

How I Fully Quit The Very Evil Google (And You Can, Too)

My enlightening quest to break free of a tech giant

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Over the past six months, I have gone on a surprisingly tough, time-intensive, and enlightening quest—to quit using, entirely, the products of just one company—Google. What should be a simple task was, in reality, many hours of research and testing. But I did it. Today, I am Google free, part of the western world’s ultimate digital minority, someone who does not use products from the world’s two most valuable technology companies (yes, I don’t use Facebook either).

This guide is to show you how I quit the Googleverse, and the alternatives I choose based on my own research and personal needs. I’m not a technologist or a coder, but my work as a journalist requires me to be aware of security and privacy issues.

I chose all of these alternatives based solely on their merit, usability, cost, and whether or not they had the functionality I desired. My choices are not universal as they reflect my own needs and desires. Nor do they reflect any commercial interests. None of the alternatives listed below paid me or are giving me any commission whatsoever for citing their services.

But First: Why?

Here's the thing. I don't hate Google. In fact, not too long ago, I was a huge fan of Google. I remember the moment when I first discovered one amazing search engine back in the late 1990's, when I was still in high school. Google was light years ahead of alternatives such as Yahoo, Altavista, or Ask Jeeves. It really did help users find what they were seeking on a web that was, at that time, a mess of broken websites and terrible indexes.

Google soon moved from just search to providing other services, many of which I embraced. I was an early adopter of Gmail back in 2005, when you could only join via invites. It introduced threaded conversations, archiving, labels, and was without question the best email service I had ever used. When Google introduced its Calendar tool in 2006, it was revolutionary in how easy it was to color code different calendars, search for events, and send shareable invites. And Google Docs, launched in 2007, was similarly amazing. During my first full time job, I pushed my team to do everything as a Google spreadsheet, document, or presentation that could be edited by many of us simultaneously.

Like many, I was a victim of Google creep. Search led to email, to documents, to analytics, photos, and dozens of other services all built on top of and connected to each other. Google turned from a company releasing useful products to one that has ensnared us, and the internet as a whole, into its money-making, data gathering apparatus. Google is pervasive in our digital lives in a way no other corporation is or ever has been. It's relatively easy to quit using the products of other tech giants. With Apple, you're either in the iWorld, or out. Same with Amazon, and even Facebook owns only a few platforms and quitting is more of a psychological challenge than actually difficult.

Google, however, is embedded everywhere. No matter what laptop, smartphone, or tablet you have, chances are you have at least one Google app on there. Google is synonymous for search, maps, email, our browser, the operating system on most of our smartphones. It even provides the "services" and analytics that other apps and websites rely on, such as Uber's use of Google Maps to operate its ride-hailing service.

Google is now a word in many languages, and its global dominance means there are not many well-known, or well-used alternatives to its behemoth suite of tools—especially if you are privacy minded. We all started using Google because it, in many ways, provided better alternatives to existing products. But now, we

can't quit because either Google has become a default, or because its dominance means that alternatives can't get enough traction.

The truth is, alternatives do exist, many of which have launched in the years since Edward Snowden revealed Google's participation in Prism. I embarked on this project late last year. After six months of research, testing, and a lot of trial and error, I was able to find privacy minded alternatives to all the Google products I was using. Some, to my surprise, were even better.

A Few Caveats

One of the biggest challenges to quitting is the fact that most alternatives, particularly those in the open source of privacy space, are really not user friendly. I'm not a techie. I have a website, understand how to manage Wordpress, and can do some basic troubleshooting, but I can't use Command Line or do anything that requires coding.

These alternatives are ones you can easily use with most, if not all, the functionality of their Google alternatives. For some, though, you'll need your own web host or access to a server.

Also, Google Takeout is your friend. Being able to download my entire email history and upload it on my computer to access via Thunderbird meant I have easy access to over a decade of emails. The same can be said about Calendar or Docs, the latter of which I converted to ODT format and now keep on my cloud alternative, further detailed below.

The Easy Ones

Search

DuckDuckGo and Startpage are both privacy-centric search engines that do not collect any of your search data. Together, they take care of everything I was previously using Google search for.

Other Alternatives: Really not many when Google has 74% global market share, with the remainder mostly due to it's being blocked in China. Ask.com is still around. And there's Bing...

Chrome

Mozilla Firefox—it recently got a big upgrade, which is a huge improvement from earlier versions. It’s created by a non-profit foundation that actively works to protect privacy. There’s really no reason at all to use Chrome.

