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December 10, 2025

Breaking Up Google

It is often said that when something is free, you are the product. Google is a great example of this adage, providing a wide range of services, from Gmail to YouTube, without charging users a single dollar. In reality, Google generates revenue by collecting, analyzing, and selling user data to advertisers, creating an ecosystem designed to collect and monetize every aspect of your online life. While Google may not be a monopoly by the traditional definition, they certainly have a monopoly on user data, controlling the most comprehensive and detailed behavioral datasets in the world.

On October 2, 2015 Google restructured and created its parent company Alphabet. Throughout the company's history, they have acquired about 262 companies[1], making them one of the largest tech companies in the world. These acquisitions not only eliminated competition, they also allowed Alphabet to seamlessly integrate their services into nearly every aspect of a user's life. Taking advantage of the network effect, Alphabet's ecosystem of services encourages users to stay within their ecosystem out of convenience. Many of Alphabet's products collect large amounts of user data: metadata and cloud-storage usage through Gmail and Google Drive, image analytics through Google Photos, voice interactions via Google Assistant and Gemini, viewing preferences through YouTube, and location data through Google Maps and Waze. Additional devices and services such as Nest smart-home products, Fitbit wearables, Android phones, and Chromebooks further expand Google's visibility into users' activities. This lock-in effect allows them to continuously gather data on user behavior, activities, and preferences, maintaining their dominance in the ad market with unmatched targeted ads.

One of Alphabet's largest sources of revenue is Google Ads, which serves as the centerpiece of their business model. As the owner of the largest digital advertising network by revenue, their dominance is unmatched, largely due to the enormous volume of user data they

collect across their many services and products. Google uses this user data to create highly customized ad profiles, allowing companies to deliver personalized, targeted ads with exceptional accuracy. The precision of these profiles is a major reason why Google continues to lead the digital ad industry and why advertisers rely heavily on the platform to reach specific audiences. Additionally, Alphabet's vast scale allows it to create prediction models that smaller competitors simply cannot match, further elevating their position at the top of the advertising market.

Google's power extends beyond creating ad profiles, they have developed a system that monitors and predicts user behavior. The more data Google collects on a user, the more accurately they can not only personalize the ads served to the user but also predict what a user will click on, watch, or purchase. This capability allows them to influence users, one example being the search algorithm controlling search results the user sees to shape the user's behavior in a way that benefits advertisers and keeps users engaged in Google-owned products. This creates a cycle where the more Google collects, the better its predictions become, which leads to more engagement, which leads to more data collected. This cycle raises ethical concerns regarding manipulation, user autonomy, and the extent to which users are knowingly participating in a system designed to exploit their attention and engagement.

Given the scale of Alphabet's data collection and their influence in digital spaces, I believe they have too much power and need to be broken up. Some may argue that separating Google Ads from the rest of Alphabet's products would significantly weaken the effectiveness of the ad network, since it would no longer have access to the extensive user data needed to build their highly targeted ad profiles. While this may be true, the ad network could still be effective. Traditional media - such as print, radio, and television - functioned for decades without individualizing targeted ads, instead placing ads in contexts likely to appeal to relevant audiences. Digital platforms and websites could adapt a similar contextual advertising model, serving ads that align with the content or the typical users of the platform. Another option is to

allow individual websites to create limited ad profiles based on first-party user data. This approach would be far less harmful because no single company would control the entire advertising ecosystem, and it would reduce the kind of cross-site surveillance and behavioral tracking that currently fuels Google's dominance.

Even if Google Ads were separated from Alphabet, they could still create highly detailed ad profiles using first-party data from their remaining services. To prevent Alphabet from building these cross-service profiles, its products could be reorganized into distinct companies based on function. One company could operate productivity tools such as Gmail, Drive, Calendar, and Photos. A second company could focus on Alphabet's entertainment services including YouTube, YouTube Music, and YouTube TV. A fourth company could manage navigation services like Maps and Waze, while a fourth company could handle hardware and connectivity products which include Android, Nest, Fitbit, Google Fiber, and Google Fi. Chrome could become its own company. The final company could be dedicated solely to search including the specialized services such as Google Shopping and Google Travel. Separating Alphabet into smaller companies would directly target the centralization of data that fuels Google's dominance.

Breaking up Alphabet's is not just about weakening a powerful company, it is about restoring balance to a digital ecosystem that operates on vast data collection, nontransparent tracking practices, and increasingly shrinking competition. Alphabet's ability to collect vast amounts of data from its various products gives it unprecedented insights into their users' lives and an unmatched advantage in digital advertising. No competitor can realistically match them, and no user can fully opt out without sacrificing function unless they completely de-Google their life, which most users would not be willing to do. By separating Google Ads from the rest of Alphabet's products and shifting the industry towards contextual and first-party models, we could create a healthy digital landscape while reducing surveillance-based tracking. Breaking up

Google would protect consumer autonomy, encourage fair competition, and help ensure no one company would have such extensive control over the world's digital ecosystem.

Sources:

[1] Johnston, M. (2025). 7 companies owned by Google (alphabet). Investopedia.
https://www.investopedia.com/investing/companies-owned-by-google/