

Microsoft brings war with Google to Kansas City

April 28 2013, by Scott Canon

Kansas City could find itself a symbolic battleground in a national fight between Internet titans amid the debate over privacy for Web surfers. Microsoft Corp. this week launched a new advertising campaign suggesting it's your partner in the ever-more-vexing task of online privacy protection.

And although the Seattle-area company doesn't mention [Google Inc.](#) in its various ads - it did single the search giant out in an earlier "Scroogled" campaign - it so far is hitting audiences in just two places: Washington, D.C., and Kansas City.

Washington has, well, power. And for now, Kansas City is the only market where the super-speedy [Google](#) Fiber Internet and TV service has begun to wire a few neighborhoods.

Microsoft said its targeting of Kansas City is merely a coincidence, that it wanted to "hear from the heartland" on privacy issues. Google declined to comment.

Still, Microsoft's latest offensive underscores its differences with Google, taking aim at a potential Google weak spot with consumers regarding [privacy concerns](#).

Microsoft built its empire selling the software that powers computer operating systems and outfits them with applications. Google made its mark with Internet search and the advertising billions that it can reap.

Google's advertising is made most valuable by its ability - through Google.com searches and through products such as [Gmail](#) - to match a user's interests with an advertiser's pitch.

"If you can build a better profile of somebody, you can sell better ads," said Dan Andresen, a Kansas State University computer scientist. "That's a much bigger part of how Google makes money than of Microsoft's business."

The two companies overlap most competitively in the field of Internet browsing - Microsoft's Internet Explorer vs. Google Chrome.

In the freshest version of Internet Explorer, users are prompted on whether they want to trigger a do-not-track option that reveals less information about their [Web surfing](#) history to potential advertisers. It's a change championed for years by privacy advocates who want to limit the data that can be mined by advertisers about consumers.

With Chrome, users can also trigger a do-not-track function. But it is not the default setting. Doing so requires awareness of the issue and a small amount of computer savvy.

And before allowing that choice on Chrome, Google presents users with a box that doesn't make it seem an immediately attractive option.

"Some websites may respond to this request by showing you ads that aren't based on other websites you've visited. Many websites will still collect and use your browsing data - for example to improve security, to provide content, services, ads and recommendations on their websites, and to generate reporting statistics."

That sensibility, say privacy advocates, undersells the ability to shield things about yourself from the Internet's data miners. (They also stress

that do-not-track options are not a privacy fail-safe.)

"You care about it if you think it's creepy that everything you're doing is being tracked by advertisers that can create profiles of you or your computer to create ads that exploit those things," said Evan Hendricks, the editor and publisher of Privacy Times.

Microsoft's campaign - print ads in Kansas City begin Sunday - includes TV commercials that stress that even in the Facebook era, people want to protect health and other data from public consumption. It's also trying to draw people to a website to teach them how to more smartly manage their online privacy.

Google Fiber complicates the war with Microsoft further. As an Internet service provider - like Time Warner Cable, AT&T or Comcast - Google has the technical power to tell what residences made connections with which websites. In fact, law enforcement sometimes uses subpoenas to get such information.

Google has said it shares only limited amounts of information. Doing so, it contends, means customers get better and quicker answers to queries.

Google says it won't sell that data to other companies. Historically, the company has urged people to be more cautious about what information they share online. Still, various Google Fiber privacy statements note it will collect "information that users of your subscription provide, such as clicks on a Google Fiber TV remote to change the channel or search program listings."

Its website says it will also collect technical information for "network management, security or maintenance." But Google Fiber won't be surrendering information "to other Google properties without your consent."

It says the websites that users visit over their Google Fiber hookups or the content of communications won't be associated with any Google account, "except with your consent or to meet any applicable law, regulation, legal process or enforceable governmental request."

Google Fiber also says it "may share nonpersonally identifiable information publicly and with our partners - like content providers, publishers, advertisers or connected sites."

[Privacy advocates](#) urge users to be mindful of the terms set by Google Fiber and other Internet service providers.

"Owning the pipes" - the network and wires connecting homes to the Internet - "is the most direct way of getting your information and mining it," said Jeff Chester, executive director of the online consumer rights group Center for Digital Democracy. "Those companies have the best way to get that stuff."

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