

Germany fines Google for privacy violations

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The camera of a street-view car is seen on the Google street-view stand at the CeBIT high-tech fair in Hanover on March 3, 2010. German authorities say they have fined Google for illegally collecting massive amounts of personal data including emails, passwords and photos while setting up its disputed Street View service.

German authorities said on Monday they had fined Google for illegally collecting massive amounts of personal data including emails, passwords and photos while setting up its disputed Street View service.

The data protection office in the northern city of Hamburg said it had slapped the US Internet giant with a 145,000-euro (\$189,000) penalty for [privacy violations](#) on what it called a nearly unprecedented scale.

It found that while specially equipped [Google](#) vehicles took city snapshots between 2008 and 2010 for its Street View function, which supplements its standard map service, they had also picked up data from unsecured wireless networks.

"Among the information gathered in the drive-bys were significant amounts of personal data of varying quality. For example emails, passwords, photos and chat protocols were collected," the Hamburg authorities said in a statement.

"In my opinion this case constitutes one of the biggest known data protection violations in history," said the office's chief, Johannes Caspar.

The company, which cooperated with the probe, was also ordered to delete the data immediately.

Caspar complained that under German law his office was not able to impose a more painful penalty on a major multinational company, noting that the maximum fine for an accidental violation was 150,000 euros.

Hamburg prosecutors had abandoned a [criminal case](#) against Google in November, when the data protection office picked it up as an administrative offence.

It found that the company had inadvertently assembled the data, but noted this constituted "a significant lapse of Google's internal [control mechanisms](#)".

Google said it had made a "mistake" in which the Street View vehicles

had picked up "snippets of information" that were essentially useless and were never examined.

The company added that it had already expunged the data.

Authorities in Germany, where [privacy concerns](#) are particularly sharp due to gross violations under the Nazi and communist dictatorships, had already imposed restrictions on Google after a protracted dispute over [Street View](#).

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