

Privacy concerns over Google book project

July 24 2009, by Chris Lefkow



Google logo

Google's ambitious book scanning project, already facing anti-trust scrutiny and awaiting court approval, is also raising concerns among privacy advocates and civil liberties groups.

In a letter to Google chief executive Eric Schmidt on Thursday, the groups expressed "grave concern" that the Google Book Search project was "leaving the crucial component of reader privacy behind."

"Increasing access to books is a very important mission that we strongly support, but readers must not be forced to pay for digital books with their privacy," they said.

The Mountain View, California-based Internet search and advertising giant has made "woefully little effort to articulate how it intends to adequately protect reader privacy as part of this giant project," the groups said.

"Under its current design, Google Book Search keeps track of what books readers search for and browse, what books they read, and even what they 'write' down in the margins."

The letter was written by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) and the Samuelson Law, Technology and Public Policy Clinic of the University of California at Berkeley.

"Given the long and troubling history of government and third party efforts to compel libraries and booksellers to turn over records about readers, it is essential that Google Books incorporate strong privacy protections in both the architecture and policies of Google Book Search," they said.

"Without these, Google Books could become a one-stop shop for government and civil litigant fishing expeditions into the private lives of Americans."

Google reached a settlement last year with the Authors Guild and Association of American Publishers on a copyright infringement lawsuit they filed in 2005 over Google's plan to scan millions of books and put them online.

Under the settlement, Google agreed to establish an independent "Book Rights Registry," which will provide revenue from sales and advertising to authors and publishers who agree to digitize their books.

Readers would be able to preview up to 20 percent of a copyrighted book online and pay to see the entire work.

The settlement is to be reviewed by a US district court judge in October and Justice Department anti-trust regulators are also looking into the

agreement allowing Google to create the world's largest digital library and bookstore.

In a blog post on Thursday, engineering director for Google Books engineering director Dan Clancy stressed the company's commitment to privacy, saying it has "a strong [privacy policy](#) in place now for Google Books and for all Google products."

"Privacy is important to us, and we know it's important to our users, too," Clancy said. "But our settlement agreement hasn't yet been approved by the court, and the services authorized by the agreement haven't been built or even designed yet."

Drafting a detailed privacy policy was thus "very difficult," he added, insisting "we do know that whatever we ultimately build will protect readers' privacy rights."

Among the protections sought by the ACLU and other groups were assurances that readers will be able to browse books anonymously and that records will not be shared with third parties.

They also asked that Google "protect reader records by responding only to properly-issued warrants from law enforcement and court orders from third parties" and that any information be retained no longer than 30 days.

In addition to the letter, the EFF, a non-profit group which defends digital rights, urged visitors to its website to send an e-mail to Schmidt urging him to establish a strong privacy policy for [Google Book Search](#).

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