

US probes Google Street View data grabs (Update)

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Picture taken on March 2010 shows the camera of a street view car, used to photograph whole streets. The attorney general of Connecticut is looking into whether Google broke the law by capturing people's personal data from wireless networks while Street View bicycles and cars mapped streets.

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Attorney General Richard Blumenthal announced Monday that his office will lead a multistate probe of "Google's deeply disturbing invasion of personal privacy," which has drawn ire and scrutiny in several countries.

"Street View cannot mean Complete View -- invading home and

business computer networks and vacuuming up personal information and communications," Blumenthal said.

People have a right to know what information Google gleaned, how it was done and why, according to Blumenthal. He also wanted the Internet giant to detail what safeguards are in place to fix the situation.

"While we hope Google will continue to cooperate, its response so far raises as many questions as it answers," Blumenthal said.

"Our investigation will consider whether laws may have been broken and whether changes to state and federal statutes may be necessary."

Blumenthal has asked Google to explain how and when wireless networks and why they recorded the quality of wireless networks they passed.

"It was a mistake for us to include code in our software that collected payload data, but we believe we didn't break any US laws," a Google spokesman said in response to an AFP inquiry.

"We're working with the relevant authorities to answer their questions and concerns."

France last week joined the list of countries to focus investigations on Google for gathering personal data as its Street View bikes and cars photographed cities across the world for its free online 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 when it learned its Street View bicycles and cars were capturing data from unencrypted

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

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.

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 around the world.

Google has gone on record saying it was cooperating with authorities in France and elsewhere and would delete data if legally obliged.

"Our ultimate objective is to delete the data consistent with our legal obligations and in consultation with the appropriate authorities," Google told AFP last week.

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.

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