

DISGRACEFUL SNOOPING FROM A CYBER GIANT

There are two kinds of assault on our civil liberties. There are those we know about – like the last government's plans for identity cards, or the omnipresence of Closed Circuit Television (CCTV) cameras in the high street of most of our towns, especially London. But these threats to our civil liberties can at least be opposed by citizens.

Now, there are also the threats about which we remain in the dark, such as the secret way in which the 200 billion dollar search engine Google has captured private data throughout the world.

Google is a multinational public corporation invested in Internet search and advertising technologies. It hosts and develops a number of Internet-based services and products. Google runs over one million servers in data centers around the world, and processes over one billion search requests every day and launched "Google Earth" in 2004.

It is only thanks to investigations by regulators – in seven of the 30 countries where Google Maps has sent camera cars to photograph millions of houses – that we have now discovered that the vehicles were also sucking up information from unencrypted wi-fi transmitters inside private homes. To many, the photographs themselves were intrusion enough, initially showing house numbers, car registration plates and all types of embarrassing scenes, from some people naked in their gardens to others emerging from sex shops. But the sweep of internet wireless data is more worrying.

Another problem is how the information has been gradually and slowly extracted from Google. At first it said it did not gather data. Then it said it was only fragmentary. Finally it admitted that entire emails, URLs and passwords were "inadvertently" captured. In the UK the Information Commissioner is investigating. But even if privacy laws have been breached, Google will face a maximum fine of only 500,000 pounds – which is hardly likely to dent an annual income of £ 4.5 billion.

Regulators in Italy have already instructed Google to mark its cars and give residents several days' notice before it roams their neighbourhoods. But such measures do not address the really serious question of what other kinds of cyber-surveillance Google, or anybody else, might be conducting.

Google says there was an experimental project to obtain details of WiFi hot spots that could help "location based web services" and that the actual collection of data was a mistake.

But it seems that there is little to stop companies from logging any information they can, purely in the event that they later come up with a clever idea for how to make money from it. Greater controls are definitely needed.

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