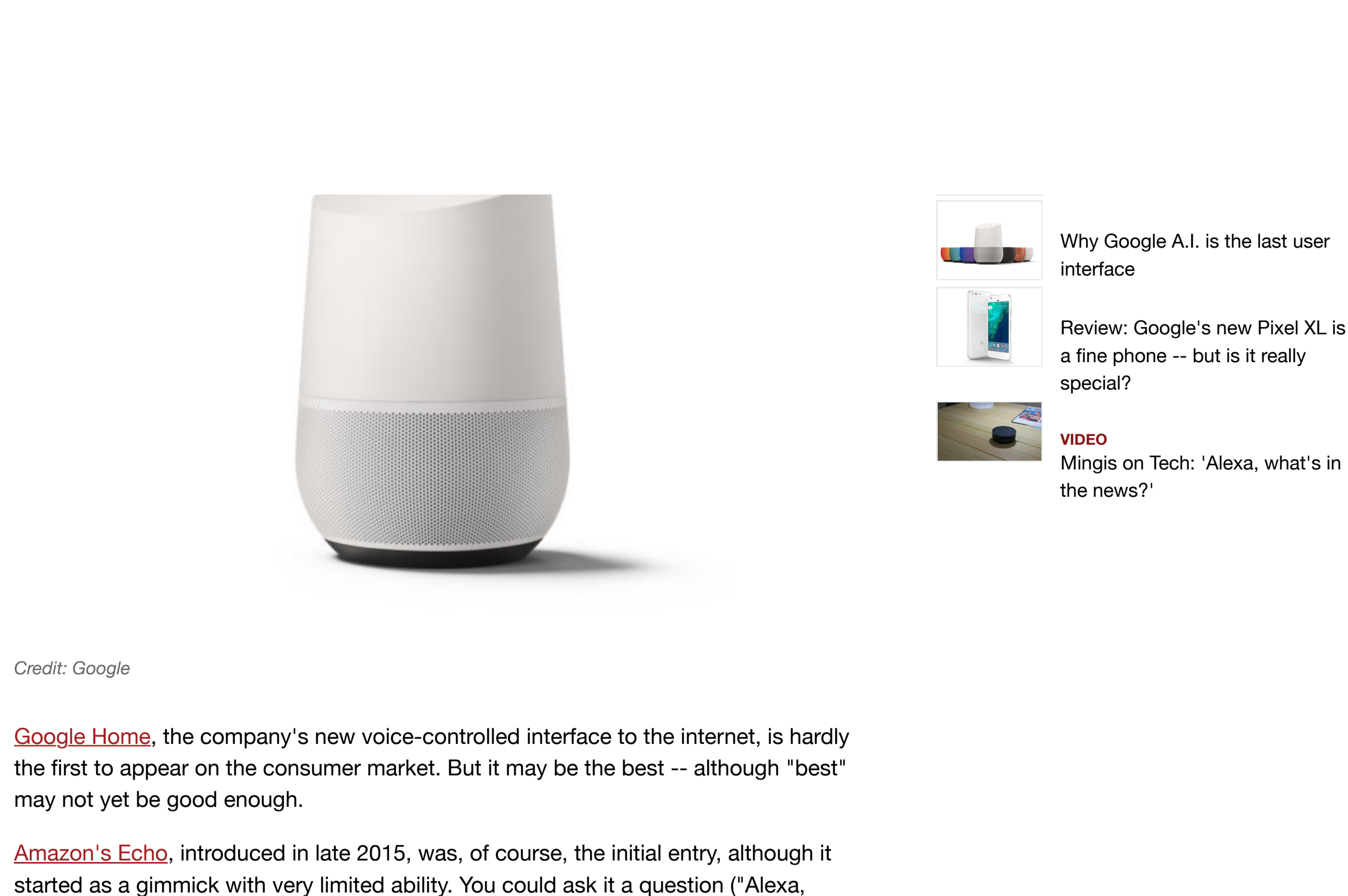
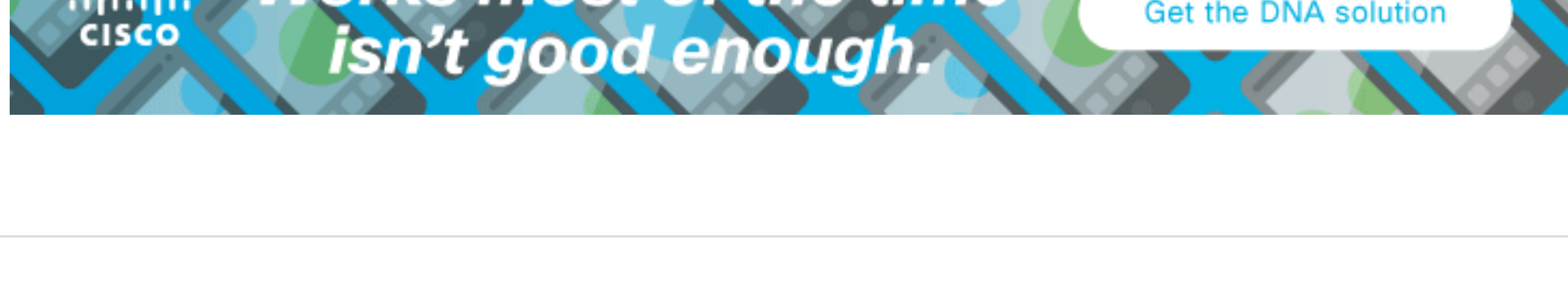


