

What Google knows about you

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Google knows about you. It knows what you've looked for on its search engine. It knows who you're e-mailing most regularly via Gmail. It knows from Google Calendar what you have going on today. And now, all those pieces of information, once kept inside the walls of individual services, will be shared among Google's many products.

The shift in policy came last week as [Google](#) worked to revamp a confusing maze of privacy policies for each of its more than 60 services.

The search giant did away with all those policies, replacing them with a single set of rules to govern all the data it collects.

But this also means that Google will let YouTube, which it owns, have access to the information it knows about you from your [Gmail](#) activity, Google Calendar and [search engine](#).

From Google's point of view, this will serve to make the [Web](#) more relevant - its chief objective.

So, if you're browsing on YouTube, the site might recommend an instructional video on how to cut an onion because it knows you just sent an e-mail about cooking classes to a friend.

Or maybe someday it'll be able to send an alert to your phone when it senses that you'll be late to a meeting it knows you have (because it's entered into Google Calendar) based on your current location (using Google's location-tracking service Latitude).

For many a Web user, this caused a bit of a shock.

Google pushed back on the concerns in a post on its [public policy](#) blog, saying that it wasn't actually collecting any more data and that the move was an effort to make it easier to understand what it was collecting.

"We're making things simpler and we're trying to be upfront about it. Period," Google's Betsy Masiello, a policy manager, wrote in a company blog post.

PERSONALIZED OR PRYING?

At the heart of this friction is a tug of war that will play out more than ever this year.

Web firms are pushing to know more about their users, and they'll work to use that information in new ways.

The rise of the social Web has made it possible for websites to tailor themselves to each user. Retail sites can, for example, show a unique front page to each visitor based on past purchases and interests gleaned

from other websites the person has visited.

Some greet this with fear. For others, it's an opportunity to use a Web that's designed just for them.

This will also, of course, let Google serve more relevant-and lucrative-ads to its users across all its services.

There are pitfalls, though. I bought a messenger bag recently, and ads for more messenger bags have since followed me around the Web.

But I already bought one. I don't need another.

Users have seen this, too, in a service like Amazon.com that will often show recommendations for products based off gifts purchased for others over the holidays. Come January, those recommendations become just noise. I'm not in the market for any more women's scarves.

What's clear, though, is that companies like Facebook and Google have an enormous appetite for our buying habits and other Web behaviors. That won't change.

So to avoid blowback by concerned users, they've had to come up with more sophisticated controls over what is logged and how it's used.

Google's attempt at streamlining its privacy policies has made all this easier to understand, but the power Google now has over your data has also increased considerably.

YOU DON'T LOOK YOUR PRESUMED AGE!

One of the more amusing things to come out of this is the realization that Google has long been guessing how old Web users are based on what

websites they view.

Google does this to try and serve more relevant ads on the many sites that use Google's ad service.

Knowing how old you are and what your interests are go a long way to tailor ads to your tastes.

The page, at www.google.com/ads/preferences, shows Google's best guess at your age and specific topics.

It doesn't always guess correctly, though.

On my work computer, Google guessed I was somewhere from 55 to 64 years old. (I'm 27.)

On my home computer, Google guessed a bit better, placing me between 45 and 54.

This information, an aggregate of websites a user has visited, is stored on a computer using a cookie, a temporary Web file, and will be different for each browser and machine.

Google users can opt out of this tracking by going to the preferences website and clicking "Opt out."

But users will then be served with even more low-quality, remnant advertising that will likely be of little interest. (The power Web user here will undoubtedly point out that ad blockers can be installed to hide all Web advertisements, too.)

But advertising itself can be a useful service. And it becomes more useful when it knows a bit about you.

And in the battle between relevance and complete privacy online, I'll take relevance any day.

HOW TO COVER YOUR WEB TRACKS

Several tools inside Google give you control over what the search giant knows. To find these controls, go to google.com/privacy and click on "Privacy tools."

- At a glance: Your Google dashboard is inside those privacy tools, the best place to see in one spot what Google is recording and where you can turn stuff off.
- Turn off your search history: Google ties your search history to your Google account when you're logged in, which can makes things move a bit quicker if you've switched computers and it remembers what you've searched before. You can turn this setting off, though, or remove specific search queries that you don't want it to remember.
- Incognito mode: Most modern Web browsers, including Google Chrome, include a way to switch to a private Web browsing session that doesn't record itself into browsing or download histories.
- Go off the record: When using Google Chat to have a conversation, you can switch a conversation to off the record. Nothing you say will be logged in your chat history.

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