

At a Glance: Some of Google's new features seem ... familiar

May 17 2017, by Barbara Ortutay



Google CEO Sundar Pichai delivers the keynote address of the Google I/O conference, Wednesday, May 17, 2017, in Mountain View, Calif. Google provided the latest peek at the digital services and gadgets that it has assembled in the high-tech tussle to become an even more influential force in people's lives. (AP Photo/Eric Risberg)

Google announced a lot of new bells and whistles Wednesday—several of which, it turns out, are already offered by rivals such as Amazon, Apple and Facebook.

These days, it's not unusual to find tech giants and their plucky startup rivals copying each other's tools and features—sometimes improving on them and sometimes just playing catch-up.

ECHOING THE ECHO

Google added features to its internet-connected Home speaker—such as hands-free calling. That echoes Amazon's Echo speaker, which was released earlier and so has had more time to acquire a wider range of abilities.

The new abilities announced Wednesday will also enable the Home speaker to control and interact with a variety of Whirlpool and Jenn-Air appliances later this year. For instance, you can ask the digital assistant within Home to turn on the dishwasher or set the temperature on the oven. This is already available on the Echo and other devices that use its Alexa assistant.

YOUR SEEING EYE

Google's new Lens tool is the stuff of science fiction. It lets people point their camera at things to find out more information about them. So if you see a flower, you can point your camera at it to find out its name. (The same, sadly, cannot be said for strangers you meet in a bar yet, unless he or she is a celebrity you didn't recognize.)

Samsung is trying some of that with its new Bixby Vision feature on the Galaxy S8 phones. Pinterest has a similar tool too. Also called Lens, it lets people point their cameras at real-world items and find out where to

buy them, or find similar things online. Take a selfie, and you'll get similar hairstyle and makeup ideas (even if you aren't wearing any makeup).

SLIMMING DOWN

Though not a competitor, Google's slimmed-down [phone](#) operating system aimed at cheap Android phones is reminiscent of Facebook's own "skinny" version, called Facebook Lite. Both are aimed at getting more people to use the company's services, even if they live in developing countries and use cheap, older phones.

MEETING SIRI ON HER TURF

Google's [digital assistant](#) is hoping to outsmart Siri on Apple's iPhone. Google is releasing its voice-controlled assistant on a free app designed for iPhone's operating system—basically competing with Apple's assistant on her own turf.

The move extends the potential reach of Google's assistant, which debuted last fall on the company's Pixel phone and an internet-connected speaker called Home. Siri has come as a built-in service on iPhones since 2011; Google's assistant will require an app download.

Both assistants can be summoned with a press of a button to answer questions, manage schedules and handle other routine tasks. Google believes its assistant can get people what they want more quickly because it draws upon the knowledge that the company has accumulated while running the world's most popular search engine.

Siri, though, might have something to say about that.

PHOTO SHARING

Google says new tools will encourage sharing of photos that you might have meant to share, but maybe forgot.

Google Photos will be able to suggest which photos to share and whom to share them with—for example, if the person is in the photo. The company envisions a world in which amazing photos are no longer left on people's phones because other pressing things in life got in the way.

Facebook has been trying to address this issue as well with its Moments app, which lets people share photos with friends and family privately, without posting them to a wider audience.

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Citation: At a Glance: Some of Google's new features seem ... familiar (2017, May 17) retrieved 1 June 2023 from <https://phys.org/news/2017-05-glance-google-features-familiar.html>

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