

# European privacy search engines aim to challenge Google

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In this Tuesday, Nov, 13, 2018 photo, Andreas Wiebe, founder of Swiss privacy-focused search engine Swisscows, is photographed in London. In the battle for online privacy, U.S. search giant Google is a Goliath facing a handful of European Davids. The backlash over Big Tech's collection of personal data offers fresh hope to a number of little-known search engines that promise to protect user privacy, such as Britain's Mojeek, France's Qwant, Unbubble in Germany and Swisscows, which say they don't track user data, filter results or show "behavioral" ads. (AP Photo/Kelvin Chan)

In the battle for online privacy, U.S. search giant Google is a Goliath facing a handful of European Davids.

The backlash over Big Tech's collection of personal data offers new hope to a number of little-known search engines that promise to protect user privacy.

Sites like Britain's Mojeek , France's Qwant , Unbubble in Germany and Swisscows don't track user data, filter results or show "behavioral" ads.

These sites are growing amid the rollout of new European privacy regulations and numerous corporate data scandals, which have raised public awareness about the mountains of personal information companies stealthily gather and sell to advertisers.

Widespread suspicion in Europe about Google's stranglehold on internet searches has also helped make the continent a spawning ground for secure searching. Europe is particularly sensitive to privacy issues because spying by the Nazi-era Gestapo and the secret services in the Soviet Union is still within living memory.

"For us, it's all about citizens and citizens have the right to privacy," said Eric Leandri, chairman of Paris-based Qwant. He said that view contrasts with the mindset across the Atlantic, where internet users are seen as consumers whose rights are dictated by the terms of their agreements with tech companies.

Traffic numbers show interest is rising. Qwant's queries tripled to 10 billion in 2017. On a monthly basis, it's getting 80 million visits while requests are growing 20 percent. Leandri says the site now accounts for 6 percent of search engine market share in France, its biggest market.

Qwant is even getting official support. Last month the French army and

parliament both said they would drop Google and use Qwant as their default search engine, as part of efforts to reclaim European "digital sovereignty."

The site doesn't use tracking cookies or profile users, allowing it to give two different users the exact same result. It has built its own index of 20 billion pages covering French, German and Italian and plans to expand it to about two dozen other languages, for which results currently come from Microsoft's Bing.

To be sure, Google's in no danger of toppling. The company based in Mountain View, California, accounts for three-quarters or more of global market share, depending on whom you ask, and rules the mobile market with its Android operating system.

Mojeek, based in Brighton, England, operates on similar principles and has so far cataloged 2 billion webpages. The company says it gets 200,000 unique visitors a month and search queries have quintupled over the past year.

Another British startup, Oscobo, does anonymous searches for U.K. users with results licensed from Yahoo/Bing. Netherlands-based Startpage anonymizes Google search results, stripping out ads and tracking.

Pat Walshe, a U.K.-based privacy consultant, has been using Startpage and Qwant for years and says has never felt their services were inferior to Google's.

"I don't think people would go back if they started using these sites," Walshe said. They're "allowing you to have greater choice and control and should hopefully minimize the tracking," which means you'll no longer, for example, see the same ad for a pair of shoes following you

around online, he said.

Walshe likes Startpage's new "anonymous view" feature, which goes a step further and lets users visit websites anonymously, so they won't be exposed to tracking by websites even after clicking a search result.

Germany's Unbubble is a "meta-search" site, sending encrypted queries to more than 30 other search engines. It promises neutral search results rather than ones filtered by an algorithm catering to personal biases.

Outside Europe, there's also U.S. site DuckDuckGo.

Some privacy search operators say it's equally important to help users avoid "filter bubbles," in which content is pre-selected by the likes of Google and Facebook based on previous searches and other data.

"The main idea is to provide neutral information and allow people to depend less on machine learning-based filters," said Unbubble founder Tobias Sasse. "If you are using Google today, perhaps you'll notice that there is always the same mainstream information," preventing people from seeing the "great diversity" online, he said.

Some sites rely on donations, others from "affiliate advertising"—links from shopping sites that pay a commission but don't target or track users. That's different from Google's behavioral, or targeted, ads that come up based on your search history, which many find creepy and invasive.

Mojeek has private investors. Founder Marc Smith, who began in 2004 with two servers in his bedroom, believes advertising is "a necessary evil and we'll look for whatever route we can to avoid it," said marketing chief Finn Brownbill.

In Switzerland, a country whose banking sector became a byword for

secrecy, Swisscows has thrived, with monthly search queries jumping by nearly half to 20 million from a year ago, said founder Andreas Wiebe, who also runs software company Hulbee.

Even so, Wiebe said he met plenty of skepticism at the start. "In 2014, I had people talking to me (saying) 'you're crazy'," and that the project would be dead within a year. Instead, National Security Agency contractor Edward Snowden's revelations of U.S. government surveillance in 2015 gave it a kickstart.

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