

Is Google Too Big to Trust?

Interesting essay about how Google's lack of transparency is hurting their trust:

The reality is that Google's business is and has always been about mining as much data as possible to be able to present information to users. After all, it can't display what it doesn't know. Google Search has always been an ad-supported service, so it needs a way to sell those users to advertisers -- that's how the industry works. Its Google Now voice-based service is simply a form of Google Search, so it too serves advertisers' needs.

In the digital world, advertisers want to know more than the 100,000 people who might be interested in buying a new car. They now want to know who those people are, so they can reach out to them with custom messages that are more likely to be effective. They may not know you personally, but they know your digital persona -- basically, you. Google needs to know about you to satisfy its advertisers' demands.

Once you understand that, you understand why Google does what it does. That's simply its business. Nothing is free, so if you won't pay cash, you'll have to pay with personal information. That business model has been around for decades; Google didn't invent that business model, but Google did figure out how to make it work globally, pervasively, appealingly, and nearly instantaneously.

I don't blame Google for doing that, but I blame it for being nontransparent. Putting unmarked sponsored ads in the "regular" search results section is misleading, because

people have been trained by Google to see that section of the search results as neutral. They are in fact not. Once you know that, you never quite trust Google search results again. (Yes, Bing's results are similarly tainted. But Microsoft never promised to do no evil, and most people use Google.)

In a nutshell, YES!

They are now as bad as the government. Most parts of Google don't know what the other parts are doing. An analysis of their workforce might be in order. Their impact on the environment should be revealed for all to see. What else does the StreetView camera vehicle capture? And Google Earth brings it all together, making them an object of suspicion (or takeover) by the U.N. Is Google inspiration for the NSA (or vice versa?) What next...now that they are into broadband supply, are we going to get (invasive) Google routers (note that they tried earlier with Google Desktop)?

They are just big enough to fail.

Locum Fardle • April 24, 2014 7:11 AM

Does the data returned by search engines that piggyback on google also include these "hidden" sponsored links?

moof • April 24, 2014 7:13 AM

Google is the main force behind making the Internet a more accommodating place for those that grew up in the Internet. While I'm also concerned about Google's size and of the possibly they might go full blown evil in the

future (they obviously try to do good currently), they're the only hope of stopping Hollywood from destroying the Internet.

moof • April 24, 2014 7:18 AM

For clarification about them trying to do good, I don't mean that they always succeed or that they never do evil, but their evil actions have been paltry compared to what the information they hold would allow them to do.

Remember, Google doesn't sell your info to third parties. They sell the promise of putting an advertisement in front of a person that they think would click on it.

So while they sell your eyes to advertisers, they don't sell your online persona.

Locum Fardle • April 24, 2014 7:28 AM

@moof

But isn't google investing heavily in robotics and drones? I'd hate to draw a negative conclusion from that but ...

Nonono • April 24, 2014 7:42 AM

The very fact of them collecting and storing personal data is evil, especially since they conceal the price that users pay for "voluntarily" surrendering their personal information.

@moof: What you write is like saying the burglar did not do evil because at least he did not kill the victim.

Also, Google HAS the data. They don't sell personality profiles NOW, but what if at some point in the future, sales momentum slows down and shareholders demand more profits. There is exactly nothing that will stop Google from doing it then.

simpson • April 24, 2014 7:50 AM

Yahoo is the absolute worst with quality lower than the National Enquirer. Their "NEWS" articles are useless garbage just to host ad pages. Their search is horrible. And it's all designed to trick and fool.

moof • April 24, 2014 7:51 AM

@nonono

Larry Page holding a large majority of the voting rights in terms of stock shares for Google is what would prevent them from caving in to shareholder demands for a quick profit.

That said, Google won't always be led by Larry Page. And Larry might change his world view in the future while he's still leading Google. That they have so much info is cause for concern in that they can't realistically promise that they will never, ever do evil.

bickerdyke • April 24, 2014 7:59 AM

people have been trained by Google to see that section of the search results as neutral.

The notable thing is, that it never was neutral to begin with.

Googles long gone ancestors like Altavista used to serve neutral results, based on neutral metrics like how often the search expression turned up on a page.

