

Google grabs personal info off of Wi-Fi networks

May 15 2010, By MICHAEL LIEDTKE , AP Technology Writer



(AP) -- Google Inc. has been vacuuming up fragments of people's online activities broadcast over public Wi-Fi networks for the past four years, a breach of Web etiquette likely to raise more privacy worries about the Internet search leader.

Even Google was troubled by its behavior, and issued a public apology Friday. The company said it only recently discovered the problem in response to an inquiry from German regulators.

"Maintaining people's trust is crucial to everything we do, and in this case we fell short," Alan Eustace, Google's top engineering executive, wrote in a blog post.

Google characterized its collection of snippets from e-mails and Web

surfing done on public Wi-Fi networks as a mistake, and said it has taken steps to avoid a recurrence. About 600 gigabytes of data was taken off of the Wi-Fi networks in more than 30 countries, including the U.S. Google plans to delete it all as soon as it gains clearance from government authorities.

None of the information has appeared in Google's search engine or other services, according to Eustace.

Nevertheless, Google's decision to hold on to the Wi-Fi data until it hears back from regulators shows the company realizes it could face legal repercussions. At the very least, company officials concede that snooping on Wi-Fi networks, however inadvertent, crossed an ethical line.

"We are acutely aware that we failed badly here," Eustace wrote.

Google's contrition may not be enough to allay growing concerns about whether the company can be trusted with the vast storehouse of personal information that it has gathered through its search engine, [e-mail](#) and other services.

Fears that Google is morphing into a real-life version of "Big Brother" has spurred previous privacy complaints, as well as pleas for more stringent regulation of the company.

[Consumer Watchdog](#), a group that has become one of Google's most outspoken critics, renewed its call for a regulatory crackdown Friday.

"Once again, Google has demonstrated a lack of concern for privacy," said Consumer Watchdog's John Simpson. "Its computer engineers run amok, push the envelope and gather whatever data they can until their fingers are caught in the cookie jar."

The Wi-Fi data was sucked up while Google expanded a mapping feature called "Street View" that also has pressed privacy hot buttons. Street View provides photographs of neighborhoods taken by Google cameras that have sometimes captured people doing things they didn't want to be seen doing, or in places where they didn't want to be seen.

As it set out to photograph neighborhoods around the world, Google equipped its vehicles with antenna as well as cameras so it could create a database with the names of Wi-Fi networks and the coding of Wi-Fi routers.

What Google didn't know, Eustace said, is that some experimental software was being used in the Street View project, and that programming picked up the Web surfing on publicly accessible Wi-Fi networks if the company's vehicles were within range of the signal.

Google only gathered small bits of information because its vehicles were on the move and its tracking equipment switched channels five times a second.

The incident has prompted Google to abandon its effort to collect [Wi-Fi](#) network data. In an apparent show of its commitment to privacy, [Google](#) also said it will introduce a new option next week that will allow its users to encrypt searches on its Web site as an added protection against unauthorized snooping.

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