

Google: Trust, Choice, and Privacy

Gus Meuli, Caitlin Finn

“Trust is hard to earn, easy to lose, and nearly impossible to win back.”¹ This statement seems to ring true in the constantly changing world of business. In a time where technology is developing faster than ever before, it is very difficult to regulate information privacy. Consumers have chosen to trust many companies with their private information in exchange for services that are used on a daily basis. Google is in the middle of the debate about information privacy with its internet based services that collect and store enormous amounts of data about its users. Through a detailed privacy policy, a consumer’s ability to choose between internet services and a trustworthy reputation Google has convinced consumers to use their products despite collecting and storing enormous amounts of personal information. To a certain degree information gathering can be ethical and very useful; however, Google has stepped over the boundary of ethics because of the amount of information they are gathering through their various products and their loose privacy policy that allows for third party exposure. This behavior is unethical because it does not “most dutifully respect the rights of all affected”²

What is Privacy?

Privacy is very difficult to define and there are many different views of privacy. Many people speak of privacy as something to be valued and that it allows people to “be free from interference by others.”³ Over the years there continues to be a debate about what privacy means, and “initially, privacy was understood in terms of freedom from (physical) intrusion. Later it became associated with freedom from interference into one’s personal affairs. Most recently, privacy has come to involve access to and control of personal information.”⁴

Privacy can be broken down into three categories: accessibility privacy, decisional privacy and informational privacy. The type of privacy that is most relevant to Google is informational privacy, which can be described as a person’s ability to be in command of personal information and how that information is distributed to others.

Society today is full of changing technology, new products, and technological progression. With these advancements, privacy has also been transformed, altered, and applied differently. Cyberspace has created a set of privacy issues that were not previously relevant. The ease by which information is gathered has caused the public to question what information is truly private. Search engine information gathering is a very relevant issue because of the type of information that is able to be gathered as well as the ease in which it is done. Google is currently the most notorious search engine, as well as, a rapidly expanding company with an increasing number of products. Google's growing prominence in the cyber world has forced many to question and look at what information Google has access to and whether or not it is acceptable.

Google Products

Google has experienced a great deal of consistent growth since its beginnings in 1998. Google's initial product provided to the public was its search engine and searching capabilities. Here the first instance of privacy issues can be seen. Google's search engine, like almost every search engine, monitors and remembers a user's previous searches. The Google search engine uses tracking cookies to allow for the gathering of information. A cookie is a file that the website sends to your computer and stores data on while you use the site.⁵ Google states, "We use cookies to improve the quality of our service by storing user preferences and tracking user trends, such as how people search."⁶ Cookies were initially thought to be only accessible by the website that held the cookies; however, with increased advertising technology and cookies provided by these companies, information from cookies can be attained by those who want it. A detailed description of what different IP addresses search for can be created by Google. This practice does not respect the rights of informational privacy for Google users.

Another interesting issue with Google's search capabilities is the site with which you are using to search. Google has started using other sites with different names to test new ideas for searches. The other sites go by different names and have different interfaces. Searchmash.com is one of the sites that Google owns. Google changes different things on Searchmash every week depending on user feedback. They use Searchmash to test different ideas and to see how users respond before they put their Google name on the line. If enough users give positive feedback, they will then change it on the official Google search site. Google still performs data collection

through this search engine. The only way the user will know that the site is owned by Google is by reading the privacy policy, otherwise it is not obvious.⁷

Google's e-mail service is another product that is scrutinized because of privacy issues. G-mail is the e-mail product that Google has created. Initially many started using G-mail because of its large storage capabilities. G-mail provided more room to save photos, videos and whatever needed to be stored. A user never has to delete e-mail because of the storage capabilities and it is also easy and convenient to use. E-mail is also interesting because everything you receive and send is stored by Google, even when deleted by the user. Although Google will not necessarily look at the e-mail, they use a scanning program to scan the e-mail and provide relevant ads to the user. The scanned e-mail is then stored on the company's system. Some of the new features that G-mail provides include the ability to merge accounts so that e-mail can be sent from Google, but will appear to have been sent from a different account. The capability of this new feature allows for Google to save an e-mail even if the user wanted a different account to appear as the sender. Google can put together a detailed profile on every G-mail user because all of their e-mails are scanned and stored. Although Google does use the information to provide relevant ads, it violates users' ethical right to information privacy.

AdSense is the product that Google uses for advertising. Google is not technically reading your e-mail; however, AdSense is scanning it for key words to provide relevant advertising. "Google AdSense is a fast and easy way for website publishers of all sizes to display relevant Google ads on their website's content pages and earn money. Because the ads are related to what your visitors are looking for on your site — or matched to the characteristics and interests of the visitors your content attracts — you'll finally have a way to both monetize and enhance your content pages. It's also a way for website publishers to provide Google web and site search to their visitors, and to earn money by displaying Google ads on the search results pages."⁸ AdSense customers allow Google to document what people are clicking when they enter the customer's website and what type of advertising best suits users of the customer's website. Companies give up some of their website privacy when they sign on to use AdSense.