Googles key to success was to remove that vulcan-like neutrality and fudge the result based on factors not related to the actual search. (PageRank being the first and page loading speed is one of the newest ones)

maxCohen • April 24, 2014 8:00 AM

I'm confused, when was the last time we were able to trust Google?!

some guy • April 24, 2014 8:03 AM

Beyond the sheer breadth of data they collect on everyone and everything, is the crazy shit Eric Schmidt says like, which led me to leave all of their services:

“If you have something that you don't want anyone to know maybe you shouldn't be doing it in the first place”

“Every young person one day will be entitled automatically to change his or her name on reaching adulthood in order to disown youthful hijinks stored on their friends' social media sites.”

“It was a joke, it just wasn't very good” regarding his comment above...

“Just remember when you post something, the computers remember forever”

“You can trust us with your data”

“We know where you are. We know where you’ve been. We can more or less know what you’re thinking about.”

“I ACTUALLY think most people don’t want Google to answer their questions, they want Google to tell them what they should be doing next.

kronos • April 24, 2014 8:03 AM

@bickerdyke: ...that vulcan-like neutrality

Oh, I am so stealing that phrase!

AOL II • April 24, 2014 8:34 AM

Competent investors will tell you there's no barrier to entry in google's core business. Handling big sparse matrices is cheap and getting cheaper all the time. Already there are plenty of alternatives that respect your legal privacy rights. The problem of google is not its bigness but its favored government position as a technology of surveillance and repression. It's the new and improved AOL (our secret police had the sense not to base it in Reston this time), and it will meet AOL's fate when global markets get fed up with its spying.

Stephen285 • April 24, 2014 8:53 AM

What is "good", what is "evil"? Google is an advertising company, governed in top-down fashion by one single man with all power - no internal debate, no balance of power. History of Man for hundreds of years (millennia?) has shown that, when power is absolute, good and evil become very, very relative concepts. And trust becomes irrelevant, as is this discussion whether you can trust

Larry Page. Googlers are much busier dealing with their quarterly personal objectives and saving their jobs, rather than dreaming about good and evil. Human nature doesn't change, and Google is a very ordinary company in many respects. Small people, protect thyselfes.

AOL II • April 24, 2014 9:05 AM

No not Reston, Dulles, VA, that made-up half-acre of Langley, www.mapquest.com/maps?city=Dulles&state=VA&address=22000+Aol+Way ,

Meldour du Esseaux • April 24, 2014 9:26 AM

> Putting unmarked sponsored ads in the "regular" search results section is misleading, because people have been trained by Google to see that section of the search results as neutral.

'That is not a bug, that's a feature.'

some guy:

> "I ACTUALLY think most people don't want Google to answer their questions, they want Google to tell them what they should be doing next.

Wishful thinking?

Michiel • April 24, 2014 9:47 AM

Google provides billions of users with "free" services like Search, Maps, Youtube, Gmail, Hangouts, etc. The crowd here may disagree but billions of people are obviously finding these pretty good services. So Google uses the data gathered from a user's usage of these services to

show targeted ads, which they would like them to click. They're trying things to make us click those ads, why are we acting all surprised about that? So now we're asking Google to only place the ads in the areas where we as users have been trained not to look? Honestly...

Don't like it? Use paid services. What, there exists no free Internet search? If we are all so upset about this and ready to put our money where our mouth is, why isn't there a paid alternative?

Damen Choy • April 24, 2014 10:09 AM

Google generally seems to label its paid placement ads and keeps them distinct from editorial content..

I do not see any strong evidence that Google is mixing its natural search results with the paid ones..

Jacob • April 24, 2014 10:18 AM

Since Google unified its Privacy Policy about a year ago or so, declaring that it is now treating user info across *all* its services in a holistic view, the writing has been on the wall.

I wonder how many people are aware of Google services that do not get much in-your-face info sharing attention but are still prevalent:

- Google Wallet
- Google analytics (seems that every person and his dog with a web site is using it)
- Re-Captcha

- Google free DNS servers
- 1e100.net (no use to end users, but still collecting in the background huge amount of info)
- Postini

The last one is really something:

About 3 years ago, being on a foreign land, I transferred a confidential file that I had prepared to a large non-US defence-oriented establishment. I sent it from a clean computer that I fully control, but I could not email the file nor encrypt it due to some admin issues on the receiving end.

