


Never-Google Movement Is Sweeping The Globe: Web users take the ultimate step to guard their data from sinister Google

Greg Bensinger, The Washington Post

 If you want to shut down or limit what Google collects from your phone, here are the places to check.

Understanding the full extent of Google's collection requires deeper digging through settings, not only on your phone but also on your Google account. Photo: Josh Edelson / AFP /

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SAN FRANCISCO - In the small South Carolina town of Newberry, Bob's Red Mill muesli cereal is hard to come by.

That presents a challenge for resident Gregory Kelly, who can't get enough of the stuff. He'd rather not truck the 40 miles or so to Columbia to stock up on it, but he's also loath to buy it from the company's website, which he says is riddled with tracking software from Google.

His privacy being paramount, Kelly grudgingly chooses to head into Columbia every so often, rather than cede his data to Google or turn over his purchase history to another online retailer. "I'm just not sure why Google needs to know what breakfast cereal I eat," the 51-year-old said.

Kelly is one of a hearty few who are taking the ultimate step to keep their files and online life safe from prying eyes: turning off Google entirely. That means eschewing some of the most popular services on the Web, including Gmail, Google search, Google Maps, the Chrome browser, Android mobile operating software and even YouTube.

Such never-Googlers are pushing friends and family to give up the search and advertising titan, while others are taking to social media to get word out. Online guides have sprouted up to help consumers untangle themselves from Google.

These intrepid Web users say they'd rather deal with daily inconveniences than give up more of their data. That means setting up permanent vacation responders on Gmail and telling friends to resend files or video links that don't require Google software. More than that, it takes a lot of discipline.

People like Kelly are trying to build barriers to Google and other tech giants largely due to increasing concerns about the massive data collection. A series of privacy scandals showing how these

companies collect and use consumer data has raised alarm bells for many people about how much they've traded for customization and targeted ads. For example, a Washington Post investigation last month found more than 11,000 requests for tracking cookies in just one week of Web use on Google's Chrome browser.

As a result, more consumers are taking measures to wrest greater control of their personal data, like deleting Facebook and its photo-sharing app Instagram. About 15 percent of U.S. households' primary shoppers never shop on Amazon, according to Kantar ShopperScape data. Some Amazon Echo and Google voice-activated speakers have landed in the trash. And some consumers are saving photos and other personal documents to external hard drives, rather than on Google or Apple's clouds.

(Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos owns The Washington Post.)

Brands are jumping on the trend, advertising what they say are superior privacy controls. At the CES 2019 tech conference earlier this year, Apple promised in a billboard above Las Vegas that "What Happens on Your iPhone, Stays on Your iPhone," though many apps siphon data from the phones and track users. And DuckDuckGo, a privacy-oriented search engine, said daily average searches have grown to 42.4 million, from 23.5 million a year earlier - although still a fraction of Google's.

Over the past few months, Jim Lantz, of Spokane, Washington, has been systematically eliminating Google products from his online life, spurred by reports of how the Silicon Valley company collects and distributes customer data. That's included scanning lengthy privacy agreements and researching websites' legal

statements. "It's quite the challenge figuring out what they own," said the wholesale sales manager.

"I don't want to give up every ounce of myself over to Google," he said. "At least I can make it hard for them."

Google in May unveiled new features it said would help users protect more of their data, including storing more of it on personal devices, rather than in cloud computing centers, and giving people more control over how and when tracking software, or cookies, is deployed. And the Web search giant is offering ways to permanently erase data, including search and location history.

No data on how many consumers may be phasing out Google is readily available, and the company didn't provide figures on how many have deleted its apps. "We want to help people understand and control their data, even if they want to leave Google," said spokesman Aaron Stein. He pointed to Google's service allowing consumers to download information stored with the company for their use elsewhere.

Joshua Greenbaum, of Berkeley, Calif., said he pays about \$100 per year to use Microsoft Office 365 software that he says has better privacy protections than Google's. "I am giving up more than I am getting" from Google, said the 61-year tech consultant who started scaling back his Google usage a couple years ago when advertisements began appearing in his Gmail account.

"With Gmail they get your email, with Android real-time location and app usage, with Maps more location data, with Google Wallet that can see into your finances, with Google Docs your personal and work history, Chrome gives your online history,

your location," Greenbaum said. "I started asking myself what other data could they get to."

All that consumer data is precisely the reason Google may be in the crosshairs of the Justice Department, which earlier this year took initial steps toward a potential antitrust investigation, The Post reported. The House is preparing its own probe of Google and Facebook amid comments from President Donald Trump that the government should be "suing" them.

Users say that it's difficult to eliminate using Google completely. Greenbaum still maintains a Gmail account "for spam" he said, and finds that YouTube is all but unavoidable if he wants to watch videos online.

For him, "the improvement is mostly in the category of self-righteousness," he said.

Not so for Janet Vertesi, a Princeton University sociology professor, who in her private life has avoided Google since 2012. She said it's a matter of being able to control her own data, which Google automatically shares across its many properties. Data collected in Gmail, for instance, is supplied to the mapping software, whether a consumer uses Google Maps or not.

"I want to know where my data goes," Vertesi said. That sometimes involves asking people to turn off their voice assistants in their homes or re-sending documents in a format other than Google Docs, she said.

Tech firms like Google say the data helps drive more personal advertisements, which are beneficial to consumers, and

underwrite products that would otherwise not be free, like email and photo storage programs.

But there's some evidence that so closely tracking people's online behavior may not provide the boost that tech companies tout. A recent study by academics from three U.S. universities who observed millions of transactions at a large media company over the course of a week found that such behavioral targeting only amounts to 4 percent more revenue than when tracking is not enabled through online "cookies," software that records browsing activity. That suggests that companies like Google and Facebook could easily absorb the lost revenue if they were less meticulous about tracking consumers.

Some lawmakers and Google's competitors have expressed concern that the search giant can unfairly control ad pricing and other online activity because of its outsized market share. The European Commission this year fined Google about \$1.7 billion over allegations that the company thwarted rivals from working with other companies that had deals with Google.

Data analyst Peter Rowell, 64, pays \$8 monthly for a private Web network, known as a VPN, which helps cloak a user's online identity. He said he worries private information about what he does online could end up spread far across the Web. "Google's got enough of my information," said the Stewartstown, Pa., resident, noting he has deleted the company's apps from his iPhone and switched to Web surfing on DuckDuckGo and Mozilla as his browser.

Still, some academics say that efforts to abandon use of Google - or Amazon and Microsoft, for that matter - are nearly impossible. Those companies all have cloud services businesses, or

essentially data centers that other companies can rent, and they power most websites, as well as other consumer services. For example, Amazon's Web services business enables Netflix, while Google helps power Snapchat and Target.

Quitting Google is a major undertaking that may not be possible, said Jonathan Mayer, an assistant professor of computer science at Princeton University.

"The reality is, you're going to use these services whether intentionally or not," he said. "It is exceedingly hard to control the data flows of these companies."

Not everyone is avoiding Google just to protect their data. Amy Manlapas, a high school teacher in Atlanta, said the company's recent failure to more strongly condemn a conservative YouTube personality for repeatedly mocking a gay reporter caused her to stop using the video sharing site. She said she is researching document-storing software for her files so that she can drop Google Docs, and plans to eliminate her use of Gmail and other Google services.

"I don't want to give my time and money to a company that's not going to be conscious of diversity," she said.

"It's hard work being ethical."