Google Maps is another one of Google's products. In addition to Yahoo Maps and Mapquest, Google also has a mapping and directions product. Like Google search, Google is able to store all of your searches and see exactly where you have mapped. While they may not know exactly where your home is, it would be easy to deduce based on frequent searches coming

from or going to a particular site. Google Earth, like Google Maps, is able to locate different locations. Google Earth uses satellite and pictures to locate the locations that are requested by the consumer.

The most recent acquisition of Google's is the video sharing website YouTube. In October, Google bought YouTube for \$1.65 billion shares in stock. Everyday 65,000 videos are uploaded to YouTube and 100,000,000 videos are watched.⁹ With this recent acquisition new privacy issues are faced. Even though YouTube will continue to have its own identity, it will still be owned by Google. Now, Google is gaining access to videos and information that is uploaded to the site. In addition, because Google has such a large advertising base, they will be able to incorporate this with YouTube's advertising as well. An interesting issue is the marked change in how Google operates. Instead of trying to improve their Google Video product to compete with YouTube, they simply bought YouTube. The acquisition of YouTube presents the issue: if Google can't get access to your information, they can simply buy someone who does.

Data Merging

A serious privacy problem that is becoming apparent with Google products is the merging of data. Currently a company such as Google only has the information from people who use their products, but these products are slowly covering a vast scope of information and privacy is being compromised. For example, Google Finance could have someone's financial information, Google Search could have their search history, Froogle could have their shopping preferences, and Google Maps could have all of their map search history. Small bits and pieces of information are scattered in different areas, which does not present a problem because different information is in different places. However, when Google merges this data then there is one place that has all private information and privacy is compromised. Google is slowly being able to do this as they create more products that save all different types of personal information. In addition, recent mergers and acquisitions have shown that even if Google does not have access to your personal information, they may be able to buy it. By purchasing YouTube, Google has gained access to millions of YouTube customer profiles and accounts. The break up of data and information allows consumers to decide who they want to have their private information. An essential part of privacy is the consumer's ability to choose who gets their private information, and once choice is no longer available, privacy is no longer available.

The Privacy Policy

The Google Privacy Policy is easily accessible on the website of whatever product Google offers. The policy touches on how information is collected, information sharing, data integrity and information security. According to Google's privacy policy, Google collects information that the users provide when establishing an account, cookie information, log information, user communication, affiliated site information, link tracking and other sites owned and operated by Google. The information gathered from these various activities include your name and address as well as your searching trends, browser type and language, links that you click on and e-mails that have been received and sent. The privacy policy goes on to state that the purposes of attaining and recording this information is to provide products and services to users, auditing, research and analysis, proper technical functioning and to develop new services. Although Google has a fairly extensive privacy policy, the wording provides a great deal of room for "loopholes." Google's privacy policy can be loosely applied to almost all information gathering. It is easy for Google to claim that they need to gather any form of information for "research and analysis" and still be within their privacy policy.

Information sharing is another topic within Google's privacy policy. The Policy states that Google will not share information with other companies or individuals unless they have the users' consent. However, Google does share information with subsidiaries, affiliated companies and other trusted businesses for the purpose of processing information on Google's behalf. This can be very problematic because it is very open-ended. Sharing information with business subsidiaries or affiliated companies means Google can choose who gets the information, leaving the consumer without any control. Google states that they will share information with other "trusted businesses;" however, a "trusted business" is a subjective term that allows Google to give private information to whoever they deem appropriate. It is easy for Google to claim that they were simply sharing your personal information as a way of bettering their services. The last instance in which they will share information is in the event that it is a lawful request, investigation of violations, to detect, prevent or otherwise address fraud or security issues, and to protect against imminent harm to the safety of Google or its users. Google will also provide notice before information is transferred due to a merger, acquisition or sale. This means that the information that Google collects can be distributed to other companies if an acquisition or a

merger happens without consumer consent. The privacy policy only requires that Google provide notification to its users.

The Google Privacy Policy also addresses the security of the information that they obtain. Google states, “We take appropriate security measures to protect against unauthorized access to or unauthorized alteration, disclose or destruction of data.”¹⁰ This is done through internal reviews of all of their practices including security measures. It should also be noted that Google does not allow access to personal information by Google employees, contractors, and agents. These people are “bound by confidentiality obligations and may be subject to discipline, including termination and criminal prosecution, if they fail to meet these obligations.”¹¹ Google also believes in data integrity and reviews their data collection, storage and processing practices to ensure that the information they collect is used for improving customer satisfaction and convenience. Although the privacy policy addresses data integrity and security measures, it must also be realized that the internal reviews and appropriate security measures are based on standards that Google has set up. Google is able to subjectively determine what they think is appropriate and their standards for internal reviews based on regulations and stipulations that they have created.

