

Google defends child porn tip-offs to police

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Houston restaurant worker John Henry Skillern, 41, was arrested Thursday following a cyber-tip that Google had passed along via the

National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC), based outside Washington.

"He was trying to get around getting caught, he was trying to keep it inside his email," said detective David Nettles of the Houston Metro Internet Crimes Against Children Taskforce.

"I can't see that information, I can't see that photo—but Google can," he told Houston television station KHOU, which first reported the story.

It's common knowledge that the world's leading Internet service, like its rivals, tracks users' online behavior in order to fine-tune its advertising services.

But the Texas case prompted concerns about the degree to which Google might be giving information about its users' conduct to law enforcement agencies.

"The story seems like a simple one with a happy outcome—a bad man did a crime and got caught," blogged John Hawes, chief of operations at Virus Bulletin, a cyber security consultancy.

"However, there will of course be some who see it as yet another sign of how the twin Big Brothers of state agencies and corporate behemoths have nothing better to do than delve into the private lives of all and sundry, looking for dirt," he said.

In an email to AFP, a Google spokesperson said Monday: "Sadly, all Internet companies have to deal with [child sexual abuse](#)."

"It's why Google actively removes illegal imagery from our services—including search and Gmail—and immediately reports abuse to the NCMEC."

The NCMEC operates the CyberTipline, through which Internet service providers can relay information about suspect online child [sexual abuse](#) on to police departments.

"Each child sexual abuse image is given a unique digital fingerprint which enables our systems to identify those pictures, including in Gmail," added the spokesperson, who did not disclose technical details about the process.

"It is important to remember that we only use this technology to identify child sexual abuse imagery—not other email content that could be associated with criminal activity (for example using email to plot a burglary)."

In a separate email to AFP, the NCMEC said federal law requires Internet service providers to report suspected child porn to the CyberTipline.

"NCMEC makes all CyberTipline reports available to appropriate law-enforcement agencies for review and possible investigation," it said.

On its website Monday, KHOU described Skillern as a registered sex offender, convicted 20 years ago of sexually assaulting an eight-year-old boy.

Investigators who raided his home allegedly found child porn on his phone and tablet device, as well as cellphone videos of children visiting the Denny's family restaurant where he worked as a cook.

Skillern has been charged with one count of possession of [child pornography](#) and one count of promotion of child pornography. He remains in custody on a \$200,000 bond, KHOU said.

Google's online set of "program policies" for its Gmail service, with more than 400 million users worldwide, includes "a zero-tolerance policy against child sexual abuse imagery."

"If we become aware of such content, we will report it to the appropriate authorities and may take disciplinary action, including termination, against the Google accounts of those involved," it states.

Last year, Google's chief legal officer David Drummond, writing in Britain's Daily Telegraph newspaper, acknowledged Google had created technology to "trawl" for known images of [child sex abuse](#)."

"We can then quickly remove them and report their existence to the authorities," he said.

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