

De-Google your life: it's worth the hassle if you value your privacy

Data privacy may seem like a distant and abstract concept but what is more personal than the information you are sharing with Google?



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Imagine you get a letter in the post offering you free water. Instead of paying Irish Water for your supply, another company promises you a generous quantity of free water.

The catch? Instead of water meters, the company wants to install meters measuring the comings and goings to your home. They will also record who you know, who you communicate with and how often.

They will store information on what you watch on television, what websites you visit on your computer, where you go on holiday, what you buy and where.

The same company allows you free water outside your home, but only after you allow them meter your smartphone to record where you go, who you call or text, what websites you visit, even where you - and your phone - spend the night. It's a great service and, sure, you have nothing to hide, have you? Free water is free water, after all.

In a world where digital services are now regarded as almost as crucial as water, [Google](#) has taken the world by storm because of its great services and compelling business proposition.

Google's search engine, email and other products are fast, intuitive and reliable - but they're not free.

Instead of cash, people pay Google in kind: with their identity, their behaviour, their habits and their preferences. Google collates and analyses this user data on a global scale, sells it to advertisers and, according to [Edward Snowden](#), more than occasionally gifts it to US and other intelligence services.

Viewed from a distance, Google is operating the largest instalment plan in human history.

The longer the plan runs, the more valuable Google's customer data collections become.

You may already be more valuable to Google now than the cost to them of offering you their services.

Given Google's billions of satisfied customers, is it quixotic to tilt against these windmills of the digital age by de-Googling your life?

Anyone who thinks so is likely to change their mind when they start. Very quickly, Google begins to resemble the Eagles' Hotel [California](#), where

you can check out any time you like but you can never leave. Or at least that's what the Californian corporation would have you believe.

Step 1

Spread your data

If you do nothing else, don't put all your digital eggs - mail, photo and cloud storage - in one basket.

Make a trade-off between convenience and privacy and explore some of the alternative services (see panel), many of which are based in [Europe](#), where you're covered by EU privacy laws.

Step 2

Search differently

Google has 92 per cent of the internet search market for a reason: it has the best algorithms in the business that turn up, as if by magic, the best results.

It's hard to do without Google search completely, but it needn't be your default choice in your browser. Try DuckDuckGo, a search engine that doesn't track you. If you still need to use Google, try doing so while logged out of its other services. You can also use GoogleAnon to remove small files, called "cookies", that Google uses to track you.

Step 3

Crumble the cookies

We've all seen the little windows informing us that cookies "improve" the user experience. That's only part of the truth.

Cookies also have a secret life, allowing Google and companies you've never heard of to shadow you everywhere you go online. To end this practice, install a tracker blocker such as Ghostery in your web browser. It's easily done and once installed informs you how many advertising hooks it stopped being lodged on your computer.

Another service, [privacyfix.com](#) from AVG, walks you through all your privacy settings on your computer and internet services you use, showing you what boxes you've forgotten to tick. The service offers an entertaining, and enlightening, estimate of how much you're worth to Google and other internet companies.

Step 4

Gmail

Perhaps the most difficult stage of de-Googleing my life is bidding farewell to Gmail. Gmail remains the gold standard of so-called "freemail" accounts, with 15GB of "free" storage combined with a reliable and

smart service. But is it a bit too smart, scanning emails and other content to provide targeted advertising?

Although Google insists Gmail users retain ownership of their intellectual property, its terms of service state that uploading content to Google's servers gives the company a "worldwide license to use, host, store, reproduce, modify . . . communicate, publish, publicly perform, publicly display and distribute such content". This license continues after you stop using Google's services.

Do you know what the implications of this are for the future? Neither do I. So perhaps Gmail or Google Drive is not the best place to store confidential news stories, exciting new film scripts or the entire written correspondence of your life.

Good alternatives exist. With minimum hassle I switched to mailbox.org, offering email as part of a full online office suite, with calendar and cloud storage, starting from €1 a month. The company doesn't scan your messages and can store your mails - encrypted - on its servers in Berlin. Small wonder mailbox.org came out on top in a survey of email services by Germany's leading consumer magazine, *Stiftung Warentest*. Although it's hard to leave your Gmail address behind, a gentle separation is possible.

