

Facebook, Apple TV+ or 5G: Which tops the list of Tech Turkeys for 2019

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Thanksgiving is behind us, but there's one more serving on the menu: our annual look back at the tech turkeys of 2019.

Last year, we picked the Facebook Portal, the video chat device that asks you to have the nerve to willingly put a Facebook microphone and video

camera in your home for more monitoring. This year, the honor solely belongs to Apple and its cupboard-bare-thin Apple TV+ streaming service.

Apple knows how to put on a show—to sell products such as iPhones and iPads. For TV+, it followed the hype playbook by signing up big stars such as Jennifer Aniston and Reese Witherspoon, Oprah Winfrey and Steven Spielberg and that did, indeed, make a splash. With a great sounding price tag of \$4.99 monthly, or one year free to anyone who buys an iPhone, iPad, Macintosh computer or iPod Touch, TV+ seemed like a sure bet.

Then TV+ debuted—with only four scripted adult series at launch, led by Aniston-Witherspoon's "The Morning Show."

Netflix and Amazon have thousands of shows. Two weeks after Apple TV+ launched came Disney+ with 7,500 television episodes and 500-plus movies, virtually its entire library available, plus Marvel, Pixar, Lucasfilm, National Geographic and on and on.

Disney+ made TV+ look that much more pathetic.

It gets worse. When you take a look at TV+, you're most likely in the Apple TV app, which displays many programs available via streaming and video on demand within the Apple universe. Everything from ABC, Showtime, FX or whatever you've added to your library. A sprinkling of them happen to be the new premium shows and some hard sell.

If you like "The Morning Show," why not watch "Wild" with Witherspoon for \$3.99, or "Horrible Bosses" with Aniston for \$2.99? When Netflix makes viewing suggestions, you've already paid your subscription, so you're not getting dinged.

And it's not like Apple's new shows got raves. Critics roasted "The Morning Show."

Maybe a year from now, Apple will get its act together and offer consumers a compelling reason to renew their subscriptions. But for now, it's one big turkey.

And there's more!

Samsung Fold

A new phone that turns into a tablet selling for nearly \$2,000 is bad enough (awfully pricey!), then, when the product was sent to critics, it began falling apart. Then its launch was delayed again and again. No thanks.

Netflix

Speaking of streaming, a big boo to the company that on Dec. 1 is forcing people to chuck old Roku streaming players and many models of Samsung and Vizio TVs over what it calls "technical limitations." No, Netflix changed its software system and wasn't straight with the public about what was going on. Buying a new Roku for \$25 or so is easy if you have the money to spare—switching out a big TV is more cumbersome.

Google, Amazon and Facebook's privacy grabs

Facebook didn't have any major Cambridge Analytica-style data breaches this year, but it was just as grabby with our personal data, if not more so. Many consumers we spoke to this year were convinced that Facebook was listening to our conversations. (The social network denies this.) It's certainly gotten way more advanced in learning about our

interests by mining our data. Ditto for Google and Amazon.

Turkey time: Amazon, Google and Apple were caught hiring contractors to listen to the recordings of our queries. Once caught, they apologized and said they would change their policies. But they wouldn't cop to stop listening. Amazon brazenly records every query you make to the Alexa personal assistant, and if you don't like it, it sends you to the smartphone app to delete them.

Not cool.

Facebook

No one tech company deserves the Turkey of the Year award more. Its stance of refusing to fact-check political ads enraged Washington (at least pols that don't use the social network to stretch truths) and journalists. To keep with our gadget theme, Facebook stubbornly refused to give up on last year's turkey winner, the poor-selling Portal video chat device, and released a new version that still violates basic privacy considerations (Facebook knows who you call, how long you spend on the phone, where the caller lives, etc.). It was touted as new and improved, but the only thing new about it, really, was a lower (by \$20) price.

Sky-high streaming prices

Remember when we wanted to cut the cord to save money from super high cable bills? Then AT&T Now (formerly DirecTV Now), a cable alternative with cable-like menu and no equipment rental, went from \$35 to \$65 monthly, YouTube increased from \$40 to \$50 and Hulu with Live TV grew from \$45 to \$55. Cable's not looking so bad anymore.

5G

You've heard a lot of hype from AT&T, Verizon, T-Mobile and Sprint about 5G, super-fast wireless service that may one day be really cool. It certainly isn't now. AT&T's service is invite-only, Verizon and T-Mobile are available in only selected cities, and the offering is so not ready for prime time that it works only on certain blocks. That's fine, except the companies charge a premium to customers for 5G access, even though there's little there. No need to be early adopters here.

Travel websites, hidden fees and semantics

How did a hotel room offer of \$137 a night for two nights turn into \$373.38? Hidden fees when I got to the cart. Travel websites are notorious for hooking you with great offers, only to blow them up to something you never agreed to in the first place. I've used Expedia for years, but in 2019, it was one of the worst offenders in hooking you in with cheap fares—then sending you to airports nowhere near your home. We tried to book flights to Seattle from Los Angeles International Airport, where we were quoted \$169 round trip, versus an average of \$300 and up on other airlines. Once we clicked enough buttons to get to the cart, we saw that the flight originated from Ontario Airport, about 60 miles from home, not LAX. Ahem, Expedia, Airbnb and the others, you're going to eventually lose the sale anyway, so how about being upfront with consumers about what things actually cost in 2020?

Sunsetting

Remember how before the digital era, you'd buy things such as lamps, stoves, TV sets and the like, and use them for years and years? Not so in techland, where companies such as Apple, Netflix and others don't bat an eye over "sunsetting" their products and making them unusable. Such

is the case every September when Apple releases its new iOS software update, which works only on phones going back four years. This year, the Apple iPhone 6 from 2014 was eliminated. People pay good money for these things—they should be able to hold onto them for longer than five years.

Giant power bricks

Come on Google, Apple, Amazon and seemingly every tech manufacturer out there. Your power supplies have grown way too large. At one point this year, when trying to review three competing products in one six-outlet power strip, I could only fit two of them in there. If the companies truly cared about the consumer, they would find a way to fit their power the old fashioned way—into a regular plug that fit in any wall socket, without blocking the neighboring device.

Smart TVs

They sounded like such a great idea. Internet-enabled sets that brought in Netflix and Hulu without you having to bother switching HDMI inputs. Then it was revealed that the reason set manufacturers could sell them so cheaply was because they were watching us and selling our viewing data to third parties. If that's not bad enough, many of the sets from Vizio, Samsung and others come with preloaded apps and no way to get new ones. Which meant no access to Disney+ when the year's most-desired new streaming service launched. Roku, which makes the popular streaming player, also monitors your viewing on some channels. So either live with it, or pay premium for Apple TV's set-top box, which starts at \$149 and doesn't share your viewing information.

Apple starts the piece as a turkey and ends up a hero.

Happy device buying, everyone!

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