

The Power of Search

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In early July, Google Inc., the owner of You-Tube, the most popular video sharing web site was ordered by a US judge to hand over to Viacom Inc., its database about online viewers. As part of the court order, Google is expected to produce records of the videos viewed on You-Tube, the viewers' login names and their computers' internet address.

Viacom is an American media conglomerate with various worldwide interests in cable and satellite television networks and movie production and distribution. Basically, Viacom wants the information to find out if You-Tube viewers have watched copyrighted shows and this is part of its effort to bolster its current US \$1 billion infringement lawsuit against Google.

While the recent ruling may lead some internet users to avoid using Google's You-Tube for the time being; there is a larger concern amongst internet users on what information does search engine such as Google, Yahoo and Microsoft keep of them. In Europe,

Dangers of Internet Search

Many of us think that searching on the internet is such an innocuous act. Moreover, the improvements in search engines over the years have made research and searching for even trivial information such as finding a recipe, opening hours of a store such a breeze. While one search item in itself may not mean very much to the search engine, 10, 500 or 1,000 of searches coupled with other information will allow these search engines to put together a rather comprehensive profile about you.

In an earlier article "You cannot hide when you are online" by this writer, the common web tracking technologies involved the use of cookies; web tracking and web bugs were highlighted. Now, let's take a look at how online search companies could assemble information about you based on the services you subscribed to and the amount of information that you registered at their websites.

Since Google is a popular search engine used by many, let's use it to illustrate how Google could theoretically find out information about you based on the types of services that you use at their website. [Note: Google as a company does not sell information it collects to other web sites and does not use it to create personal profile of its online users]

Search History

If you turn on Google's Search History feature, Google will keep track of each and every search that you conduct through its website. Hence, every site URL that you visit through these searches is recorded.

Gmail

Many users using Google search engine are also users of its web mail service, Gmail. If you use Gmail, all your incoming and outgoing emails are stored on Gmail servers. It is also typical for these servers to examine the incoming and outgoing emails to analyse their contents so that targeted online advertisements can be embedded in these emails.

Google Desktop

Those of you who have or are using Apple's Mac operating system will know the power of their embedded search software "Sherlock". Google Desktop is a software available for download from Google that allows you to search your PC in the same way that Google searches the internet. Theoretically, Google knows all the contents of your local hard disk.

Picasa

This software from Google allows you to search all photos in your PC, index them in one or multiple album, edit, publish and print your photos online. Coupled with Google Desktop, Google will have a good image record of you, your family, co-workers and friends.

Froogle

If you use Google's online price-comparison service, Froogle; potentially Google can track what are you online purchases including travel plans, songs, video, pizza deliveries, and anything else that you sent through Froogle.

Blogger

Many of you would have used one or other blogging software. Blogger from Google allows you to login in using your Google account to create your own blog, publish and maintain it. Of course, things you blog on the site including those that are restricted to selected few are also stored in Google servers.

Orkut

This is Google's social networking service and for your convenience, Google allows you to log in using your Gmail account. Who you socialize with online and your other social networking credential that you posted are also stored in Google servers.

Google Local

If you decide to use Google Local, Google's mapping service, Google could keep track of all the locations for which you are looking for maps or driving directions.

Google Toolbar

Yes, this toolbar keep tracks of all your internet destinations and Google server stores every site that you visit on the Internet

As most of us own a mobile phone, Google also allow you to download their mobile applications onto your phone; be it a blackberry, Nokia, iPhone, Windows Mobile, etc so that you can watch You-tube videos, check your Gmail mail box, conduct Google search and even download map using your mobile phone.

Besides your PC IP address, Google has your email account, your social networking profile, online photos, online sites you visited, videos that you watched, things you purchased online, contents of your local hard disk and now your mobile phone number. Under EU privacy requirements, Google and other search engine such as Yahoo and Microsoft can store these information for a maximum of 18 months. Need I say more?

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