

Cloudy outlook as Google steps up push to rule web

By Richard Waters

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[Google](#)'s ambitions are so sweeping, the theatres in which its campaign is being advanced so dispersed, that it is not always easy to trace the outlines of the broader war it is fighting. Sometimes it takes simultaneous advances on a number of fronts to bring its progress into focus. This has been one of those weeks.

What other company, after all, would take public aim at not one, but three big rivals – [Amazon](#), [Apple](#) and [Microsoft](#) – in the space of just a couple of days? Not doing any one thing well enough against formidable competitors like these could end up being Google's biggest problem.

But it is counting on having an ace up its sleeve: the ability to connect with users across a broader range of devices, and with a wider array of services and media content, than anyone else. This "[cloud](#)" strategy – relying on services run in Google's data centres, and delivered to consumers using standard web technologies – is still a work in progress, but some of its contours are becoming more discernible.

Take Monday's [launch of Google eBooks](#), a digital bookstore to rival the one behind Amazon's Kindle. This being Google, much was made of the cloud nature of this service. Readers can store their books on Google's servers and tap into them from different PCs, tablets, smartphones or eReaders (though not the Kindle) without losing the page they were on.

That Amazon already has a similar feature, or that the Kindle has an app so you can also read its books on Apple's devices, is beside the point, at least in Google's world. By basing its services on common standards – and a more widely used digital rights management system – Google hopes eventually to outflank companies such as Amazon.

The launch of eBooks, like the launch of [Google TV](#) two months ago, is more important for what it promises than what it immediately delivers. These cloud media platforms are still a work in progress, and Google has a long way to go to persuade media companies that it is more friend than foe.

Several US television networks are blocking access to their websites from Google TV, and the search group has yet to finalise its settlement of a sweeping lawsuit from book publishers. A third online platform, for music, has been held up in talks with the music industry.

But putting the pieces in place is an important start, and creates intriguing possibilities. As Allen Weiner, an analyst at Gartner, points out, Google could eventually assume a truly scary cross-media dominance. All the information about user behaviour collected across multiple cloud services, mixed with its core search

data, could give it better insight into users than anyone – and the ability to match that with personalised advertising campaigns delivered across different services and devices.

Another glimpse at Google's cloud strategy came the same day with a demonstration of a tablet computer running a forthcoming version of the company's Android operating system, which was developed for smartphones.

Andy Rubin, the executive in charge of Android, outlined how, in this multi-device world, Google is focused on “synching” between devices, so that information entered once automatically informs a user's experience of the web, whatever gadget is involved.

As if on cue, the next day brought the first public demonstration of Chrome OS – another Google operating system, this one aimed at the heart of Microsoft's PC monopoly. This will not hit the market until at least the middle of next year, but it was a graphic demonstration of an idea that Google has touted for some time – the computer as nothing more than a window on to the web.

There are many things to quibble with in all of this. When compared with the surgical precision with which Steve Jobs lays out each step in Apple's evolving plan to monopolise your digital life, Google's push into the cloud is messy. It has been unable to explain why it is developing two different operating systems, for instance, or why it will soon have three different app stores (one for Chrome this week matching those for its smartphone and TV platforms.)

Nor will it be easy to loosen Microsoft's grip on the PC. Until users feel sure they can get a guaranteed connection to the web and can replicate the many things they can do on a PC, moving to the cloud will be a leap too far for most.

As Google has put more services and software platforms in place that fill out its grand plan, however, it has been able to show off more clearly how the various pieces can be made to fit together. If consumers – and the media and other companies that want to reach them – come to value this broad connection through the cloud, it will be a formidable force.

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