

What Google Knows

It wasn't that long ago that a tremendous scare went through the internet community. The issue had to do with the huge amount of data that can be collected on individuals using search engines online. This large body of information naturally drew the attention of the Homeland Security agencies who are charged with the job of finding out all they can about potential sleeper cells of terrorism in this country.

The stand off came when the government began to demand access to the search records of all users of the major search engines. When this upcoming struggle for privacy began to come to a head, many of us who depend on search engines for both personal and business research began to get that "big brother is watching" feeling.

It's a tough compromise. We know that our government must have the ability to find and put a stop to security risks that might result in another disaster like September 11th 2001. But at the same time, Americans are tremendously protective of their liberties, their privacy and their right to be left alone by the government.

Of all of the search engines who were in the spotlight during that struggle, Google's resistance to allowing undue invasion of privacy of their customers stood out as an act of courage in a difficult confrontation. It turned out that Homeland Security really wasn't becoming "big brother" and was simply researching how to use statistical data to possibly find terrorist patterns in search engine usage. But many of us remember that while Yahoo and others knuckled under quickly, it was Google who stood up and protected user information rather than immediately turn it over to Uncle Sam.

This stand reflects a long established business ethic that Google has maintained to be protective of the data it collects about users of its search tools. That protective nature has more benefits than just building our confidence that Google is a safe tool for all of us to use. Google indeed has at its disposal a tremendous library of personal information on anyone using its search tools. And as the dominant search engine in the industry, this potential includes just about anyone who accesses the internet.

The information that can be collected from you and I as we use the internet can tell an interested party a lot about your interests, what kind of business you are in, your religious views and your political affiliations. Powerful analytical tools are available to take large volumes of search information and translate that into profiles that would be of great interest to the government and to marketers who would love to be able to target specific populations for sales.

For Google, this information has significant value to them as they fine tune their search engine methodologies. They can methodically analyze this data to draw conclusions about how their search tools are working and how they should

update the formulas that drive those tools to be more in step with how the internet audience is using cyberspace. Yes, this is taking advantage of their already dominant position to secure that position and make their toolset even more capable of staying ahead of the game. But we really cannot fault Google for using this data in that way. That is just good business.

It turns out then that Google's protective posture when it comes to that massive database of search information serves their purposes extremely well. If they can keep this mountain of very specific data secure and proprietary, it represents a trade secret of tremendous value to Google to help them maintain their market superiority for a long time to come.

This is a case of the needs of the market serving the public good well. For as Google protects our search information so only it can benefit from such knowledge, they also are protecting our privacy from the prying eyes of overenthusiastic government agencies, hackers, marketing campaigns and even the terrorists who could use that information for insidious purposes. Therefore we can be thankful that Google jealously guards this data for its own uses because in the process, they are protecting us along the way.

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