

3 ways to start the year with a digital clean slate



Tech Talk
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Here's a New Year's resolution for 2018: De-clutter your digital history. Your computer stores a huge amount of browsing data, and in places you might never think to look. This meticulous chronology makes you vulnerable to snoops and advertising trackers. The solution: Eliminate it.

Here are three ways to cover your tracks, using two of the biggest services on the internet. You may be surprised how closely these companies follow you, but you might be even more surprised how much control you have over it.

Erase Google search history

Google's mission is to know everything, so few are surprised that the world's most famous search engine keeps close records of your browsing history. This might seem harmless at first: Your computer remembers the websites you visit, so it's easier to access them later on, right? What's the big deal?

But here's another way to look at it:



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The tech giant knows everything you've ever searched. If you have a Google account, the corporation archives it, not just on your computer but in its own databases. So you can't just erase your search history from your browser and hope for the best. Google still knows all.

Speaking of tracking, many people are unaware Google also tracks your physical location. You can see where and when you go on a map.

The good news is that you can delete all that data, and you don't have to storm the Googleplex headquarters to do it. Instead, you can clear your history from the comfort of your personal computer, thanks to a little feature called "My Activity."

Google has dozens of basic features, and most people would never notice this option. But if you click My Account in the upper-right corner, you can hit My

Activity >> Delete Activity By. A little box will appear, and you can change the Delete by Date field to All Time. Google takes pains to remind you how beneficial your search history is, but you now have the option to remove it for good.

Erase Facebook search history

Would you believe that Facebook keeps the same kind of records as Google? If anything, Facebook's data are even more personal, such as clubs and pastimes, because of the tidbits we share with our social network.

Facebook also mines when you've looked up an ex or a neighbor. If someone accesses your account, even by accident, that information is fully available.

Facebook tracks where you're logged in. You can erase that. Facebook also tracks you in photos. You can review all the photos tagged with you in them.

Fortunately, you can wipe away your Facebook search history with a few clicks. To clear past searches, log in to Facebook, and go to the upside-down triangle in the top-right corner. Click on Activity Log. This is where Facebook tracks your actions within the site.

In the left column of the Activity Log, under Photos, Likes and Comments, click on the More link. Then scroll down

and click on the Search link. Here you'll see a list of every Facebook search you've ever made, organized by date. You can clear searches individually by clicking the crossed-circle icon on the right.

Then click Remove in the box that appears. To clear every search, click on the Clear Searches link located at the top-right of the list.

Use a covert search engine

Google has hundreds of millions of users around the world, and the company's name has become synonymous with "finding information." But remember, you don't have to use Google, and as handy as the service is, there are other ways to navigate around the web.

DuckDuckGo has a mission to keep users' information private and to prevent personalized search results. The search engine includes nifty calculators and other tricks, and you can customize its interface with search shortcuts and an Instant Answers feature.

You might be surprised by the quality of Instant Answers, which easily rivals Google's Knowledge Graph. You can also make DuckDuckGo an extension of your browser and activate more privacy settings to keep your search history as protected as possible.