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Google to anonymize logs in a nod to privacy advocates

By **Nate Anderson** | Published: March 15, 2007 - 07:15AM CT

In its continuing quest not to be evil (or, at least, to be less evil), Google today announced an overhaul of its privacy policy. User searches will no longer be tagged indefinitely with an IP address and cookie information, so privacy junkies can feel better about the security of their search history—sort of.

Under the new policy, both the IP address and cookie information will be anonymized at a point 18-24 months after the log files are generated, "unless [Google is] legally required to retain the data for longer." The new policy, once implemented, will be applied retroactively.

Google will still keep search data for 18-24 months before anonymizing it, in part due to concerns that governments around the world will eventually require this in short order anyway. And the program won't begin until the end of 2007, and possibly even later. The new policy is a "difficult initiative to implement," Google said in a statement, but the company believes that the effort will pay off in increased user trust and less suspicion from privacy advocates.

A response to privacy advocates

One of those advocates was the Norwegian government, which has been able to grab the attention of major tech companies like Apple and Google. In this case, the Norwegian Data Protection Authority was one of the groups that expressed its unease with Google's current policy of retaining such personally identifiable information indefinitely.

Google was the only search engine to hold out against a US government subpoena early last year, so it does some credibility in the privacy department. The whole debacle (and the search fiasco at AOL) certainly brought home to the public the fragility of "online anonymity." Millions who thought that their searches were private saw them turned over 1) to the government and then 2) to private researchers in the AOL case. When it became clear that this information could, in some cases, be used to identify individuals, the outrage was widespread.

Google seems to be seeking both good publicity and fewer future scandals with the new move, even though they say that the new policy could result in their losing data that "has analytical and statistical value" to the company.

"By anonymizing our server logs after 18-24 months, we think we're striking the right balance between two goals: continuing to improve Google's services for you, while providing more transparency and certainty about our retention practices," the Google statement said. Privacy advocates might want personally-identifiable info scrambled a bit sooner, but this is certainly better than nothing.

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