

The 20 most popular sci-tech stories of 2019

Aurich Lawson / Getty

reader comments

17 with 15 posters participating, including story author

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2019—we're glad to put the year in our rear-view mirror, but there were still plenty of tech stories to remember. What stood out this time around was the sheer diversity of our most popular stories. Sure, readers always love listening to what Ron Amadeo has to say about Google's strategic direction or following Eric Berger's scoops about what's going on inside NASA, but the return of the Razr? A man with an "eye of Sauron" around his iris? The "church of bleach?" Some things you just can't predict.

So without further ado, here were the 20 most popular stories of 2019 at Ars Technica.

Last month, Google quietly released "Google Assistant Ambient Mode," which takes over the lock screen any time you charge your Android phone. As Ron Amadeo described it:

"The new ambient mode shows a quick greeting message at the top, followed by your calendar, weather, upcoming flights, and notifications. Below that is a quick settings section that shows things like a do-not-disturb toggle and smart home controls for lights and thermostats. There's also a photo frame mode. It looks like a handy screen that could pop up when you're just charging your phone before bed."

Remember back in 2004 when the OG Motorola Razr V3 was the new phone hotness? It arrived a little less than two years before the first iPhone exploded onto the scene, and it was the phone of choice for those who wanted something a little nicer looking than a Nokia candy bar.

In January 2019, we learned that Lenovo—the current owner of Motorola Mobility—would resurrect the Razr for a new age. Motorola made things official in November when it revealed a \$1,500 foldable smartphone. Preorders were supposed to begin the day after Christmas in advance of a January 9, 2020 launch, but Motorola then decided to delay availability to “better meet consumer demand.”

You can bet Ron will get his hands on a Razr and tell you all about its bezels as soon as he can.

Copyright—the gift that keeps on giving, at least for copyright holders. It seems like Congress is intent on making it a never-ending gift, too—at least until this year. As 2019 dawned, a number of copyrighted works passed into the public domain as the extra 20 years added by the Sonny Bono Copyright Term Extension Act of 1999 finally expired.

“George Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue* will fall into the public domain. It will be followed by *The Great Gatsby* in January 2021 and Ernest Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* in January 2022,” wrote Tim Lee. And in 2024, “we’ll see the expiration of the copyright for *Steamboat Willie*—and with it Disney’s claim to the film’s star, Mickey Mouse. The copyrights to Superman, Batman, Disney’s Snow White, and early Looney Tunes characters will all fall into the public domain between 2031 and 2035.”

This is unprecedented stuff, and Tim breaks down all of the factors that made it happen.

When last spotted, the magnetic North Pole was on its way to Siberia, which may be because the Earth’s magnetic field

reverses itself every so often. The last pole reversal came about 770,000 years ago, but the actual switcheroo can happen in as little as 22,000 years.

Ars resident geologist Scott Johnson dug into a study over the summer that pieced together a timeline for the previous reversal.

“The researchers interpret this additional data as showing a major weakening of the magnetic field starting 795,000 years ago, before the pole flipped and strengthened slightly,” he wrote. “But around 784,000 years ago, it became unstable again—a weak field with a variable pole favoring the southern end of the planet. That phase lasted until about 773,000 years ago, when it regained strength fairly quickly and moved to the northern geographic pole for good.”

Raise your hand if you're a Comcast subscriber.

Looks out, sees about 40 percent of the US audience with their hands up.

Now keep your hand up if you're happy with the service.

Sees most arms drop.

Part of the reason people hate Comcast so much is that the company has a history of doing things to piss off its customers. Some of these things are even illegal. In this case, Comcast was found to have broken Washington state law 445,000 times and was directed to refund its customers and to pay a \$9 million fine.

Surely it will never do anything like this again.

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