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Wandering on the Web-free cloud storage

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Wandering the Web — Free Cloud Storage

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Cloud storage: it's the future. Even if you aren't familiar with the term, you've used cloud storage. Ever used email through a Website, like on Gmail or Yahoo? Ever watched a movie through Netflix Instant View or Amazon On Demand? Ever seen a clip on YouTube? All of these services and thousands, if not millions more, use cloud storage.

Back in the day, like when the movie *Hackers* represented cutting edge technology, most data could only be accessed from a local hard-drive. Files would sit on a personal computer to be accessed whenever the user wanted, but the user had to sit in front of that computer and use that computer's keyboard and mouse. Until the 1990s and the invention of the Internet, you could only access data on that computer that the manufacturer included or that you had manually loaded. Then came the Internet.

Originally, the Internet worked very simply: one computer would use phone lines to access the data stored on another computer, elsewhere. Invented in the United States, the Internet spread throughout the world and is thus now called the World Wide Web. Today we use many methods of transferring data throughout the world and the atmosphere. In the next few decades, the average technology user may rarely if ever see data cables: data will move through cellular and satellite signals like G3 and now G4 networks.

Because of ever-growing abilities to transfer large amounts of data through unlimited space and in little time, local hard drives as places to store data are no longer practical or efficient. Instead, we now mostly use servers that can be accessed from anywhere data can be sent and received. Servers are super computers capable of handling exponential amounts of data compared to personal computers. A server can be so powerful that it can handle millions of other computers accessing it at once. These servers are how most of us access the Internet on a daily basis. For example, my library is physically located in Bowling Green Kentucky, but our catalog lives in a server in Louisville. You would never know, the connections are that fast.

Cloud storage is all about fast access to large amounts of data. Therefore, its usefulness depends on the storage capabilities of servers. As technology continues to improve like a speeding bullet, the price of storage shrinks. We can hold gigabytes of data on a disc the size of a small coin. Servers can hold thousands of terabytes of data without a huge cost, and their storage capabilities will continue to go up while the prices continue to go down. Because modern civilization depends more and more upon instant access to information, servers, data transfers, and thus cloud storage are increasingly becoming the hubs of our daily lives.

Every day, more and more companies and organizations compete in a growing global economy that's still largely centered upon the recessed economy of the United States. This means constantly-growing competition among these companies for business. Companies in first-world countries increasingly offer services instead of manufacturing products. More and more of the global economy is based on the usage of and access to data. Thus, companies increasingly collect data that they then lease to users for service fees. Think **Netflix Instant View** and the **iTunes Store**. That's much of today's business and profit, and it will do nothing but increase.

At the same time, users are producing their own data. This data must be stored somewhere that they can access at almost any time. Thus, as incentive for buying services, more and more companies are offering relatively large amounts of free storage for anyone who wants it. They hope that by giving the user some free storage, the user will eventually need more storage and buy it from the same place that they already have an account and data collection. But as the competition increases, the freebies keep going up in size, too.

It would take a book to go through all the major free cloud storage sites out there, and that book would be out-of-date before I wrote even a tenth of it. But for now, here's a list of my favorite and most recommended free cloud storage services you can take advantage of right now. I've divided the list into types of storage offered.

General Storage

For free storage of multiple types of files and data, try **Windows' SkyDrive** or **Amazon.com's Cloud Drive**. **SkyDrive** (*http://www.windowslive.co.uk/skydrive*) offers the first 25GB for free, with a size limit of 50MB per file. **SkyDrive** has the advantage that it can also be easily used to share files with other users. It also offers a great deal of control over organization of folders/files and who can see what. You can use a Silverlight application from your browser to access the drive, but it's not necessary.

Amazon.com's Cloud Drive (*https://www.amazon.com/*) offers 5GB of storage for free, but you don't have to set up an account if you already have an account on **Amazon.com**. You do not need software. **Amazon.com** offers 20GB of free storage for the first year — after that, it's around $20 a year to keep those 20GB. If you buy your mp3s from **Amazon.com**, those files get free storage on your **Cloud Drive** unconditionally.

Photos and Video

I've been using **Photobucket** (*www.photobucket.com*) since 2005. With a free account, you get unlimited noncommercial photo storage and up to 500 videos. However, you have to pay to upload high resolution images. I pay about $30 a year and currently store over 10,000 photos on my site. It's easy to share albums and images with others through links (they even provide html coding for Websites), FaceBook, Twitter, and a connected digital photo printing company (but I personally prefer *winkflash.com* for digital photo printing). They also feature a free **iPhoto** app that allows **iPhoto** users to add photos to their **Photobucket** account without even going online. Downside: not the best interface. Upside: amazingly helpful and fast customer service (though that could be my 12,000+ photo account …).