I prepared a link to the file on my local server, emailed the guy the link, and started to monitor server logs to see when he finished downloading it so I can erase the file from my machine.

2 minutes after I emailed out the link, I saw 2 file pulls using that special link I had prepared, coming from the US. I told the guy he must have a virus on his machine. He called up the departmental IT guys - they could not find anything wrong.

It took me a while to discover that that establishment contracted Postini, owned by Google, to filter incoming spam and malware. Postini sucked up any file link arriving at that establishment, moved it to US servers for malware analysis and if OK approved the email to continue its route to destination. Nobody at the dept. was aware of that arrangement.

Two years later, I had the same episode happening with company-confidential design files going to a big US firm's foreign subsidiary.

"We may combine personal information from one service with information, including personal information, from

other Google services"

Arkh • April 24, 2014 10:27 AM

@Michiel There are at least 3 services which users did not ask for and which can track them. Those used by website owners: analytics, adsense and the g+ share buttons.

Those you just get shoved through your browser's throat and you gain nothing from it. And it is a lot worse than a google service as it tracks almost all your web usage.

Randalf • April 24, 2014 10:55 AM

Now Google should in reality not have a need for any 'personas'...on G-Mail they (supposedly) use the contents of the email to determine what ads to show. Considering that their efforts to evaluate a persons CURRENT preferences are not really all that exact (people do change, etc) and since they do index (again, supposedly) billions of web pages, what would stop them from using the contents of the currently viewed web page to show 'relevant' ads?

This just means that collecting USER information is unnecessary, wasteful, and unjustified, when it can be all done anonymously with the help of the page contents. Just like supposedly is done with G-Mail, completely "anonymous" (believe it, you sheeple)...

Unless of course they have received orders/requests/wishes from 'elsewhere' to collect the user information.

Besides that, Google never **promised** to not be evil. That's just some **binterpretation** peddled by who-knows, the Google Fan Club I guess.

TheProduct • April 24, 2014 11:06 AM

How much is one well-tracked identity worth to Google? In US\$. Is that an amount some would be willing to pay, in trade for being untracked? In very rough numbers, ignoring profit, trust, the wide range of identities, implementation details, etc.

Does anyone have a good sense?

IDoNotCareAboutMyName • April 24, 2014 11:10 AM

@WhyAmINotSurprised:

"They are now as bad as the government. Most parts of Google don't know what the other parts are doing."

I do not agree. Google is worse than the government. They steal our privacy and expose it to the rest of the world. Information stored by NSA is only available to a small set of government staff. Information stored by Google is available to anyone.

Google does NOT allow us to take control of our digital footprint either, violating our privacy and rights in unacceptable ways.

"An analysis of their workforce might be in order. Their impact on the environment should be revealed for all to see. What else does the StreetView camera vehicle capture?"

SSIDs? BSSIDs? Passwords?

To me NSA activities are unacceptable, but Google ones are by far worse.

Randalf • April 24, 2014 11:11 AM

Let me just clarify my last paragraph:

*Besides that, Google never **promised** to not be evil.*

*That's just some **interpretation** peddled by who-knows, the Google Fan Club I guess.*

The story is that Google's "motto" is or was "Don't do evil".

The fact that a company motto refers to not-being-something should not be interpreted as that the said company **promises** to not to-be-something. Especially when "evil" is a very subjective term and as such is subject to, if nothing else, change.

For example to see how subjective opinions can change, look at the history of such opinions as:

1. what is pornography?
 2. is homosexuality wrong?
 3. what is a proper skirt length for women?
 4. should women be allowed to vote or work outside the house?
- etc

Or for a concept of "is killing a disabled person evil?" we can look at the history of euthanasia, e.g. in Germany during years 1902, 1932, and 1982.

&me • April 24, 2014 11:15 AM

@moof

So while they sell your eyes to advertisers, they don't sell your online persona.