Other Alternatives: Avoid Opera and Vivaldi, as they use Chrome as their base. Brave is my secondary browser.

Hangouts and Google Chat

Jitsi Meet—an open source, free alternative to Google Hangouts. You can use it directly from a browser or download the app. It’s fast, secure, and works on nearly every platform.

Other Alternatives: Zoom has become popular among those in the professional space, but requires you to pay for most features. Signal, an open source, secure messaging app, also has a call function but only on mobile. Avoid Skype, as it’s both a data hog and has a terrible interface.

Google Maps

Desktop: Here WeGo—it loads faster and can find nearly everything that Google Maps can. For some reason, they’re missing some countries, like Japan.

Mobile: Maps.me —here Maps was my initial choice here too, but became less useful once they modified the app to focus on driver navigation. Maps.me is pretty good, and has far better offline functionality than Google, something very useful to a frequent traveler like me.

Other alternatives: OpenStreetMap is a project I wholeheartedly support, but it’s functionality was severely lacking. It couldn’t even find my home address in Oakland.

Easy but Not Free

Some of this was self-inflicted. For example, when looking for an alternative to Gmail, I did not just want to switch to an alternative from another tech giant. That meant no Yahoo Mail, or Microsoft Outlook as that would not address my privacy concerns.

Remember, the fact that so many of Google’s services are free (not to mention those of its competitors including Facebook) is because they are actively monetizing our data. For alternatives to survive without this level of data

monetization, they have to charge us. I am willing to pay to protect my privacy, but do understand that not everyone is able to make this choice.

Think of it this way: Remember when you used to send letters and had to pay for stamps? Or when you bought weekly planners from the store? Essentially, this is the cost to use a privacy-focused email or calendar app. It's not that bad.

Gmail

ProtonMail —it was founded by former CERN scientists and is based in Switzerland, a country with strong privacy protections. But what really appealed to me about ProtonMail was that it, unlike most other privacy minded email programs, was user friendly. The interface is similar to Gmail, with labels, filters, and folders, and you don't need to know anything about security or privacy to use it.

The free version only gives you 500MB of storage space. I opted for a paid 5GB account along with their VPN service.

Other alternatives: Fastmail is not as privacy oriented but also has a great interface. There's also Hushmail and Tutanota, both with similar features to ProtonMail.

Calendar

Fastmail Calendar —this was surprisingly tough, and brings up another issue. Google products have become so ubiquitous in so many spaces that start-ups don't even bother to create alternatives anymore. After trying a few other mediocre options, I ended getting a recommendation and choose Fastmail as a dual second-email and calendar option.

More Technical

These require some technical knowledge or access to your web host service. I do include simpler alternatives that I researched but did not end up choosing.

Google Docs, Drive, Photos, and Contacts

NextCloud —a fully featured, secure, open source cloud suite with an intuitive, user-friendly interface. The catch is that you'll need your own host to use Nextcloud. I already had one for my own website and was able to quickly install NextCloud using Softaculous on my host's C-Panel. You'll need a HTTPS

certificate, which I got for free from Let's Encrypt. Not as easy as opening a Google Drive account but not too challenging either.

I also use Nextcloud as an alternative for Google's photo storage and contacts, which I sync with my phone using CalDev.

Other alternatives: There are other open source options such as OwnCloud or Openstack. Some for-profit options are good too, as top choices Dropbox and Box are independent entities that don't profit off of your data.

Google Analytics

Matomo —formally called Piwik, this is a self-hosted analytics platform. While not as feature rich as Google Analytics, it is plenty fine for understanding basic website traffic, with the added bonus that you aren't gifting that traffic data to Google.

Other alternatives: Not much really. OpenWebAnalytics is another open source option, and there are some for-profit alternatives too, such as GoStats and Clicky.

Android

LineageOS + F-Droid App Store. Sadly, the smartphone world has become a literal duopoly, with Google's Android and Apple's iOS controlling the entire market. The few usable alternatives that existed a few years ago, such as Blackberry OS or Mozilla's Firefox OS, are no longer being maintained.

So the next best option is Lineage OS: a privacy minded, open source version of Android that can be installed without Google services or Apps. It requires some technical knowledge as the installation process is not completely straightforward, but it works really well, and lacks the bloatware that comes with most Android installations.

Other alternatives: Ummm...Windows 10 Mobile? PureOS looks promising, as does UbuntuTouch.