REVIEW

Review: The Google Home invasion

Google's new voice-controlled device extends the company's reach to casual conversation.



Credit: Google

Google Home, the company's new voice-controlled interface to the internet, is hardly the first to appear on the consumer market. But it may be the best -- although "best" may not yet be good enough.

Amazon's Echo, introduced in late 2015, was, of course, the initial entry, although it started as a gimmick with very limited ability. You could ask it a question ("Alexa, what's it like outside?") and get an answer ("It's 64 degrees and sunny. There's a chance of rain later tonight."). You could build a wish list, or order stuff, or play music. More recently, with the help of third-party extensions, it's become, well, a little bit less of a gimmick with slightly greater abilities.

In the end, though, any voice control system is ultimately only as good as the ecosystem behind it. By that metric alone, Google Home wins.

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The physical manifestation of Google Home is a curvy, squat white cylindrical tower, about 5.6 in. high and 3.75 in. wide, with an angled slice out of the top. The bottom third is covered by a white fabric grill that hides a 2-in. speaker driver and two 2-in. passive radiators. You can easily replace the grill with separately purchased colored fabric and metal grills (Mango, Marine or Violet for fabric; Carbon, Copper or Snow for metal). It's quite attractive and unobtrusive, as opposed to the Amazon Echo's stark black monolithic tower; it is available from [Google Play and several other vendors](#) for \$129.

The angled top of the unit is touch-sensitive; it displays a series of lights during startup and Google's now-characteristic four colored dots when triggered. You can adjust the unit's volume, start a search, or pause music by touching the top, but you can also do all that by voice command (and will likely never have to touch the thing once it's set up). The whole unit weighs 1 lb.

Far and away the worst design decision, though, is with the power brick. Google Home has a brick so bulky that takes at least two, and possibly three, positions on a power strip. Granted that the device draws 16.5 volts and 2 amps, and needs some beef for power conversion. However, the brick needs either to be smaller or oriented differently.

Okay Google -- let's set up

Setup is quick and painless: Plug it in, download an app ([Android](#) or [iOS](#)), and run through some simple menus to connect it to your Google account and your Wi-Fi. That's it. If you have a [Chromecast](#), [Nest](#) or [SmartThings](#), you add the devices through the app. You can also configure the app to use the Home with [IFTTT](#) or to order an [Uber](#) car (if you first enter your account details).