How do you know? Or do they give it away for free instead? (to use NSA word games)

qwertyuiop • April 24, 2014 11:19 AM

@Michiel - *What, there exists no free Internet search?*

Actually free Internet search does exist - duckduckgo.com. Doesn't track you, doesn't filter bubble.

(I have no association with duckduckgo.com other than as a very satisfied user.)

Anony • April 24, 2014 11:20 AM

You all take for granted that when you search on Google, the links that pop up are legit, legal, useful, free of malware, etc. Google puts forth a lot of effort to make that so. I've seen some of it firsthand. When you search for an item to buy, if you go off-Google for the search, you find folks selling it for less than they could possibly have bought it for. Digging deeper (checked with original manufacturer) you realize it's part of a credit-card theft ring. That sort of stuff is common as hell. Google goes through great efforts to keep the web clean. And you want to knock them for what they "could" do?

bcs • April 24, 2014 11:44 AM

The most effective ad will always be an ad the customer *wants* to see. Google knows this.

Also re: data collection, it works best when people *want* to make their data available. Google also knows this.

Randalf • April 24, 2014 11:46 AM

@Anony

You all take for granted that when you search on Google, the links that pop up are legit, legal, useful, free of malware, etc.

Maybe that is the problem. Because they are not all useful nor free of malware. Or even legal for that matter.

On another note, Bruce should make another article titled "Is Google Too Big to be Criticized?"

Once the user-base of a company grows past a certain threshold, any criticism against the company can be stifled by someone from within that user-base.

Bob S. • April 24, 2014 11:48 AM

Google Chairman Eric Schmidt:

"Well, it was invented by Larry [Page] and Sergey [Brin]," said Schmidt. "And the idea was that we don't quite know what evil is, but if we have a rule that says don't be evil, then employees can say, I think that's evil."

Now, when I showed up, I thought this was the stupidest rule ever, because there's no book about evil except maybe, you know, the Bible or something."

<http://www.dailytech.com/Googles+Eric+Schmidt+Dont+Be+Evil+was+Stupid/article31544.htm>

So, get over it, Google is evil as the rest, maybe more sometimes, maybe less.

Evil is evil.

Also, please recall the promise of paid content on cable TV with "no ads". That's was a lie of course, and so we pay for content and watch tons of ads, too. The point is, the corporation will do anything it can to maximize profit.

That's where government regulation is supposed to come in, but our government has become totally incompetent, useless, corrupt and dare I say....evil.

There is no good ending to this story as it stands now. We are free falling into pluto-corporate fascist police state making us all electronic slaves.

Maybe slavery is the natural state of mankind, master and slave while the brief spasm of egalitarianism in the USA was an aberration.

Jones • April 24, 2014 12:33 PM

@Bob S

Maybe slavery is the natural state of mankind

I would say it is more like a 'natural tendency'. Actually the ultimate power in a capitalistic system comes from capital, commonly known as cash (as opposed to other forms of money, e.g. that what has been borrowed, etc).

Those with capital then of course 'rule'...they have what others desire (or need, in order to feed themselves).

And those who rule, who have authority for others, have for a long time not been particularly benevolent with that authority. Some thousands of years ago the following was written in Ecclesiastes 8:9:

"All of this I have seen, and I applied my heart to every work that has been done under the sun, during the time that man has dominated man to his harm."

squarooticus • April 24, 2014 12:40 PM

Google is not as bad as the government, because they cannot imprison me. Period. Say what you will about Google's abuses, the consequences are simply not as dire, and unlike government you can opt out of Google, as difficult as that might be from a practical standpoint.

Mike • April 24, 2014 12:59 PM

I've seen the claim about "unmarked ads in search results" from google for a while now. I've never seen such ads. I do see ads at the top (or bottom) of the search results, but they are always marked as such. Here's a typical example: the ad is clearly marked with a different background color and the words "Sponsored Links" in the upper right. Yeah, I can see that some people might be confused by these, but still - they are marked. Google does play with them - today, the colored background is restricted to the word "Ad" next to the link, and there's a subtle frame around them.

And yes, there are links to or into that site in the search results. Personally, I always click on the sponsored links, so the company has to pay for my eyes.

Curious • April 24, 2014 1:37 PM

Isn't Google behind the so called "super cookies"? I don't like that. I don't want companies to dog me around so that it makes sense for them to push ads onto me in particular.