In general, Google believes in the protection of the private information that they have gathered. Google values their customers and has thus far honored the general public’s trust to our knowledge. Along with belief in privacy protection, Google also stresses the importance of customer satisfaction. Many of their practices and the information they have gathered is solely used to improve their products. Google’s privacy policy stresses customer satisfaction and urges anyone that has questions or is confused about Google practices to contact a member of the Google team.

Questions and Ethical Thoughts

Arguing the ethical practices of Google presents several problems because of the quality of the company that Google is. Their mantra being “don’t be evil,” seems to drive a great deal of what they do. However, in recent years, Google has become too large, too powerful, and too aware of whom their consumers are. In large part, the Google consumer isn’t aware of the information that is being gathered about them. It is because of this that Google has delved into unethical practices based on “The Rights Approach.” The Rights Approach argues, “That people

have dignity based on their ability to choose freely what they will do with their lives, and they have a fundamental moral right to have these choices respected. People are not objects to be manipulated; it is a violation of human dignity to use people in ways they do not freely choose.”¹² Google has been able to monitor and collect user information based on the fact that many of their users have never even looked at their privacy policy or realize what Google does to gather information. The Rights Approach believes that people may choose freely what they will do with their lives; however, Google has eliminated choice when it comes to gathering information. The user is not able to choose whether or not AdSense will be used to scan e-mails. The user is not able to choose whether the links they click on are stored.

In continuing with the Rights Approach, human beings have the right not to be manipulated. If searching trends are being tracked without user knowledge, merged with a newly acquired company, and later solicited for business based off of gathered information, the users rights are being violated because of manipulation. The user had no intent of this newly acquired company using their information and did not agree to give this information to them.

With the cutting edge technology that Google is known for, the line between privacy and public domain has become blurred. In turn, several questions pertaining to the ethical aspects of Google practice can be asked. First, is it right for Google to collect, keep and use information that they have gathered about you? Consumers need to decide if they are serious about privacy and think “before you Google for something, think about whether or not you want that on your permanent record. If not, don’t Google or take steps so that the search can not be tied back to you.”¹²

Next, one must ask: at what point is privacy compromised for the success of a company? What information is too much? Google has grown exorbitantly since its creation in 1998. Much of this growth can be attributed to Google’s ability to understand its consumers.

Google is able to gather an array of different information from its customers. They have technology targeted at collecting as much helpful information as they can. That being said, do customers sign away their rights to privacy when they use Google and all of its products? To a certain extent, yes a consumer does. It is important to know what Google is collecting. The burden is on the customer to know Google’s privacy policy and what they are collecting. It is a users’ responsibility to know what they are getting themselves into. Google can collect whatever information a user is willing to give. When someone registers for a Google account, they

willingly give information that is kept by Google. If a person wants the benefit of a well respected company, then they must be willing to allow them to collect this information. As people that live in a country of freedom and choice the question people must ask, should people have to choose between a respectable company and privacy? The reason that Google is the best is because of the information that they collect.

Trust

The reason people give up information about what they do on Google's website is because they trust that Google will follow its privacy policy, take adequate measures to protect the information, and not misuse the incredible amount of information in their possession.

Google was created in 1998 and has been providing internet search technology and other services for nine years. In those nine years Google has created a company that is profitable, growing, innovative, and continues to earn the trust of people around the world. Google has a reputation as a great company to work for, and they treat their employees very well. Recently, Google was named the best company to work for in 2007 by Fortune magazine. Google also recruits the most qualified and highly intelligent people to work for them. When people believe that a company cares about the well being of its employees they are more likely to trust that company because they believe the companies attitude toward its employees will carry over to caring about the well being of its customers. Until customers feel that Google is no longer trustworthy, they will continue to use Google products and grant Google access to personal information.

Conclusion

Privacy is a very serious issue and it is important that companies are responsible about how they deal with customer's private information. Google's success can be largely attributed to their ability to stay ahead of the changing trends and their ability to provide the best services. However, in doing this, Google has become unethical in the information that they are storing about their users. While Google does have a privacy policies that pertain to specific products, the policies are too broad and too loose to actually protect the rights of its users. The open-ended terms of the policy allow for third parties to gain access to user information based on Google's claim that they are a "trusted business." In doing this, Google violates the Rights Approach

because consumer choice is being taken away. The average user of Google is not aware of every Google practice, nor do they have the knowledge of how to protect themselves and their privacy. Google must provide their users with more options, and do so in a clear and understandable way. In order to truly respect the rights of its customers, Google should provide the opportunity for a user to decide whether or not they want their e-mails scanned, if they want their searching trends stored, and if they want the links that they collect on remembered. Google's practices are just the beginning of what internet search engines and other products are doing to improve and "get ahead." This goes further in showing that the burden has almost completely shifted to that of the consumer, and it is up to the individual to truly understand what they are getting themselves into and how to take the necessary steps to protect themselves.

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