Possibly the most well-known free photo cloud storage site is **Flickr** (*http://www.flickr.com/*). They have integrated widgets into many other popular Websites, making it easy to transfer photos from other social media Websites to **Flickr** and vice versa. I had an account with them exclusively for my gardening Website (*myfolia.com*) that allowed me to see and post the **Flickr** images from *myfolia.com*. Pretty cool. I'd say they do a better job than **Photobucket** with site-to-site integration. **Flickr** allows 300MB of free photo uploads and two video uploads each month. It also has an easier and snazzier interface than **Photobucket**. No software required.

Google Plus has recently added a free photo and video storage component called **Picasa Web Albums** (*https://picasaweb.google.com*). Currently, users can upload over a gigabyte of photos. Both **Photobucket** and **Picasa** also allow photo editing. The service is new enough that details are currently changing. Again, you do not need to sign up for **Picasa** if you already "own" a Google account. No software required.

Documents, Presentations, Etc.

I consider **Google Docs** (*docs.google.com*) to be hands-down the best free storage place for everything like word processing, PDFs, slide-show presentations, spreadsheets, forms, and tables. **Google Docs** can upload from and download to any Web-enabled computer — no software required. You can also edit or create these documents from scratch directly from **Google Docs**. The service comes free with any Google account such as Gmail. Documents can be easily published to the Web, shared with collaborators (with multiple-user editing options), and easily presented full-screen on projectors. Instead of working from your local drive(s), use **Google Docs** and never lose access no matter what computer(s) you work from. I now give slide show presentations exclusively through **Google Docs**. It's much faster than loading your files onto a USB drive (which

can be easily corrupted) and using a local computer to retrieve the data from the drive, which often causes a lag. But take along the USB drive back-up anyway, just in case of an Internet failure.

Many people also use **Dropbox** (*www.dropbox.com*). To use **Dropbox**, software must be downloaded to one's local harddrive. Their software supports Windows, Mac OSX, and Linux. Free storage includes up to 2GB. With referrals, users can up their free storage to 8GB. I have not personally used **Dropbox**, but my Internet-savvy Aunt Lori loves it.

Temporary Storage

Sometimes you need to send a large file to someone, and you don't want to use a USB drive or burn a CD/DVD. Instead, **YouSendIt** (*https://www.yousendit.com/*) allows you to upload large files so that someone else can download it elsewhere. At present, files up to 100MB can be sent for free. To send whole folders, simply zip the folder into a single file and send it as one item. You then specify the email addresses for the recipient(s). If you're worried about the recipients getting marketing messages from **YouSendIt**, simply send the file to yourself and then forward it privately from your own email account. **YouSendIt** notifies the recipients (which can include yourself) of the link when it's ready to download the file and the time frame for which the file will be available — currently ten days.

Apple Mobile Device Storage

Apple recently launched a "free" cloud storage service for users of their mobile devices: mainly **iPhones** and **iPads**. I put "free" in quotes because you have to buy a data plan through (currently) **AT&T** or **T-Mobile** to even use these mobile devices. But **Apple** provides free storage to back up and sync your mobile device(s) to one another and/or to your home computer.

Currently, **iCloud** offers the first 5GB of cloud storage free, which can be accessed directly from an application on the mobile device or through a Website. This service is brand new with the October release of iOS5, **Apple's** new operating system made exclusively for their mobile devices. I am as yet unaware of any equivalents for other mobile devices outside of **Apple** products.

To sum up, why use free cloud storage? Because it's free! It's also serviced for you: harddrive crashed and burned? Laptop sto-

len? Not a problem if your data lives in cloud storage servers. Not computer savvy? Professionals monitor, update, and maintain the servers for you. Your information can be transferred from old servers to new servers and from old formats to new formats with no effort (or even awareness) on your part. Best of all, you can access cloud storage from absolutely anywhere. All you need is an Internet-enabled device and an Internet connection.

Finally, cloud storage takes away the synchronization factor. Own a laptop for work, a desktop for home, an iPhone for the go, and an iPad for meetings? (Yes, I'm a Mac person, sorry.) Without cloud storage, we have to manually transfer data from one device to another to keep them up-to-date with each other. With cloud storage, there's no such problem since everything you need is centralized online and you simply access and change it from wherever you are. This means no more carrying a USB drive around to transfer that important report to whichever computer you happen to be using at the time.

On the other hand, if the Internet access or data network you're using goes down, it's lights out. But the bigger these networks get, the more redundancies and failsafes the companies add to prevent this from happening. When it does happen, outages are usually for only a short time. Even power outages aren't a problem if you keep your mobile devices fully charged and use G3/G4 data services instead of local wireless networks.

So, overall, Cloud Storage is a wonderful thing that keeps getting better and cheaper. And, if you play your cards right, you can even get it for free.

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things, blanket acceptance of everything new is not good (when I ate my first deep-fried scorpions I was jokingly told I was safe as long as I didn't eat more than seven or eight at a time). But being open to every new thing is only meaningful if it meaningfully contributes to one's goals. In my view, measures like "user convenience" and setting goals on the basis of user needs analysis are among the best ways of deciding what to do.

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