I don't know if super cookies are a current thing or something that is supposed to be used in the future.

bazzz • April 24, 2014 2:26 PM

On a corporate scale it's too big to be trusted. So much data, so many individuals with access to it.

I have a bet going on that Google will be split up by the DoJ by 2018 just like AT&T corp, one entity for mobile devices, one for the core search engine, one (or multiple) for the remainders.

RG • April 24, 2014 2:49 PM

Its even worse than you think.

Now its Google Shopping (which they have in Silicon Valley). You sign up and they do your shopping for you.

So they know where you shop (you tell them the stores), what products you buy (you tell them that), how often you purchase, how much you spend, (credit card info?) and where you live or work (they deliver to you).

All this from the company that created the Google glasses and sent their minions out to record everyone everywhere....

Joseph Roser • April 24, 2014 3:00 PM

Despite the amount of data it collects, Google ad targeting is still very poor. To give you an example, often there are inappropriate ads posted around articles that describe real tragedies. They get the context wrong in most cases.

Ben R • April 24, 2014 3:09 PM

I'm echoing Mike here, but where does the claim of "unmarked ads in search results" come from? Can anyone show an example? I searched the Web for "google unmarked ads" (using Bing to satisfy the paranoid) and only found a picture showing ads against a blue background with web site names in green. These don't have the words "Ads" or "Sponsored links" above them but I've always understood that they were ads.

Google has never mixed ads with the so-called organic results or accepted money in exchange for higher ranking in the organic results. If they ever change that policy it will be a huge story, but I don't think they ever will because they would probably lose half their web search customers to Bing in a week.

Andrew Wallace • April 24, 2014 3:28 PM

It is best to operate in plain sight.

That was the thinking behind Google in the beginning anyway, while sat round the boardroom table.

With the introduction of Snowden leaks, its less of an open secret anymore.

Leigh V. Malone • April 24, 2014 3:37 PM

Identification of the user enables personalization of search results.

That's good if it serves the purposes of the user, but it's bad if it serves the purposes of someone who wants to harm the user.

In a political environment where the government targets their own population, users should aim to avoid being identified with respect to search engines for their own protection.

I know from first hand experience that Google is being used as a military weapon. That might be a good thing in a country that protects individual rights, but not under fascism.

The NSA's policy of intrusive surveillance, or "active defense", is just a euphemism for unprovoked aggression. It rationalizes the abusive shaping of search results for zersetzung purposes.

name.withheld.for.obvious.reasons • April 24, 2014 3:37 PM

@ Bruce Schneier

I was happy to see you clarify the duckduckgo relationship with Microsoft. When you first recommended duckduckgo I was skeptical...looked at the underlying host scripts and was dismayed to find Microsoft sitting underneath the service.

What concerns me is what Microsoft considers evil to be-- and do they or don't they share their non-evilness with others?

What is "tracking" in the parlance of duckduckgo--I'll get back to you after another go round with the source.

Don't get me wrong, you are appreciated many and your work help us and at least there is an advocate that is both informed and practical instead of shill for x,y, or z. Although you might be with w, at least from a basis vector perspective.

Will • April 24, 2014 3:39 PM

Actually it does not matter if they do it "openly" (Google's idea of "open" is I guess that they wrote about it in their privacy policy) or not.

Doing something "wrong" openly does not make it "right".

Skeptical • April 24, 2014 3:42 PM

Obviously there'd be no way for a user to tell if Google started slipping sponsored links into its regular search results, but, with an exception, they'd have to sell the option to advertisers to make money from it, which would essentially make the fact public. According to Google, [i]f any element on a search result page is influenced by payment to us, we will make this fact clear to our users.

However, Google could put its own products and services on top of search results, and not distinguish this

deliberate placement from regular search results. But this would be rather obvious.

I have to say that I'm a little skeptical of the idea that it's profitable for Google to attempt to capture and store every detail about a user. Based upon a glance at how Google sells advertising space to businesses, it doesn't appear that their ad service relies upon a sophisticated personality profile of each user.

Andrew Wallace • April 24, 2014 4:03 PM

@Will

Joe Sixpack buys into that strategy though.

