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Personal Technology *from The Wall Street Journal*

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## Learning About Everything Under The 'Cloud'

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by Walter S. Mossberg

The digital world loves to revel in its own jargon, and one of its most popular phrases today is “cloud computing.” You see the expression everywhere new uses for the Internet are discussed. But what do techies and companies mean when they refer to doing things in “the cloud”? They aren't talking about meteorology, and all they see when they use the term—which is always singular—is sunshine, not rain.

To help you navigate through the talk about cloud computing, here's a very basic explainer. It doesn't cover every detail current among Internet experts. But I hope it gives regular folks a better understanding of the “cloud” products and services being offered them.

At its most basic level, the “cloud” is simply the Internet, or the vast array of servers around the world that comprise it. When people say a digital document is stored, or a digital task is being performed in the cloud, they mean that the file or application lives on a server you access over an Internet connection, via a Web browser or app, rather than on “local” devices, like your computer or smartphone.

This isn't a new idea. For years, there have been services that would back up your files to a distant server over the Internet or keep your photos online. And Web-based email programs, like Yahoo Mail or Hotmail, are familiar examples of cloud-based applications. These programs live on servers, not your PC, and you access them through a Web browser.

What's changed is that, in recent years, large-scale Internet-based storage has gotten cheaper, so it's possible for programmers to create more-sophisticated remote software, and the speed and ubiquity of Internet connections have improved. Also, some users have expressed a desire to share and collaborate in easier and richer ways than emailing files. Cloud-based services let many users view, comment on, and edit the same material. All this has given a boost to cloud computing.

On top of that, computers are changing in ways that make cloud services more desirable. Your little netbook may lack the huge hard disk needed to hold all your music or photos, but there are ways to keep this material in the cloud and access it at will. Your smartphone can't run all the sophisticated programs, or store all the files, that your PC can. But, if it's connected to cloud storage and cloud-based apps, it can do much more than its hardware specs suggest. And, with cloud file storage and apps that run on remote servers, you could conceivably travel without any computer. A borrowed PC, tablet or smartphone might be all you need to log in and do real work.

So, in recent years, a flood of cloud-based products and services have appeared to store and share files; to keep information on all your devices synchronized; and even to perform tasks like editing photos, or creating and editing long documents or large spreadsheets.

For instance, I wrote parts of this column in a private test edition of a cloud-based version of Microsoft Word that the company will release soon. In fact, Microsoft (MSFT) will be making its entire Office suite available free in the cloud. Google (GOOG) and others already have such cloud-based productivity suites. Another example: Many of the 200,000 apps for Apple's (AAPL) iPhone are merely small programs that tap data or services stored in the cloud to provide everything from restaurant choices to driving directions.

There are other good examples. At Picnik.com, you'll find an elegant, versatile cloud-based photo editor that can work on pictures from a wide variety of Web-based photo sites as well as those on your own hard disk. At Zoho.com, you'll find a cornucopia of cloud-based apps that interact with both the Web and your local hard disk. You can track your finances using a cloud-based program called Mint, which is available from a PC browser, or from an iPhone or Android-based phone.

Of course, clever readers will have noticed that this trend toward cloud computing has an obvious flaw. If you aren't connected to the Internet—or are saddled with a poor connection—you could be left high and dry when you want access to an important file stored remotely, or need to use a cloud-based program. Google, which is building an entire cloud-based operating system, and other companies have come up with ways to store some remote material on your local device. But these solutions aren't yet comprehensive, so wise users will make sure that the tools and files they need most are still available on their devices.

Some products get around this by offering hybrid cloud and local services. One of my favorites in this category is SugarSync, which backs up key folders you select to the Web and synchronizes them to the hard disks on your PCs or Macs, so you always have the freshest copies handy, whether you have a connection or not. Another problem is privacy. Many of these cloud services have good security, but prying hackers are relentless and smart, so consumers should be careful about what they store in the cloud. You may not care if a family photo is swiped, but your Social Security number is a different matter.

Cloud computing is here, and growing, and quite useful. It will only get better and better.

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