When you're finished, start everything you say with "Okay Google" ("Hey Google" also works) and you're off.

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Speaking out: Security and voice recognition

By Carin Hughes From performing car commands and phone searches to accessing account information, voice recognition makes digital life effortless. And more people are opting to go hands-free with approximately 40 percent...

My interactions with Google Home went something like this:

"Okay Google. Tell me about pizzerias near me."

In a clear and somewhat formal female voice (that you can't change), Google responded with a list of three establishments within 0.7 miles. (Why 0.7 miles? I suspect that Google Home is a secret agent of the Metric Police, because 0.7 miles is more or less 1 kilometer.)

"Okay Google. Tell me about the first one."

Google gave details about the first one.

"Okay Google. Tell me about the second one."

Google complied.

"Okay Google. Tell me about the last one."

Google failed. Apparently, the word "last" won't work.

This is not limited to pizza, by the way. It worked with Uzbek restaurants, too; I happen to live near several. That was kind of impressive.

If you ask Google Home to call one of the restaurants, it tells you it can't do that yet. The "yet" is provocative, as it implies that Google Voice integration is forthcoming.

Google will play music from its own Play Music and YouTube Music libraries, Spotify Premium or Pandora. (More services, including iHeartRadio, are promised.) You can ask to use any specific service -- "Okay Google. Play 'Pump It Up' by Elvis Costello from Google Play Music" -- but you can also set a default in the Google Home app.

It takes practice to understand what sorts of information Google Home is good at providing. Its current event updates were very quick -- "Okay Google. What's the score of the Cubs' game?" -- but it couldn't tell me what was on my Google calendar (or any other calendar) for the next day. (Oddly, when asked the same questions, Amazon Echo was fine with the calendar but couldn't give me an accurate game update.)

One problem with Google Home is that it's impossible to drill down to a specific piece of content. You can request "Pump It Up," for instance, but the version you get is the one that Google picks. It's the same with video; you can tell it to get "the most recent 'Last Week Tonight'" from YouTube, but you can't pick an exact clip from the show. (Note that this is also an issue with Amazon's Echo, which is a particular problem when you're trying to order a certain version of a product.)

Bottom line

There's little question that some sort of voice response device that controls a home tech ecosystem is inevitable. Google Home is the best of them today: The best physical design, the best database behind it, the most "natural" because it can retain the context of the last couple of exchanges. If you ask it for pizza restaurants, it will remember that that's what you're talking about.

That doesn't mean it's a prime-time mass-market device. Dealing with Google Home is like dealing with a child. You need to speak to it in ways that it understands, not the way you probably talk; you'll get unexpected results that may or may not be okay, and it can't do things (make phone calls, find the exact media you want to play back) that you might reasonably expect it to do. (Yelling doesn't help either -- with Home or the child.)

If you keep in mind its limitations and are reasonably confident that it's going to grow and mature, Google Home could be interesting. But never forget that although you paid for it and it's in your home and it does things for you, Google Home is really a new endpoint for an ecosystem and cloud that you're not really in control of. It's listening, and it's harvesting your questions and activities for Google.

My colleague JR Raphael raised [another interesting problem](#) with all devices of this nature: The lack of authentication. Anyone in your house can issue commands, be it learning the weather, changing the thermostat, ordering detergent, hearing your meeting schedule, or -- eventually, as Google Home doesn't do this yet -- listening to your email. You have been warned.

It's not enough that Google knows what you want to know about when you're sitting in front of your computer or fiddling with your phone. It's not enough that Google's Nest thermostat knows when you're home or when you're away, or what the rhythm of your household might be. All of those, you see, require intentional interaction with a device, whether it's a desktop computer, a mobile phone, or a thermostat.

With Google Home, Google wants to make it convenient for you to ask it for stuff as casually as asking the air. Whether you're comfortable with that -- or whether it's inevitable regardless of your comfort level -- is for you to decide.

