

Google faces more government demands for user info

October 25 2011, By MICHAEL LIEDTKE , AP Technology Writer

Google is dealing with more government demands to turn over information about its users as more people immerse themselves online.

The mounting pressure on the Internet search leader emerged in a statistical snapshot that Google Inc. released Tuesday of its dealings with authorities around the world. The breakdown provides a country-by-country capsule of Google's legal sparring with authorities during the first six months of the year.

This is the fourth time Google has disclosed a six-month summary of government requests since the company started reporting the numbers last year following a high-profile showdown with China's communist government over online censorship. With Tuesday's update, Google included the total number of user accounts targeted, instead of just the number of requests made by police, prosecutors, courts and other agencies at all levels of government worldwide.

Google received more than 15,600 requests in the January-June period, 10 percent more than the final six months of last year. The requests in the latest period spanned more than 25,400 individual accounts worldwide - a tiny fraction of Google's more than billion users.

Google became a caretaker of sensitive personal information through its dominant search engine, which processes about two of every three online queries in the U.S. and an even larger share in parts of Europe. The company vacuums up even more information about what people are

doing and thinking through its YouTube video service and increasingly popular Gmail service for communications. Meanwhile, Google is trying to get users to share even more tidbits about their lives on a social networking service called Plus, which has attracted more than 40 million accountholders since it debuted in June as an alternative to Facebook.

All that information makes Google a potentially valuable resource for authorities fighting crime, terrorism or other activities opposed by the government.

The highest volume of government demands for user data came from the U.S. (5,950 requests, a 29 percent increase from the previous six-month stretch); India (1,739 requests, up 2 percent); France (1,300 requests, up 27 percent); Britain (1,273 requests, up 10 percent); and Germany (1,060 requests, up 38 percent).

Google also listed how many times governments sought to censor video on the company's widely watched YouTube video site or demanded some other piece of content be removed for reasons ranging from privacy concerns to laws prohibiting hate speech.

The volume of worldwide censorship demands from governments remained at roughly the same level from the previous six-month period, although there were sharp spikes in some countries. In Britain, for instance, the government asked Google to remove 220 videos from YouTube during the first six months of the year, compared with 40 videos during the previous six months. The British government wanted most of the videos taken down for "national security" reasons.

Google declined to provide more details on the videos that the British government saw as national security risk. Britain's Home Office would only say that "the government takes the threat of online extremism or hate content very seriously."

Google acquiesced to 82 percent of the British government's censorship demands in whole or part, according to Tuesday's breakdown.

The company usually complies with at least a portion of most government demands. Google has said that it often has little choice because it must obey laws in the countries where it operates. The alternative is to leave, as it did last year when it shifted its search engine to Hong Kong so it wouldn't have to follow mainland China's censorship requirements.

In the U.S., Google gave federal, state and other agencies what they wanted 93 percent of the time. The nearly 6,000 requests affected more than 11,000 user accounts during the January-June period.

In India, Google honored 70 percent of the 1,739 requests, which targeted more than 2,400 users, the second highest totals.

Google, which is based in Mountain View, Calif., rejected the most government demands for user information in Argentina, where 68 percent of the requests were denied. Less than 50 percent of the government requests for user data were complied with in Canada, Chile, France, Hong Kong, Mexico, the Netherlands, Russia, Turkey and South Korea.

By disclosing how many government requests it receives every six months, Google hopes to encourage the passage of new laws that will give the company more leverage to deny government access to people's online communications and activities.

More information: <http://www.google.com/transparencyreport/>

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