

Deception by Design: A Case Study of the Google Location Tracking Controversy

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ABSTRACT

Google's 2018 location tracking controversy exemplified deliberate ethical failure in technical communication. A fragmented UI separated "Location History" from "Web & App Activity," while documentation falsely claimed disabling Location History stopped all tracking.

The AP investigation triggered a \$391.5M settlement, proving technical communicators must become ethical advocates championing transparency and "Privacy by Design."

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Ethical Mandate of Technical Communication

Communicators must evolve from neutral translators to ethical guardians, protecting users' right to understand privacy trade-offs. Google's writers had a duty to ensure documentation matched reality.

Dark Patterns

Deceptive UX design that tricks users into actions contrary to their interests. Google's fragmented interface obscured data collection, while misleading labels created false understanding of privacy controls.

Privacy vs. Security

Security protects data from threats; privacy governs collection and use. Google collected data users believed they'd stopped—a privacy communication failure, not a breach.

Crises of Discovery

Privacy crises reveal intentional practices, prompting: "Why didn't you tell us?" Tracking wasn't a breach—it was ongoing for years. The crisis was public discovery of what Google knew.

WHO IS RESPONSIBLE?

Engineers, UX, Writers (Implementation Level):

Legal: Provide accurate documentation; ensure UI matches stated behavior

Ethical: Reject deceptive patterns; advocate for user-centered design

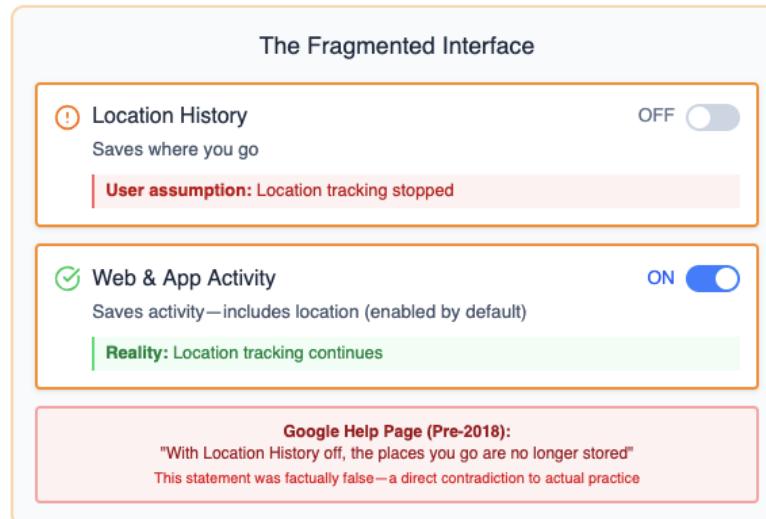
Management & Executives (Leadership Level):

Legal: Ensure compliance with consumer protection laws; maintain accountability

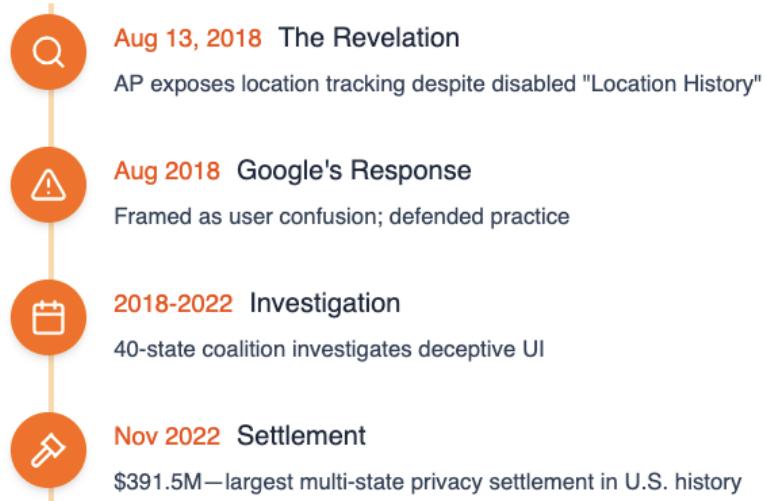
Ethical: Set organizational standards; prioritize user trust over data collection

THE DECEPTIVE DESIGN

A fragmented privacy interface separated controls and contradicted documentation:



Crisis Timeline & Google's Response

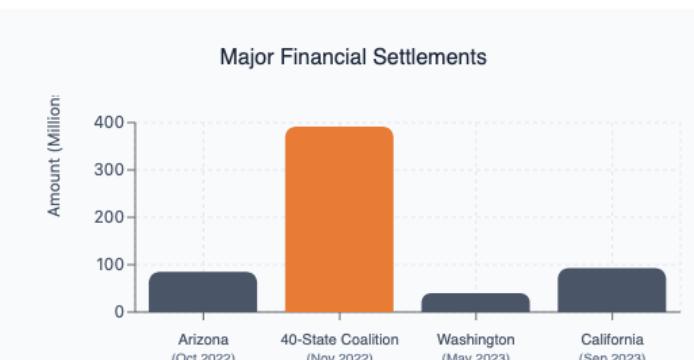


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LEGAL ACCOUNTABILITY

Google's deflection strategy—framing deceptive design as "user misunderstanding"—failed. State attorneys general proved Google violated consumer protection laws. The \$391.5M settlement forced centralized privacy settings and accurate documentation.



Arizona (Oct 2022): \$85 Million
40-State Coalition (Nov 2022): \$391.5 Million
Washington (May 2023): \$39.9 Million
California (Sep 2023): \$93 Million

CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

This crisis was a betrayal of trust, prioritizing data collection over informed consent. Our framework for ethical technical communication:

Holistic Transparency

Centralize privacy controls with plain language explanations. Documentation must match functionality exactly.

Privacy by Design

Default non-essential data collection to "opt-in." Communicators should advocate for these defaults during development, not just document existing practices.

Assume Discovery

Operate as if all internal practices will become public. Plan for disclosure, don't just react to crisis.

Technical communicators must evolve from passive documenters to ethics advocates, challenging deceptive patterns and championing user autonomy.