

Google to offer tracking opt-out to Wi-Fi owners (Update)

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(AP) -- Google Inc. is going to let people with home wireless networks decide whether they want to be lumped into a system that helps pinpoint the locations of people on cell phones.

The concession announced Tuesday will give wireless, or Wi-Fi, networks the right to forbid Google from listing them in a vast database that the company has been building in the past few years.

The adjustment is a response to concerns raised in Europe. Regulators there have periodically looked into whether Google's mapping services violate Europe's privacy laws.

To avoid trouble, Google is working on a way for owners of Wi-Fi networks throughout the world to tell the company to back off. The opt-out choice will be available this autumn, according to a blog posted Tuesday by Peter Fleischer, Google's top privacy counsel.

Like other Internet companies increasingly interested in targeting people on the go, Google relies on the publicly broadcast signals from neighborhood Wi-Fi networks to get a better handle on locations of cell phone users. The Wi-Fi database helps fill in coverage gaps created by inaccurate information from cell phone towers or the unavailability of global positioning system, or GPS, technology.

Apple Inc. made a programming change earlier this year that the company promised would prevent its iPhone from automatically

collecting data from Wi-Fi networks.

Google, the maker of the Android software used on millions of smartphones, believes people online benefit when their physical whereabouts are known. The information, for instance, could be used to deliver discount offers from nearby merchants - something that could also boost Google's revenue by selling more ads - or to let someone at a bus stop know how much longer they have to wait to be picked up.

But regulators and privacy watchdogs worry the location databases being maintained by Google and others could turn into tracking services that compile histories of people's movements. Google says it has never kept any records on the locations of individuals.

Google, which is based in Mountain View, also says it doesn't identify the names of people who own the Wi-Fi networks feeding its location service. Even so, "We think we can go further in protecting people's privacy," Fleischer wrote Tuesday.

The company lost some credibility among privacy experts last year when it revealed that cars collecting information for its online mapping service had been vacuuming up emails and other personal information transmitted over neighborhood Wi-Fi networks in the U.S., Europe and other parts of the world. Google blamed the intrusion on an unauthorized program set up by one of its engineers.

The Wi-Fi intrusions resulted in repeated Google apologies, regulatory fines and a promise by the company to tighten its privacy controls over its nearly 30,000 employees.

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