

Fraud, sex, post-it art: Google cuts search links

3 July 2014, by Juergen Baetz



In this April 17, 2007 file photo, exhibitors of the Google company work on laptop computers in front of an illuminated sign of the Google logo at the industrial fair Hannover Messe in Hanover, Germany. Google's removal of search results in Europe is drawing accusations of press censorship, as stories from some of the continent's most prominent news outlets begin vanishing. The U.S. Internet giant said Thursday it is getting 1,000 requests a day to scrub results. The U.S. firm must comply with a May ruling from the European Union's top court that enables citizens to ask for the removal of embarrassing personal information that pops up on a search of their names. Among links to vanish were stories on a soccer referee who resigned after a scandal in 2010, French office workers making post-it art, a couple having sex on a train and a lawyer facing a fraud trial. At least three British media, including the Guardian newspaper and public broadcaster BBC, said Google notified them search results in Europe would not contain some links to their publications. (AP Photo/Jens Meyer, File)

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"It is the equivalent of going into libraries and burning books you don't like," Daily Mail Online publisher Martin Clarke said.

BBC Economics Editor Robert Peston said the removal of his 2007 blog post, which was critical of Merrill Lynch's then-CEO Stan O'Neal, means "to all intents and purposes the article has been removed from the public record, given that Google is the route to information and stories for most people."

The company is only starting to implement the ruling on the "right to be forgotten" and so far the numbers are small: The Guardian cited six articles, the BBC said one critical blog entry was removed, while the Mail Online saw four articles hit. Several German media contacted Thursday said they had not yet received notifications from Google.

"It's not yet really clear what the magnitude of this is," cautioned Joel Reidenberg of Fordham University, currently a visiting professor at Princeton University. "Google may be choosing to go overboard to essentially create a debate about censorship."

The company said it had received more than 70,000 removal requests by the end of June. Each

application on average seeks the removal of almost four links, meaning its experts have to individually evaluate more than a quarter-million pages. to information when the public's right to know about it outweighs an individual's right to privacy—for example when a politician or public figure seeks to clean online records.

Google does not explain the decision to remove a link or say who requested it. The company is not disclosing how many appear to fall into areas the court specified as potentially objectionable: results that are "inadequate, irrelevant or no longer relevant."

"The ruling has created a stopwatch on free expression—our journalism can be found only until someone asks for it to be hidden," author James Ball wrote on the Guardian's website.

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The purge of search results applies to Google's local search pages covering the EU's 28 member nations and four other European countries, encompassing more than 500 million people. The company has a 90 percent market share for searches in Europe. Those who switch to the firm's American domain, Google.com, will find unaltered search results.

The Mountain View, California, company finds itself in an uncomfortable position. It has no choice but to comply with the ruling by the EU top court, which cannot be appealed, but many decisions to remove search results are likely to draw criticism.

"This is a new and evolving process for us," Google spokesman Al Verney said Thursday. "We'll continue to listen to feedback and will also work with data protection authorities and others as we comply with the ruling."

Princeton's Reidenberg said while the court gave Google little practical guidance on how to implement its decision, it effectively gave the search engine a responsibility similar to those traditional publishers always had—judging whether an information is in the public interest, whether it will withstand legal challenges and whether an individual complaint against it is warranted.

"Google algorithms are already making value judgments all the time as to which information is relevant," he added.

Proponents of the court decision say it gives individuals the possibility to restore their reputation by deleting references to old debts, past arrests and other unflattering episodes. They also note that the court specified Google should not remove links

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