

Dicing with data

Google and especially Facebook should change the way they look after people's personal information.



IN THE space of a week two of the best-known internet companies have found themselves in a pickle over privacy. Facebook faces criticism for making more information about its users available by default. Meanwhile Google has been castigated by a bevy of privacy regulators for inadvertently collecting data from unsecured Wi-Fi networks in people's homes as part of a project to capture images of streets around the world.

Although the two cases are distinct, they have revived fears that online privacy is being trampled underfoot as internet behemoths race to grab as much data as possible. And they have provoked calls for tougher action by regulators and governments to prevent web firms from abusing the mountains of personal data they now hold. Danah Boyd, a social-networking expert, has even argued that Facebook, with its hordes of members around the world, is now so embedded in people's lives that it should be regulated as a utility.

The firms have fought back. Facebook claims that most of its users are comfortable with the changes it has introduced, including one that lets it share detailed customer data with some external sites. It has blamed the furore on media hysteria; only a few privacy activists have publicly committed "Facebook suicide" by closing their accounts (see article). As for Google, it has apologised for its "mistake" and says that leaders of its Street View project knew nothing about the software that allowed its roving vehicles to capture snippets of e-mails.

Friends or foes?

At its most extreme, the attack on Facebook and Google makes little sense. Treating them as utilities seems excessive, for two reasons. They are not essential services that enjoy a local or national monopoly; people who feel their privacy is being violated are free to hop to other web services (remember AltaVista and MySpace?), though many sites deliberately make it hard for them to take their data with them. A second reason to tread carefully is that strict regulation could stifle the rapid innovation in business models that has thrived on the internet. Instead, officials should concentrate on enforcing existing privacy rules—something they seem reassuringly keen to do. Canada's privacy commissioner, Jennifer Stoddart, has given warning that her organisation may take action against Facebook for violating a deal reached last year requiring the network to seek users' permission before sharing their data.

However, even if, like this newspaper, you both distrust government intervention and believe the world has gained from the sharing of information on the web, there are plainly real grounds for concern. For instance, Google claims it discovered that its software had been

accidentally recording private information for several years only after privacy officials in Germany demanded that it come clean about the data being collected. That is a stunning admission from a technology giant—and privacy watchdogs are right to investigate that.

Facebook's problem is more fundamental. True, the social network has some of the most extensive privacy controls on the web, but these have now become so complex—and are tweaked so often—that even privacy experts find them bamboozling. The company also has a powerful incentive to push people into revealing more information. Facebook generates most of its revenue from targeted advertisements based on users' demography and interests, so the more data users share publicly the more money it can mint from ads. It may well be betting that users are now so hooked that they are unlikely to revolt against a gradual loosening of privacy safeguards.

The worst thing is Facebook's underlying prejudice against privacy. Sign up and it assumes you want to share as much data as possible; if not, you have to change the settings, which can be a fiddly business. The presumption should be exactly the opposite: the default should be tight privacy controls, which users may then loosen if they choose. If Facebook fails to simplify and improve its privacy policy, it will justly risk the wrath of regulators—and many more Facebook suicides.

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