

France joins probes into Google Street View

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Arthur Poirier, a French student employed by Google France, rides a tricycle fitted with cameras as part of the Google Street View project, in Paris in August 2009. France's data protection agency announced it is examining private data, including emails, collected by Google Street View, to decide if the firm should face criminal charges or other sanctions.

France became the latest country Thursday to probe Google for gathering personal data as its Street View bikes and cars photographed cities across the world for the controversial mapping service.

The French data protection agency CNIL said it was examining private data collected for Street View, including emails and possibly banking details, to decide if the firm should face criminal charges or other

sanctions.

Street View lets users view panoramic street scenes on Google Maps and take a virtual "walk" through cities such as New York, Paris or Hong Kong.

The service, which began in 2006, first came in for criticism for threatening the privacy of people caught -- sometimes in embarrassing situations -- in the photos taken by cars cruising cities in over 30 countries.

But when it emerged that Google's cars and bikes had also been gathering fragments of personal data sent over unsecured Wi-Fi systems, legal action and official probes were quickly announced across the world.

CNIL chairman Alex Turk said Google sent its data to the French agency on June 4 after the CNIL requested it, and said that by September he hoped to be able to decide whether or not the Internet giant should face any sanctions.

Google responded that it was cooperating with authorities in France and elsewhere and would delete data if legally obliged to.

"We have reached out to the data protection authorities in the relevant countries, and are working with them to answer any questions they have," Google said in a statement sent to AFP on Thursday.

"Our ultimate objective is to delete the data consistent with our legal obligations and in consultation with the appropriate authorities."

It said it had also handed data to privacy authorities in Spain and Germany for analysis.

Passwords for email accounts and other secret information were among the data currently being examined by the CNIL, Turk told reporters as he presented his agency's annual report.

The content being examined was likely to include "data that are normally covered by... banking and medical privacy rules," he said, adding that it appeared the information was gathered over a two-year period.

The CNIL can issue a simple warning, impose a fine or can hand a case over to the prosecutor's office for it to decide whether criminal charges should be brought.

It is facing civil suits in Oregon and several other US states demanding millions of dollars in damages over its collection of personal wireless data in alleged violation of local and federal privacy laws.

Canada's privacy commissioner is probing the collection of data by Street View vehicles, while police in both New Zealand and Australia said this month they would investigate the Internet giant over alleged privacy breaches.

In Europe, Germany, Austria, Italy and France were among the countries investigating whether their citizens' privacy had been breached by the California-based company.

Google said last month it was halting the collection of WiFi network information after saying it had mistakenly gathered personal data. On June 1 it said it had deleted private wireless data mistakenly collected in Austria, Denmark and Ireland.

It had insisted previously that it was only collecting WiFi network names and addresses with the Street View cars.

The company said it has had experts examine its data-gathering software and shared its findings with data protection authorities.

Street View cars have been collecting WiFi data in Australia, Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Britain, Canada, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hong Kong, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Luxembourg, Macau, Mexico, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Singapore, South Africa, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Taiwan and the United States.

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