-downloaded apps in the Google and Apple app stores, according to App Annie, a mobile analytics firm.

Outside smartphones, Google is the dominant force on our personal computers. By some estimates, more than 65 percent of us use Google's Chrome web browser. And in education, our schools have chosen the Chromebook, low-cost PCs that run Google's operating system, as the most widely used tech tool for students.

## Online Video

This can be brief: YouTube is by far the largest video-hosting platform. Period. About 215 million Americans watch YouTube, spending 27 minutes a day on the site, on average. That's up from 22 minutes a few years ago, according to eMarketer.

Another way you might watch Google videos is through YouTube TV, a streaming service that offers a modest bundle of TV channels. Released in 2017, YouTube TV had more than two million users last year, according to Google. That's not far behind Sling TV, a similar bundle service introduced by Dish in 2015, which had about 2.6 million subscribers last year.

## The Home and Beyond

If you recently bought an internet-connected gadget for your home, chances are that Google is behind it. After all, the company offers Google Home, one of the most popular smart speakers and powered by Google's virtual assistant, and it owns Nest, the smart-home brand that makes internet-connected security cameras, smoke alarms and thermostats.

We often interact with Google even when we use an app that lacks a clear connection with it. That's because Google provides the cloud infrastructure, or the server technology that lets us stream videos and download files, to other brands. If you're using TikTok in the United States, guess what: You're in Google's cloud. (TikTok may soon switch cloud providers under a deal with Oracle.)

Even Mr. Weinberg, who quit Google, said he had been unable to shake its services entirely. He said he still watched the occasional Google-hosted video when there was no alternative.

"If somebody's sending a video that I need to watch and it's only on YouTube, then that's just the reality," he said.