

The story behind Google's new privacy policy

Written by Administrator

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Google replaces all its privacy policies, across almost all its products and services, with one single policy. Is there more behind the move.

If you are a Google service user you must have received the notification from Google announcing its new privacy policy. The development set the web afire with all shades of reactions. Larry Dignan at ZDNet believes that Google now knows more about you than your wife does. Others are convinced that this will strengthen the hands of regulators who are already miffed with Google's monopolistic vision. This comes bang on the heels of last week's failure to meet quarterly earning prediction, and the fact that user adoption of Google Plus, the social media platform that it hoped would be a game changer is still at about an eighth of Facebook. Not a great press time for the guys at Google.

What is the new privacy policy?

The bottomline of the new policy is that Google now replaces all its privacy policies, across almost all its (more than 70) products and services, with one single policy that will treat the user as one entity on all its services. This policy comes without an opt-out. What this means for the user is that Google will now be able to integrate all the information (which, incidentally, you have already given them permission to acquire in the individual terms of agreements, whenever you registered for a Google service) and use it to offer a better and more intuitive experience as well as use it to generate more targeted advertising on its sites. For more details about the new policy, head over to the policy page on Google, or take a look at Alma Whitten's (Director, Privacy for Product and Engineering, Google) official blog post on this subject. In this post, we take a look at exit options, the impact of this policy, and the story behind how Google got to this point.

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Is there a way out?

Google has some built in features like the ad manager that can be used to control some aspects of what this new policy might imply for users, but for most lay users, these would be similar to Facebook's older privacy controls which lay buried in a maze of menus and options. Already developers are busy with anonymizers and opt-out extensions, and I am very curious how they will fare on Google Search results. This new privacy policy also comes with a somewhat arrogant reaffirmation of the commitment that they claim to have towards data liberation with Google making it clear to users that while there is no opt-out, "if you want to take your information elsewhere you can." I am certain this sounds very much like a bad marriage with a difficult divorce even to many Google loyalists.

How did Google get this powerful?

Google has become what it is today riding on the back of users who saw it as the champion of the open web. It made all its basic services free, set up huge databases of every sort, provided web development tools and support, and launched initiatives to de-commercialise and free content up in many areas such as education, software programming, music, streaming video, and books. Yet, the last few years have seen it at the centre of anti-trust inquiries both in the EU and in the US not very different from those faced by its alleged arch enemy - the evil corporation. The question being asked by objective commentators is whether this apparently monopolistic trend is possibly a step towards the open web realizing true openness.

The restrictive practises story goes back to when Microsoft got into trouble over features in the Windows operating system that put others at a disadvantage. The hero of that particular battle, Netscape, has however long been buried and forgotten. Microsoft on the other hand has remained the industry leader in spite of many aspects of computing evolving faster than it could strategise.

How did Google come into the picture?

Google set up shop in 1998, with its web search and advertising solutions and later webmail, and opened the door to free web services that rivalled those offered by others in terms of efficiency, speed, and user experience. Over the years, Google emerged as the new protagonist, initially by taking pole position in the search race which gave them an edge over others in terms of advertising revenue, and then by introducing a host of other web and computing services including operating systems, codecs, a browser, and their latest forays into protocols for mobile devices and chromebooks. Somewhere along this journey, they have

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ended up looking more and more like villains to their competition, and recently, to regulators as well. With the new privacy policy, this sentiment will surely be reinforced.

So is Google good or evil?

Google and advocates of Google's philosophy of offering the best user experience possible, of course, do not agree with the sentiment of Google's strategy being monopolistic. From a larger perspective, they point out that it is the size of their web footprint in terms of number of products and services that creates this perception. With regard to their new privacy policy too, they point out that just on the user experience level, they have boiled 60 different policies down to one, and cut a 68,000 word policy filled with legalese down to a 10,000 easy to understand document. Google users too often defend practices like adopting the proprietary Adobe Flash player, or developing an alternative to Javascript as positive steps towards loosening the monopolistic stranglehold of internet and technology giants.

Cloud computing is another example of how Google has actually played both sides of the game equally well. Google launched its cloud based document storage and processing services as a way to counter Microsoft's Office suite, the longstanding staple of business computing, and one of Microsoft's main bread earners. Then came the launch of the Chrome browser, the Chrome OS for netbooks, and then Chromebooks. With most new features in their services being released as Chrome-only, this can be seen as an anti-competitive stance. The reason that many observers will not agree that Google is being restrictive is that in the field of web services, the competition is merely a click away, you are free to take your information and go there.

Should I be worried about this policy?

Privacy activists may rave and rant about how they don't want their erudite Google account to be invaded by ads based on their middle-aged YouTube searches for "preteen boys," or to find search suggestions based on their email, but my personal opinion is that as long as you are not doing anything that you will not be embarrassed about or ashamed of, and this cauldron of data actually intuitively what you wish to do and wish to see, it is a good thing. Google already had all of this data with it all this time, and has, in some way or the other, been using it to provide better targeted services. This policy just makes it official and makes you a party to the arrangement. If you are ashamed of your internet behaviour, then you either need to get help, or pay the price for it, or just grow up and accept things about yourself. I know that not too many people will agree with me on that, especially given the fact that the contemporary user of the web has his adolescence, youth and adulthood all up there in the cloud. This can be embarrassing to those who would not like anyone to know that they were silly goats before they became dead serious

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mathematics professors - or whatever - known for their “grave”ness - or is the word “gravity?”

Who is the champion of a free internet now?

In the global outrage and inquiry that has followed the announcement of its new privacy policy, there is one truth that cannot be disputed. In the last 14 years, Google has taken strategic decisions that have repeatedly been perceived as out of sync with its self declared role of guardian of the open web. The future will reveal how this develops as far as fair play in the internet technology world is concerned. It is my understanding that the war for a free internet and an open web has already moved out of the hands of corporates like Google, Apple and Microsoft, (and even governments) and has landed at the doorstep of the individual user of the internet and social media. In order to retain the benefits of a user base, services and products have to ensure that the user gets full freedom to do and see what he or she chooses. How this will happen is as yet unclear (to me) in light of the thrust of new technology being convergence and mobile computing and an as yet undefined emerging social media. The champion of the free internet and the open web is you and me.

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