Unexpected Challenges

Firstly, this took much longer than I planned due to the lack of good resources about usable alternatives, and the challenge in moving data from Google to other platforms.

But the toughest thing was email, and it has nothing to do with ProtonMail or Google.

Before I joined Gmail in 2004, I probably switched emails once a year. My first account was with Hotmail, and I then used Mail.com, Yahoo Mail, and long-forgotten services like Bigfoot. I never recall having an issue when I changed email providers. I would just tell all my friends to update their address books and change the email address on other web accounts. It used to be necessary to change email addresses regularly—remember how spam would take over older inboxes?

In fact, one of Gmail's best innovations was its ability to filter out spam. That meant no longer needing to change emails.

Email is key to using the internet. You need it to open a Facebook account, to use online banking, to post on message boards, and many more. So when you switch accounts, you need to update your email address on all these different services.

To my surprise, changing from Gmail today is a major hassle because of all the places that require email addresses to set up an account. Several sites no longer let you do it from the backend on your own. One service actually required me to close my account and open a new one as they were unable to change my email, and then they transferred over my account data manually. Others forced me to call customer service and request an email account change, meaning time wasted on hold.

Even more amazingly, others accepted my change, and then continued to send messages to my old Gmail account, requiring another phone call. Others were even more annoying, sending some messages to my new email, but still using my old account for other emails. This became such a cumbersome process that I ended up leaving my Gmail account open for several months alongside my new ProtonMail account just to make sure important emails did not get lost. This was the main reason this took me six months.

People so rarely change their emails these days that most companies' platforms are not designed to deal with the possibility. It's a telling sign of the sad state of the web today that it was easier to change your email back in 2002 than it is in 2018. Technology does not always move forward.

So, Are These Google Alternatives Any Good?

Some are actually better! Jitsi Meet runs smoother, requires less bandwidth, and is more platform friendly than Hangouts. Firefox is more stable and less of a memory suck than Chrome. Fastmail's Calendar has far better time zone integration.

Others are adequate equivalents. ProtonMail has most of the features of Gmail but lacks some useful integrations, such as the Boomerang email scheduler I was using before. It also has a lacking Contacts interface, but I'm using Nextcloud for that. Speaking of Nextcloud, it's great for hosting files, contacts, and has a nifty notes tool (and lots of other plug-ins). But it does not have the rich multi-editing features of Google Docs. I've not yet found a workable alternative in my budget. There is Collabora Office, but it requires me to upgrade my server, something that is not feasible for me.

Some depend on location. Maps.me is actually better than Google Maps in some countries (such as Indonesia) and far worse in others (including America).

Others require me to sacrifice some features or functionality. Piwik is a poor man's Google Analytics, and lacks many of the detailed reports or search functions of the former. DuckDuckGo is fine for general searches but has issues with specific searches, and both it and StartPage sometimes fail when I'm searching for non-English language content.

In the End, I Don't Miss Google at All

In fact, I feel liberated. To be so dependent on a single company for so many products is a form of servitude, especially when your data is what you're often paying with. Moreover, many of these alternatives are, in fact, better. And there is real comfort in knowing you are in control of your data.

If we have no choice but to use Google products, then we lose what little power we have as consumers.

I want Google, Facebook, Apple, and other tech giants to stop taking users for granted, to stop trying to force us inside their all-encompassing ecosystems. I also want new players to be able to emerge and compete, just as, once upon a time, Google's new search tool could compete with the then-industry giants Altavista and Yahoo, or Facebook's social network was able to compete with

MySpace and Friendster. The internet was a better place because Google gave us the opportunity to have a better search. Choice is good. As is portability.

Today, few of us even try other products because we're just so used to Googling. We don't change emails cause it's hard. We don't even try to use a Facebook alternative because all of our friends are on Facebook. I understand.

You don't have to quit Google entirely. But give other alternatives a chance. You might be surprised, and remember why you loved the web way back when.

Other Resources

I created this resource not to be an all-encompassing guide but a story of how I was able to quit Google. Here are some resources that show other alternatives. Some are far too technical for me, and others I just didn't have time to explore.

Localization Lab has a detailed list of open source or privacy-tech projects—some highly technical, others quite user friendly.

Framasoft has an entire suite of mostly open-source Google alternatives, though many are just in French.

Restore Privacy has also collected a list of alternatives.

Your turn. Please share your favorite Google alternatives in the responses or via Twitter. I am sure there are many that I missed and would love to try. I don't plan to stick with the alternatives listed above forever.

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