

Technology

The search for better privacy

Be careful what you're giving away during a simple Google search

By Joseph Wilson

You might have noticed that your favourite search engine's main page changed last month. Google's famously simple front page now has a tiny 8-point font addition that reads "privacy" just beside the ©2008 text. The link leads surfers to a page describing Google's privacy policy, including videos explaining the company's policy on your rights relating to the search engine.

It's widely believed that the move on July 4 to include a home page link to the privacy policy is a response to privacy advocates noting Google's violation of the California Online Privacy Protection Act. In 2004, the state courts demanded that a website that collects personal information about its users "conspicuously post its privacy policy on its website." It took four years, but Google is finally complying.

The move to adhere to this Californian law occurred just days after Google's privacy policy was tested in court. Viacom, one of the largest media conglomerates in the world, has been embroiled in a legal battle with Google since March 2007. The owner of TV channels like MTV and Comedy Central contends that Google is at fault by letting people watch Viacom's copyrighted material on YouTube.

Since Google bought YouTube in 2006, Google's privacy policy now applies to users of YouTube. Whenever people access clips on YouTube, Google records the date and time the file was accessed, the IP (Internet protocol) address of the computer and the person's user name. Google claims to use this information "to improve the quality and design of the YouTube sites and to create new features, promotions, functionality and services."

The Google privacy policy is pretty clear that those log files are not to be shared with any outside party. In June, Viacom demanded access to those log files so it could prove in court how popular its videos were. On July 1, a U.S. district court judge ruled that Google must give Viacom the log files for the case. Although the files don't contain anything too specific like e-mail addresses or real names, the implications for privacy on the Internet are staggering.

Online ventures depend on the public's trust that personal information will be kept confidential. IP addresses can in fact be traced back to individual computers with additional information from Internet service providers (ISPs). User names can be cross-referenced with other social networking sites to see if names are repeated.

The newly launched Google Health, an online platform for storing medical records, might be hamstrung by this development. The idea is to have a centralized repository of health information, medical charts and prescriptions for patients and doctors to access. For anyone frustrated with the disorganization of the Canadian medical system, this might seem like a welcome initiative.

The ruling in the Viacom case shows that the information stored on Google's servers can fall into the clutches of other companies. Google's own privacy policy was superseded by the will of a judge and a tenacious corporation.

If an organization could prove that certain medical information was relevant to a legal case, it might conceivably get access to such data.

Do yourself a favour and skim the privacy policy on Google's main page to learn what information you're sharing when you do something as simple as watch a YouTube video. Your privacy may depend on it.

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