Android 11—The Ars Technica Review

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Android 11 has finally arrived after a lengthy beta process that started approximately three years ago in February 2020. This is the 30th release of Android, if we're counting by API levels, and in a year when it seems nearly everything has been delayed or canceled, Google has managed to turn in one of the smaller Android releases.

Last year, Android 10 was a massive release, adding gesture navigation, a dark mode, Project Mainline, a dual-boot system, scoped storage, foldable smartphone support, and a million other things. In comparison, Android 11 is more limited. This being the annual Ars Technica review, however, there are of course still plenty of things to talk about—like yet another notification panel revamp, a new media player, chat bubbles, smart home controls, and more.

Table of Contents

The notification panel

The notification panel is one of the biggest strengths of Android, and Google can't seem to let a major release go by without iterating on it. This year, the theme seems to be around organization and creating what Google calls a

“dedicated persistent space” for certain types of notifications.

Notifications are now broken up into five categories, some with big headers on top of each section. “Conversations,” “Notifications,” and “Silent” notifications get the big header labels in the notification panel, while ongoing notifications from things like Google Maps navigation don’t get a label but are pinned to the top of the panel. The fifth type is for media notifications, which now live inside *the Quick Settings panel*. This is a wild change.

The persistent media carousel

- The new media player, which, when active, lives above all your notifications. You can swipe to switch players.
  Ron Amadeo
- The new and old Notification panel. The big section labels take up a lot of space.
  Ron Amadeo
- If you haven’t played media in a while, the media player will be at the bottom of the Quick Settings. In Android 10 you got nine buttons per page, in Android 11 you get six buttons per page and a media player.
  Ron Amadeo

The media player can actually end up in two spots, depending on when you last played a piece of media. If you have a currently playing or recently paused media session, the media player will show up above the notification panel. If you swipe away the media player or haven’t played anything in a while, it will show up at the bottom of the expanded Quick Settings. Since you access the expanded Quick Settings from the notification panel, it’s sort of like the media player can end up on “Page 1” or “Page 2” depending on how recently it was used.

To make room for the media player, the Quick Settings icons

are now down to six icons per page, where previously there were nine icons per page. So you swipe down the notification panel and see six items at the top, and then when you expand the Quick Settings panel you see… the same six icons. It doesn't make a ton of sense.

The media notification space supports multiple players. If you've started up more than one media app recently, you'll be able to horizontally swipe through multiple media players, which is great for switching between a music player and podcast app. It's up to each app to hold a spot for itself in the media player carousel, which can hold up to five apps.

Apps can supposedly secure a persistent spot in the media player by calling the new "MediaBrowserService" API. I don't think any apps, however, actually do this right now, so it's hard to know how it works. Google claims that apps pinging the new API will stick in the media player carousel around forever (sorted by when you last used them), even after a reboot. If any app actually implemented the persistent behavior, you would be able to turn it off by swiping over the media player, pressing the little gear that appears under it, and turning on the option to "hide player when the media session has ended."

- Tap the audio output selector and you'll get a list of devices (right).
  Ron Amadeo
- Google's developer docs show Chromecast support in the audio picker.

The media player has a new output-picker button in the top left, and when you tap on it, you get a pop-up card listing audio devices. Right now, this tends to list things like "Phone Speaker," "Wired headphones," and the names of any connected Bluetooth devices. Since this is all the button ever lists at the moment, it's not particularly useful.

Google's developer documents show Google Cast devices, like

Google Home speakers and Chromecasts, popping up in this list, which would be incredible. The docs say, “By default, only local media routes are shown. If your app supports other media routes, such as remote playback you’ll need to let the system know.” “Remote Playback” here means Google Cast devices, with a “Google Home” and several other speakers popping up in the accompanying picture. So whether or not Google Home speakers appear in this list will be up to each individual app. So that will need to be updated.

For developers, the recommended way to get Google Cast speakers in the audio picker for your app is to include version 1.2.0 of the MediaRouter jetpack library and enable a few remote-playback flags. The problem is this version of the library is still in beta. That means—and this is probably going to be a running theme in this article—that from what I can tell, no apps support this Android 11 feature yet.

I think the particulars of how the new audio picker will work with Google Cast devices is a big deal, because the current Google Cast interface (accessible via the “cast” button inside an app) is probably the single worst interface shipping on a modern Android phone. It reminds me of the share-sheet problems that used to exist before Android 10. The Google Cast list in an app is built *at runtime*, so when you press the cast button, you first get a blank sheet, and then it slowly fills up as the app pings speakers on your network like it’s taking attendance for a classroom. Not all the speakers show up at once, so the list jumps and shifts around as attendance is taken. It’s common to see the speaker you want, go to tap on it, and exactly 1 millisecond before you touch the screen, the list updates and the wrong item shifts to the spot beneath your finger.

The list is also sorted alphabetically, not by something more useful like “last-used” or “most-commonly-used.” It’s also a mishmash of speakers and speaker groups, and there is no way to hide speakers you never start individually or flag certain

list items as important. This is crazy, since when you make a speaker group, you'll most likely want to start the speaker group and never an individual speaker. For now, the list isn't even smart enough to put speaker groups at the top.

I really like the *idea* of the new media controls. Switching between apps with a quick horizontal swipe is handy. Most of the time, all I want to do is resume the last media I was playing, and having a list of my last few media sessions would be a super-easy way to do it. As someone who normally has a few media-player widgets on my home screen for easy startup, a persistent media player seems like an ideal feature. The problem right now is that nothing is actually persistent. No apps turn on persistent mode, so a lot of times you go looking for the media player and it's just… not there. It's pretty disappointing opening the Quick Settings expecting to use your favorite media app and for it to be missing. After a few missed connections, I just gave up trying to use the Quick Settings player. Without persistent mode, it's more-or-less identical to the old media notification, just with the cool multiplayer support.

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