First, forward messages to your new address until you're ready to close down Gmail.

Then download a copy of your messages via Google Takeout, which you can then open as an offline in any email programme.

After you cut your ties, Google will continue to have a copy of exchanges with friends and family who remain with Gmail. But at least you've made a fresh start for yourself.

Step 5

Cloud storage

As you de-Google your life, you will notice again and again that the most powerful loyalty tool is its most subtle: convenience. The more data you give the company, the more dependent you are on Google to access "your" data.

Its slogan, "One Account. All of Google", ensures everything flows seamlessly from your computer to your tablet and smartphone.

Only when you depart do the challenges begin. Leaving Gmail was a walk in the park compared to the task of keeping my contacts and calendar synced across multiple devices without the Google (or Apple) cloud.

Independent tech experts say the big players deliberately tinker with file standards for their calendar and address-book offerings to make migration possible and keep you inside their golden cage. It's a devious and effective practice, but hearing that only strengthened my resolve to break free.

Be prepared for frustrations - and late nights - on this front but, if you clear this hurdle, you're home free.

For those of you wedded to free cloud services such as Google Drive, consider using the Omnicloud from Germany's [Fraunhofer Institute](#). This service allows you to locally encrypt all data before it is uploaded to the cloud.

Step 6 Smartphone

All smartphones leak data like an old banger leaks oil. Knowing where this data is going is key, and while trust in [Apple](#) and Google's privacy policies is good, control is better.

A decade ago Google bought Android and presented it as an "open source" alternative to Apple's proprietary iOS. But in recent years Google has switched on the corporate tractor beam, pulling app developers, mobile handset makers and their customers inside Google's solar system, its own private corner of the Android universe.

Using an Android phone without Google watching you is possible but less fun. If you're technically minded you can wipe your Android phone and install CyanogenMod - a fully functional version of the operating system pruned of Google's tentacles. Or you could join the Nordic avant garde aboard the good ship [Jolla](#) (see panel below).

Conclusion

Leaving the Google universe is a bit like going vegetarian: a noble idea that can flounder because of convenience and habit.

If de-Googleing your life sounds like a lot of hassle, it is - at the start. Apathy is far easier. [Peer Heinlein](#) of Berlin email provider mailbox.org suggests being more data conscious is like being health conscious: knowing is not the same as doing.

"You can't force people in these things, and making them feel guilty doesn't work either," he says.

"But you can make the alternatives so appetising people don't feel they're doing without."

Even after the Snowden revelations, people with other priorities than big-data collection adopted an understandable “why bother, who cares” response.

For privacy campaigner [Glenn Greenwald](#), the man who revealed Snowden’s mass surveillance claims against the National Security Agency, the most common response he hears on the road is what he calls the “I have nothing to hide” argument. To this he has a simple answer. “Whenever I hear someone say ‘I have nothing to hide,’ ” said Mr Greenwald in Berlin last year, “I always ask that person for their email password so I can read their messages. No one has ever taken me up on the offer.”

People have nothing to hide when they sense surveillance is distant and abstract. Things change when the idea of surveillance is concrete and personal. But what is more personal than the information you are sharing with Google?

As the implications of big data begin to reveal themselves, so too the arguments in favour of de-Googling your life. For instance: would you like an airline or insurance company to charge you more for their products or services because they have access to data on your private life or health that you don’t remember sharing – or didn’t realise you’d shared – with Google?

Privacy is a flexible social norm, but new privacy norms are not inevitable just because they are promoted by for-profit corporations dangling “free” digital goodies at an uncertain cost.

