



Rise up to the cloud-based

Consumers and businesses are increasingly turning to storing and sharing digital content online. **Ian Calcutt** sheds light on what ‘the cloud’ could mean for you.

The ‘cloud’ is a prevalent buzzword in the technology world. In its simplest form, it means storing your content off-site – whether that location is your home or workplace – and being able to access it from anywhere and on anything with an internet connection. Cloud-based services differ slightly to web-based facilities such as online banking or shopping. They are not dependent on browsers, so you’ll find the interfaces usually run in their own apps on computers, tablets and smartphones. Portability is central to the cloud. Storage capacity and memory-intensive processing are not provided by the device in your hand, where technical resources may be limited; they come from the back-end infrastructure. In our daily lives, we are also becoming more comfortable with and reliant upon mobiles with internet access. Cloud services can offer back-ups for important documents, work in progress that you can finish on the train, or media such as photos and videos. Services

normally use a ‘freemium’ model where basic storage costs nothing but you can pay for extra space. Examples include Dropbox, SugarSync, Box.com and the new Google Drive, which like most cloud products, works across numerous operating systems and devices. The other big IT corporations, Microsoft and Apple, have their own – SkyDrive and iCloud respectively – but with some limitations on how you can use them. The personal cloud is aimed at individual consumers but it also boosts small businesses. Versatile note-taking apps like Evernote are a boon to employees, as are services that sync contacts and calendars. Sharing documents securely between people with, say, Dropbox or Google Docs is an important asset in project collaboration.



Apple iCloud services



digital future

Various team management apps for remote working are also available. The upcoming Microsoft Office 15 is said to be more cloud-orientated, though Apple software is making further inroads into the business sector due to the success of the iPhone and iPad. Apple defines its cloud services as the removal of an obvious file system. Content is instead tied to the application you use to open or edit it with, with the data residing in the cloud.

Image making

It is becoming easier for people to upload their photos and home movies to the cloud and choose who to share them with rather than emailing individually or posting on various – and less private – social networking sites. Samsung recently launched its cloud-based Family Story feature for sharing photos and videos among small circles of relatives. Cloud gaming ventures such as OnLive and Gaikai employ powerful processing so that players can get a console experience with just a conventional computer.

Increasingly the cloud will host some if not all of your digital music library. It can also deliver purchased movies

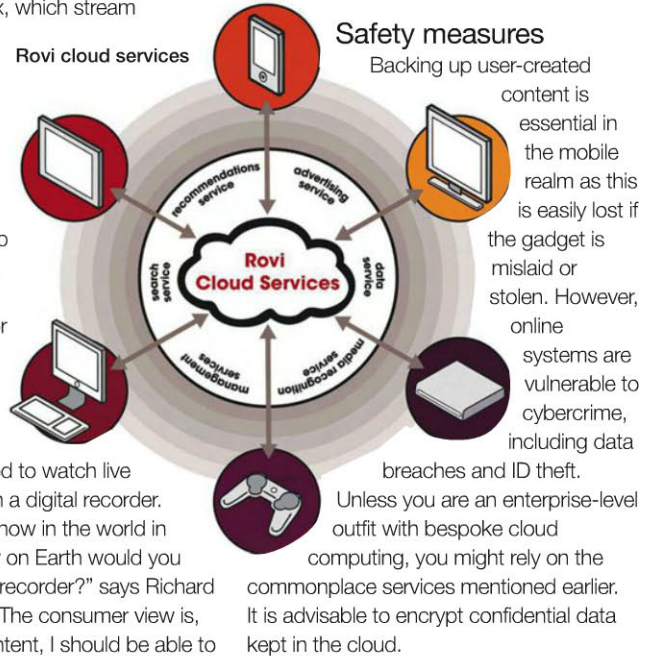
through services such as UltraViolet. Films are held in a digital 'locker' where they are yours to access on a range of supported, net-connected players. This contrasts with movie and TV rental services such as LoveFilm and Netflix, which stream content on a pay-per-view basis.

KnowHow Movies, an HD-compatible online service from the Dixons Stores Group in partnership with Rovi, has both rental and media locker features. For film and TV, catch-up and streaming services like the iPlayer and Sky Go can replace the need to watch live or set recordings on a digital recorder. "If you have every show in the world in the cloud, then why on Earth would you bother setting up a recorder?" says Richard Bullwinkle of Rovi. "The consumer view is, I've paid for this content, I should be able to get it wherever I am, inside the home, outside the home."

The Google TV platform is due to be relaunched and integrated into screens from Sony, LG and Samsung, with a possible European roll-out by at least one of those brands before the end of 2012. How neatly this will sit beside existing cloud media portals such as Sony's Qriocity remains to be seen. The impact of Apple with its iTunes store and compatible hardware (which later this year may include a feature-rich TV itself) is potentially significant too. Connected devices that

Cloud-based services

use cloud services can have new features easily 'pushed' to users via firmware updates, which also has cost benefits. Products without broadband connectivity could quickly seem outdated.



Hosting companies may be entitled to pry on what you store on their servers or surrender it to authorities if compelled by law. To work smoothly in the cloud you must have a reliable internet service, either fixed-line or over the air. Also consider the consequences if the cloud provider goes bust or, like Megaupload, is taken down. Despite this, if you conduct a large part of your business online then cloud services can help. Smaller firms in particular may be ill prepared for in-house IT failures, so the ubiquity and cost effectiveness of cloud computing can work to your advantage. ■

