

Google publishes figures on government requests for data

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Google has launched a new function called the Government Requests tool [http://www.google.com/governmentrequests] that allows users to see how many requests have been made by governments for the data Google routinely collects on users.

The tool allows users to view either data requests or removal requests. The removal requests do not include the removal of child pornography or copyrighted material from YouTube as the company does this routinely. The data requests view does not give details beyond the raw number of requests received and gives no indication as to whether Google complied with the requests.

The United States is recorded having made 3,580 requests for data between July 1 and December 31, 2009, second only to Brazil with 3,663. Third in the list is United States' main ally in the "war on terror," the UK, with 1,166.

In an official company blog announcing the new service on Tuesday, April 20, Google cites Article 19 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, which reads, "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers." The company says the 1948 Article "applies aptly to today's Internet." Google says it believes "greater transparency will lead to less censorship."

An FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) page asks, "How many of these requests did you comply with?"

Google writes, "The 'data requests' numbers reflect the number of requests we received about the users of our services and products from government agencies like local and federal police. They don't indicate whether we complied with a request for data in any way. When we receive a request for user information, we review it carefully and only provide information within the scope and authority of the request. We may refuse to produce information or try to narrow the request in some cases."

The company says it would like to share more information but confronts logistical difficulties in doing so. "The requests we receive for user data come from a variety of government agencies with different legal authorities and different forms of requests. They don't follow a standard format or necessarily seek the same kinds of information. Requests may ask for data about a number of different users or just one user. A single request may ask for several types of data but be valid only for one type and not for another; in those cases, we disclose only the information we believe we are legally required to share."

Google's business model requires the collection of vast amounts of data from its users in order to serve its core source of revenue, targeted advertising. It is therefore an obvious target for fishing expeditions by the US government, such as that which became public in January 2006, when the company refused to comply with a government subpoena to hand over vast amounts of data supposedly to bolster the case for the Child Online Protection Act.

At the time, the *World Socialist Web Site* warned that the request by the US government was testing the water

to see just how far it could go in getting companies to comply with ever more invasive demands for data. While Google made the request public and waged a legal battle against it, three of the four largest search companies silently complied with the request. Yahoo, Microsoft and AOL all handed over data to government lawyers, only issuing statements after it became public as a result of Google's legal opposition. (See: "US government demands Google hand over Internet search data")

In a March 2006 ruling by Judge James Ware, the government's demand for samples of users' search queries was denied. The judge cited "the interests of individuals in freedom from general surveillance by the Government of their use of the Internet or other communications media" as one of the "vital interests" raised by the case. However, Ware was careful not offer any opinion as to the legitimacy of the government request.

Agreeing to the demand that Google hand over 50,000 URLs, the court essentially upheld the right of government to forcefully solicit the assistance of Internet companies in pursuit of legal cases. Google's new Government Requests tool makes clear that this was by no means a one-off request.

Search companies such as Google are a prime target for government spying operations due to the wealth of information they offer. Google entices users to register their personal information through added value services such as the online office suite Google Apps and the ubiquitous Gmail email service.

When a user accesses a Google service, the servers automatically record information sent by the browser. Google's privacy statements says, "These server logs may include information such as your web request, Internet Protocol (IP) address, browser type, browser language, the date and time of your request and one or more cookies that may uniquely identify your browser." Even users who are not logged into a Google service can be uniquely identified through a lookup of the IP address, but to associate this address with an actual person would require additional information from the user's Internet Service Provider (ISP). With

users logged into an account, the amount of information available increases substantially. When a user logs in to a service, a session is established and the movements of the user are tracked within that session, which in turn is identified with a person through the personal information they gave when signing up for the account.

Google has come a long way from its search engine beginnings in 1998. Buying startup companies with expertise and technologies to allow it to branch into ever broader areas, Google now has a hand in virtually all aspects of Internet services, from the web browser, Chrome, to the video sharing service, YouTube, which Google purchased in 2006 for \$1.65 billion in stock.

Perhaps most concerning from a privacy standpoint is the emergence of the mobile Internet and always-on smart phones. Google's privacy policy has a section headed "Location data," which states the following: "Google offers location-enabled services, such as Google Maps for mobile. If you use those services, Google may receive information about your actual location (such as GPS signals sent by a mobile device) or information that can be used to approximate a location (such as a cell ID)."

With this information sitting on the servers of Google and other companies, government agencies now may have unprecedented access to information not only regarding what people are reading or saying, but where they are at any given time. It should be noted that the 3,500 requests recorded by Google were made by the Obama administration, which is just one more indication that the assault on democratic rights launched by the Bush administration is continuing full pace.



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