Orion Kostival

CSCI 370

2/26/2013

Ethical Reflection

Google Will Pay $22.5 Million to Settle FTC Charges

In August of 2012, Google was ordered to pay a $22.5 million civil penalty in order to settle Federal Trade Commission charges which claim that Google did not abide by the privacy policies that they had outlined with the FTC (Federal Trade Commission). In the age of rapidly declining online privacy, the FTC is constantly trying to ensure that companies abide by their privacy agreements and in particular the privacy policies that they make to consumers. As a part of a previous settlement with the FTC, Google had agreed that it would not serve targeted ads or place tracking “cookies” on any Safari Internet browsers (Federal Trade Commission). By default the browser settings in Safari are set to disable all third-party tracking cookies and according to Google this was effectively the same thing as opting out of Google’s tracking cookie. However, according to the FTC’s investigation, Google exploited a vulnerability in the Safari browser that allowed temporary cookies to be placed in the browser. Once the temporary cookie was placed, this opened the door for all of Google’s tracking cookies to be placed in the browser (Federal Trade Commission). This is the largest civil penalty ever for a FTC violation and according to the FTC Chairman Jon Leibowitz “No matter how big or small, all companies must abide by FTC orders against them and keep their privacy promises to consumers, or they will end up paying many times what it would have cost to comply in the first place.”

Even though a significant number of people use the Internet every day, most of them probably do not understand exactly how the Internet works, or even how their browser works. Most people want to click the browser icon on their desktop, surf the web and all the while they are under the assumption that all of the parties involved are playing nicely. More so in computer science and information technology than any other industry, it is imperative that companies abide by their policies and procedures. In this case, even a tech savvy Safari user may not have noticed that Google had bypassed the browsers default settings and planted a tracking cookie in their browser. However, because of Google’s agreement with the FTC, the user should have been able to safely assume that there was absolutely no way for a tracking cookie to be placed in their browser unless they explicitly allowed them. Without a doubt Google acted unethically in this situation and deserved to be fined. Kantianism states that a set of moral rules are ethical if they can be universalized. In this case, if every software company were to sign off on a set of privacy policies and then simply break their promises to their users, no one would be able to have faith in their online privacy and furthermore, most people would not even know they are in danger. This violates the First Formulation of the Categorical Imperative and is therefore unethical under and Kantianism system. All the user sees is the browser and the web page it is displaying and consequently nearly everything that affects the user’s security is invisible to the user. This is what makes is to important that computer scientists act ethically and really consider whether their actions could be universalized without compromising the user’s privacy or security.

Works Cited

Federal Trade Commission. *Google Will Pay $22.5 Million to Settle FTC Charges it Misrepresented Privacy Assurances to Users of Apple's Safari Internet Browser*. 9 August 2012. 19 February 2013. <http://www.nbcnews.com/id/33882559/#.USZ3QKXbO6M>.