

Troy Wolverton: A look back at the year in tech

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This past year saw few breakthrough tech products, but it was anything but a boring year in tech.

Edward Snowden's revelations about NSA snooping and HealthCare.gov's troubles were big stories, as were Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer's retirement announcement and Apple's fall from grace.

While we didn't see any new tech products comparable to the iPad or the iPhone this year, we did see plenty of interesting new gadgets, from the debut of Google Glass to the long-awaited arrival of the new game consoles from Sony and Microsoft.

Here's a look at some of the top news in consumer technology in 2013:

Snowden's secrets: There had been reports dating back to at least 2005 that the government was spying en masse on the communications of American citizens. But the documents released by Edward Snowden, the former National Security Agency contractor, showed just how extensive and far-reaching surveillance has become.

According to the Snowden revelations, the NSA has infiltrated most of the major technologies and services that consumers use on a regular basis. It gleans data from all of the major Internet companies-Apple, Microsoft, Google, Yahoo, Facebook-sometimes without their knowledge. It collects so-called metadata on U.S. citizens' communications-such as who you call and email. It monitors users'

browsers, gleaning their search history and possibly even passwords, and uses cellphone data to track users' locations.

The revelations have huge implications for consumer technology companies and their customers. Perhaps the biggest threat is that they could Balkanize the Internet, persuading other countries that they need to either disconnect from the network or distance themselves from American users and the services offered by American companies.

Obamacare's rough start: It seemed a great idea: Create a website that would allow the millions of consumers required to buy insurance under the Affordable Care Act to shop and sign up for coverage.

But the reality turned out ugly. In the days after it launched, the HealthCare.gov site was unavailable to most visitors. And those able to get through weren't able to do much-few were able to sign up for health plans. Even a month after launch, the site remained shaky.

After the administration put new leaders in charge, the site has gradually become more stable and sign-ups have increased. But problems have forced the administration to push back several deadlines and have harmed the entire health-reform effort.

Apple's bruises: For more than a decade-from the iPod to the iPad-Apple has used breakthrough products to drive fast-paced growth. As recently as early last year, its annual sales were growing by nearly 60 percent.

But by the middle of 2013, Apple's overall sales growth had come to a halt as the company saw sales declines on many of its products, including the iPad. Even a refreshed lineup may not help; at least one new product-the iPhone 5c-appeared to be a dud.

Apple's fortunes rebounded in the second half of the year, when its stock recovered the ground it lost earlier in 2013 and the company concluded a long-awaited deal with carrier giant China Mobile to offer the iPhone. But it still faced pressure from investors, notably Carl Icahn, who was pressuring the company to pay out more of its stockpile of cash.

Wintel in transition: We knew going into this year that this would be Paul Otellini's last at Intel (INTC). We didn't know it would also be Steve Ballmer's last full year at Microsoft.

Ten years ago, those companies occupied the center of the PC-dominated technology world. Today, with PC sales declining and the sales of smartphones and tablets booming, both Intel and Microsoft seem to be operating at the margins.

Despite years of effort under Otellini, Intel remains a bit player in chips for smartphones and tablets. Similarly, Microsoft under Ballmer has struggled to find a market for Windows outside of traditional PCs.

It remains to be seen whether their successors will have more luck turning around their organizations. But Ballmer's departure in particular could portend big change for his company and its millions of customers.

Game on: The move to a new generation of consoles started last year with Nintendo's release of the Wii U. But it didn't really take off until this fall's release of Sony's PlayStation 4 and Microsoft's Xbox One.

With the rise of social, mobile and browser-based multiplayer games, console-based gaming may seem passe. But while consoles are no longer the primary focal point of gaming, they still draw huge crowds. Each of the new consoles will likely sell in the tens of millions.

That popularity of the devices makes them highly influential. Many of

the games consumers now enjoy on their smartphones and tablets were originally written for consoles.

What tech are you wearing? For years, futurists have anticipated wearable devices-computing or communications gadgets that could be worn like clothing. This year those visions started to become reality.

Pebble offered a pioneering smartwatch that can display updates and other information from a smartphone. Google, meanwhile, started shipping Glass, its eyeglass-like wearable computer that has the potential to replace smartphones entirely. And companies from Samsung to Epson joined the fray, introducing wearables of their own.

None of the products was an immediate hit, but they offered a hint at what the wearable future might look like.

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