You don’t have to be paranoid to de-Google your life, but it helps. **De-Google your world: The alternatives** FREEMAIL Gmail, Hotmail/Outlook.com, Yahoo! Mail. Alternative: Mailbox.org and Posteo, or encrypt existing email with PGP. For large email/contact/calendar migrations, try audriga.com. BROWSER Google Chrome. Alternative: Firefox; Opera. CLOUD SERVICE Google Drive, Dropbox. Alternative: Mailbox.org or owncloud.org or simply encrypt existing service with Omnicloud. SMARTPHONE Android (Google), iOS (Apple). Alternative: Sailfish OS; Firefox OS; Ubuntu. Alternative: Firefox; Opera. MAP APP Google Maps. Alternative: OpenStreetMap; Here. OTHER ALTERNATIVES TO ALL SERVICES AND APPS alternativeto.net **Jolla smartphone: Finnish company that can compete with Apple and Google** Mobile phones are always a privacy trade-off, offering communications on the go that are nevertheless trackable via both your

mobile-phone number and device number. But Edward Snowden's revelations have made it clear that a smartphone can lead a second, shadowy life as a Trojan horse for intelligence agencies.

For anyone concerned about their data, an interesting alternative to US-owned smartphones has arrived from the one-time home of European mobile communications: [Finland](#).

Jolla, Finnish for "small sailboat", is a device that puts the smart back into smartphone.

Similar in looks to the [Nokia](#) Lumia, the Jolla is one of the what-ifs of recent tech history: the phone Nokia chose not to build when it hitched its fortunes to Windows and [Microsoft](#).

A small team inside Nokia, working on an open-source alternative, left the company to realise that vision. Jolla is the outcome: a slick device that runs the Linux-based operating system Sailfish.

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about the phone is that it works, marrying the elegance of Apple's iOS with the openness of Android. But Jolla's software goes further with a pertinent design question: what is the point of touchscreens and gesture-based operating systems if you break the flow with mechanical or on-screen buttons?

Aboard Jolla there are no buttons: you swipe up from the bottom of the screen to reveal your apps and click to open as normal. To close again, you swipe in from the left or right. The app shrinks into a small window but keeps running, ready to be reactivated.

Another intuitive swipe reveals notifications, while discreet, on-screen lamps allow you drop down - or up - a menu level.

Native apps take the Jolla elegance still further, using a pull-down menu rather than a clutter of buttons to answer a call or send a text message. It's pleasingly minimalist, but not for minimalism's sake.

Form follows function, too, in the design of the device. The back cover contains an in-built, programmable NFC chip and is easily removed to access the battery and SIM card - a blessing in an era when most smartphone users are locking, screwing and gluing their phones shut. Another of Jolla's selling point is privacy: Sailfish is an open operating system with no corporate tentacles.

Yet the practical Finns know their phone needs to work in the real world so, to bridge the current app gap, you can install your favourite Android apps both from non-Google stores and, with some fiddling, the Google Play store, too.

On the down side, the Jolla phone had mid-market specs when it launched two years ago and power users will notice its age now, particularly in the camera, screen and processor. But regular software updates maintain a solid experience.

After a summer launch of an impressive-looking tablet running Sailfish 2.0, Jolla is likely to launch a new phone. For now the Jolla, a first-generation mobile phone and operating system, is rock solid and remarkably stable and mature. Version 2.0 will be one to watch.

Anyone with problems can turn to the small but engaged Jolla online community, some of the most civilised and friendly online forums you'll ever encounter.

Ask why they have come aboard, some users say they're supporting the underdog, others cite the promise of diversity Jolla offers compared with Apple and Google.

"It can't be right that in this industry that is supposed to be about innovation there are only two options to choose from," writes one user, Pim.

David, a "60+ user from Greystones", says he was anxious to support the concept despite its limitations.

"For all the positives associated with open-source and community development, progress, although good, can be painfully slow when waiting for official updates," he writes.

Another user writes: "What I also like is being part of the adventure of a small and highly motivated company. I admire their guts taking on a multibillion industry with only 120 employees and a community."

Perhaps that is the most remarkable part of the Jolla story: how a small Finnish company produced a new smartphone with a tailored new operating system that can compete comfortably with Apple and Google. Despite their massive economies of scale, these big boys will charge you €500+ for their phones. That's a huge mark-up on phones that, unknown to many users, quietly earn their manufacturers a rolling income in user data.

Jolla is a boutique work in progress but it's a compelling European proposition for €249 plus postage from jolla.com.