

Google Street View is 10 years old

Photo by Fernandez Broz from Pixabay

Happy Birthday, Google Street View is 10 years old! A data protection historical review and an outlook

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11/18/2020

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street view

Today it is 10 years since Google published its Street View panorama service for the 20 largest cities in Germany after long and intensive discussions about data protection law. Long before Edward Snowden's revelations of systematic and mass intelligence control and long before Cambridge Analytica and the possibilities of influencing democratic elections through profile-based manipulation of the will of the voters, the dispute over the Google Street View project may seem exaggerated in retrospect. Nevertheless, the dispute was heated up at the time, as before, actually only at the census in 1983.

Starting in 2007, Google recorded street views with panoramic cameras on cars across the whole of the USA, in order to then make them available on the Internet for retrieval. With the appearance of the first Google cars with the 3 meter high camera structure in Germany, numerous data protection questions arose. Many citizens, but also politicians, were extremely concerned about the project, despite the automatic pixelation of faces and license plates promised by Google. As a result, there was a call for a stop to recordings in cities and communities. It was particularly controversial that the views of private houses and gardens should be published without the residents' involvement or knowledge. Additional controversy was sparked by the detection of the WiFi networks discovered during a data protection check, which could be seen during the journeys. Here, Google not only contented itself with the already problematic systematic recording of the WLANs with their names, locations and other parameters, but also recorded the data traffic and thus the content of WLANs operated without encryption as they drove past. As a result, a series of investigations and preliminary investigations were initiated against Google worldwide.

In lengthy negotiations between Google and the HmbBfDI, a right of advance objection was achieved throughout Germany, which enabled affected owners and tenants to apply for pixelation of the house or apartment views before publication on the Internet, stating their place of residence. As a result, around 250,000 requests for redacting were submitted and implemented

by Google. The possibility of objection and other requirements, such as advance notice of trips in the respective regions, still apply to all providers of panorama services in Germany.

Since then, Google has not released any new shots for the Street View service. In its decision of May 2020 (PDF), the conference of the independent data protection supervisory authorities of the federal and state governments adhered to the conditions set out at that time, including under the provisions of the GDPR. In principle, this also applies to the preliminary objection to illustrations of

House facades and private property areas.

Prof. Johannes Caspar, Hamburg Commissioner for Data Protection and Freedom of Information: "If you like, the dispute over Google Street View was the first and at the same time the last battle of the analogue world with the powerfully emerging digital modern age, which with the widespread use of digital Technology found its way into the everyday world of many people. The initial uncompromising attitude with which this happened had turned traditional milieus of values and opinions against the Google Street View project. All of that would be data protection history a long time ago today. However, the current question of the permissibility of the panorama services remains on the agenda. I think that the operation of such services has many advantages and does not have to fail in the end because of data protection. Unfortunately, there are still no generally applicable standards that set legally secure requirements across the Union for the protection of the rights and freedoms of those affected, but also for service providers. A uniform framework should prevent patchwork quilts, especially in the area of panorama services at EU level."

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