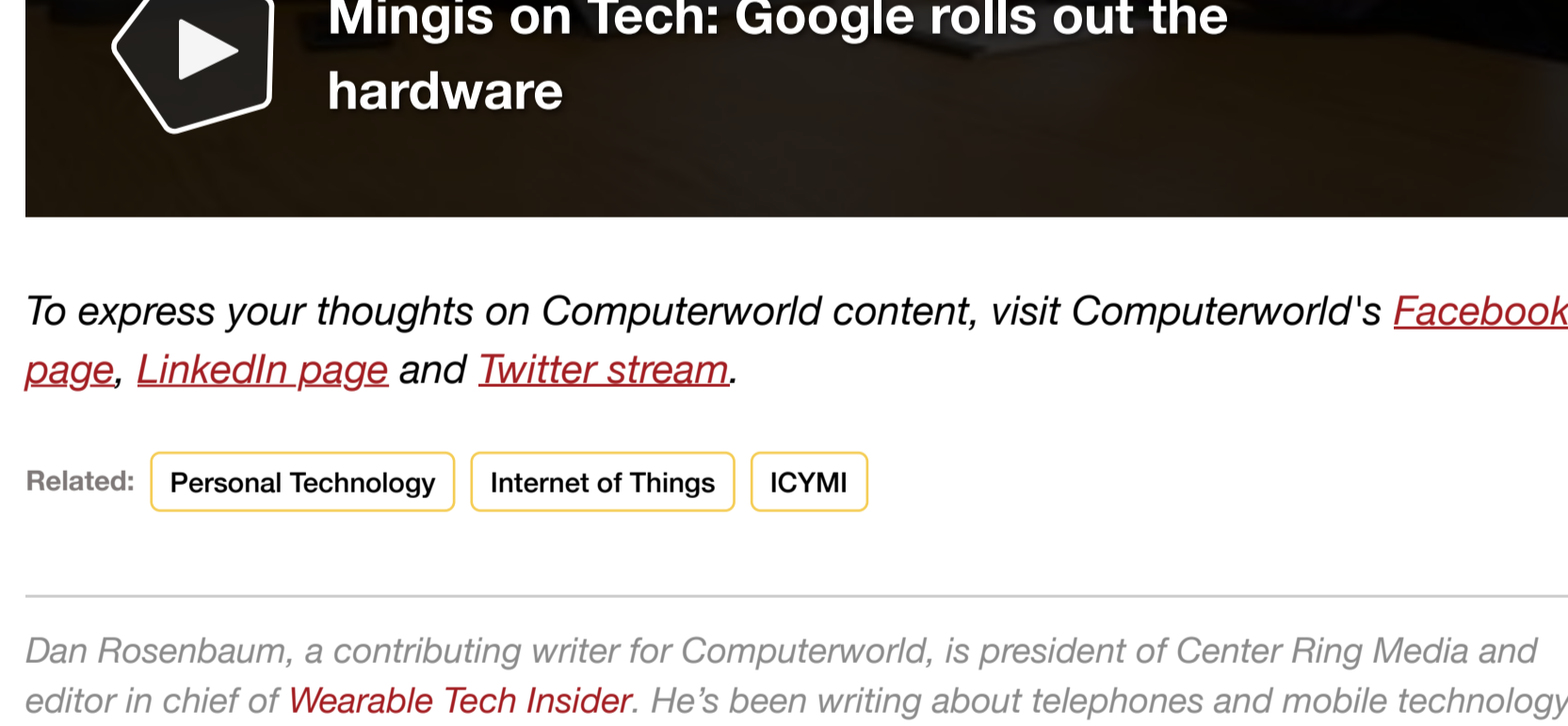
At a Glance

Google Home

Price: \$129 (vendor price); also available from [several retail outlets](#)

Pros: Attractive design; "conversational" search; backed by Google's immense database

Cons: Large power brick; conversational search is still limited



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