

Smart things everywhere to be seen at CES

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It's not clear what individual gadget will be the next big thing in the tech industry. But the Internet of Things is definitely already here in a big way.

At events and news conferences in anticipation of the CES convention here this week, everyday devices that have been imbued with tech "smarts" are everywhere to be found. And collectively, they are starting to supplant televisions, computers and smartphones as the center of attention at the show, which attracts thousands of companies, journalists and tech fans each year.

Take Tuesday - the annual "Press Day" at CES, when some of the biggest [electronics companies](#) make their preshow announcements - as an example. Press Day used to be dominated by the big Japanese and South Korean electronics companies, which formed a slugger's row with one announcement after the other, nearly all focused on their latest big-screen televisions.

But this year, plenty of other companies were horning in on the action, many of them touting Internet of Things advances. Fitbit unveiled a new smart watch. Qualcomm announced new chips for use in connected cars, smart watches and other devices. Meanwhile, Nvidia pre-empted Press Day with an event of its own Monday night at which it announced a new chip designed to be the brains inside self-driving cars.

Even the traditional electronics companies seemed to want to tout their Internet of Things bonafides. Samsung announced a new connected

refrigerator, which has cameras on the inside that can allow users to see how much milk is left in the jug, and a 21-inch touch screen on the door that can be used to turn off the lights in the house. Huawei announced a new version of its own smart watch. And LG touted its partnership with Google on developing Internet of Things devices using the search giant's technology.

But the influence and spread of the Internet of Things is likely to be seen throughout the show, not just on Press Day, if my inbox is any indication. I've been flooded with pitches from companies touting everything from fitness monitors embedded in clothes to devices that track the activities of pets to smart toothbrushes, smart pressure cookers and smart diffusers of essential oils.

At CES Unveiled, which serves as a kind of preview of the big show, Internet of Things devices were all around. I saw a kitchen scale from a company called Perfect designed to help consumers make the perfect smoothie by directing them to weigh each ingredient one at a time and telling them, through a tablet app, when they've got enough.

I also saw a smart piano called the One that teaches users how to play by lighting up each key, one at a time, as a tablet app goes through a piece of sheet music. And I saw a shower head from a company called Hydrao that monitors how much water you use, turning colors as you approach a preset limit and keeping track of your usage over time in a smartphone app.

Part of the reason for the Internet of Things becoming such a big movement in tech is that it's benefiting from the success of the last big trend - smartphones. The rapid advances in mobile processors has made it possible to produce sophisticated chips that use very little power cheaply. What's more, the proliferation of sensors in smartphones - used for things like cameras, motion sensors, pressure gauges - has enabled

economies of scale, allowing those same sensors to be used in other kinds of gadgets without adding a lot to their cost.

Meanwhile connectivity - whether through the Wi-Fi routers we have at home or through the cell towers that surround us - is becoming ubiquitous, allowing devices to easily communicate with each other and to more sophisticated computers in the cloud.

But the Internet of Things trend is also being driven out of necessity. Sales of the products that have driven the [tech industry](#) over the past 20 years - PCs, smartphones, tablets, flat-screen televisions - are all slowing or even declining. Electronics makers eager to keep the party going have been desperate to find new products that will replace them and catch fire with consumers.

The problem is, it's not at all clear that we consumers need or want all these things to be connected or smart. In some cases, making dumb gadgets smarter will offer consumers convenience or safety. But in many cases, those benefits may be outweighed by added complexity and cost.

It can already be a pain to keep computers and smartphones up to date. Imagine having to do that with a whole house full of smart devices. Consumers already often have trouble connecting their televisions to the Internet or their PCs to each other; such problems may seem trivial compared with trying to connect smart devices to each other, given the many competing standards for connecting the Internet of Things.

Many devices also will require ongoing subscriptions to be truly useful, whether to connect to cloud services or to get needed features and updates.

And that's not to mention the privacy and security issues that come part and parcel with [smart devices](#) that collect data on our every activity, such

as when we're home, what we're eating, what we're doing in bed, how and where we're driving and who we're with. Questions abound over how well that data is being secured, who will have access to it and how it will be shared.

So while the Internet of Things is getting lots of attention here, it deserves a lot more scrutiny from consumers before it replaces smartphones as the next big thing in tech.

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