NSA aren't interested in the view of the technical community.

As long as Joe Sixpack buys into Google being this independent corporation separate from government then continue they do and mission accomplished.

When the Snowden leaks started to wake up the Joe Sixpack crowd, that is when there began to be ripples within the NSA.

Will • April 24, 2014 4:52 PM

as to "unmarked ads", I am not sure if they are all that serious an issue anyway.

I followed the links from the essay that is linked by Bruce. If I understood this correctly, it seems that the best examples are at the bottom of this page (from EU Antitrust Commission):

[http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release MEMO-14-87_en.htm?locale=en](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-14-87_en.htm?locale=en)

Arclight • April 24, 2014 5:54 PM

Another trend I have noticed lately is that Google ads allows banners that look like legit download links. I was trying to download the latest build of Heidi Eraser at heidi.ie the other day, and I had to cancel 2 different snoopware downloads(which looked like mirror site links) before I found the less-obvious legit link.

AlanS • April 24, 2014 8:05 PM

@Randalf

Paul Buchheit (Google employee #23): Coming Up With "Don't Be Evil"

"I believe that it was sometime in early 2000, and there was a meeting to decide on the company's values. They invited a collection of people who had been there for a while. I had just come from Intel, so the whole thing with corporate values seemed a little bit funny to me. I was sitting there trying to think of something that would be really different and not one of these usual "strive for excellence" type of statements. I also wanted something that, once you put it in there, would be hard to take out. It just sort of occurred to me that "Don't be evil" is kind of funny. It's also a bit of a jab at a lot of the other companies, especially our competitors, who at the time, in our opinion, were kind of exploiting the users to some extent....But the real fun of it was that people get a little uncomfortable with anything different, so throughout the meeting, the person running it kept trying to push "Don't

be evil” to the bottom of the list. But this other guy, Amit Patel, and I kept kind of forcing them to put it up there. And because we wouldn’t let it fall off the list, it made it onto the final set and took on a life of its own from there. Amit started writing it down all over the building, on whiteboards everywhere. It’s the only value that anyone is aware of, right?"

Figureitout • April 25, 2014 2:18 AM

What can advertisers do when you first off use ad-blocking software (easy) and next give false data to them? Can you imagine? You got your porno-f*ck up computer design solely to provide false data to all who collect it. A stupid commercial based on false data. Takes time but 1 false ad from everyone adds up to lots of useless info for marketers.

Maybe...just maybe they will eventually be forced into an actual productive field of study instead of wasting people's time (and now maliciously tracking and selling info).

Winter • April 25, 2014 3:08 AM

@Figureitout

"Maybe...just maybe they will eventually be forced into an actual productive field of study instead of wasting people's time (and now maliciously tracking and selling info)."

I agree completely. They really *can* do it. Amazon does it with their *Customers Who Bought This Item Also Bought*. I go to Amazon to get good book tips. That is advertisements I actually look out for.

But obviously, if we only buy books we like, that leaves all those publishers of worthless books and goods out in the cold. So I can see the money is in peddling garbage.

herman • April 25, 2014 4:33 AM

One day Google will be so big, that it will collapse into a black hole, which will take the whole US with it...

yesme • April 25, 2014 5:08 AM

@herman,

I don't think the US needs Google for that. They are on that course a long time.

That said, I think that Google and others could have been hurt way more if Snowden and Greenwald wanted to do that. It's just that these guys played so nice that the US tech industrie will probably get away with it with only little damage.

coverturtle • April 25, 2014 6:35 AM

Yes, and there are gobs of good reasons why:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jerry_Pournelle#Iron_Law_of_Bureaucracy

Wm • April 25, 2014 6:40 AM

"Google needs to know about you to satisfy its advertisers' [and the NSA's] demands."

Randalf • April 25, 2014 8:35 AM

@Figureitout

What can advertisers do when you first off use ad-blocking software (easy) and next give false data to them? Can you imagine?

Is it rather difficult to give Google false data nowadays with the two-factor authentication?

Anyway I think if this development is not stopped, if everything is always brushed aside with either "you should expect it because..." or "they are doing it openly", the scope of the data collection will just increase.

At this rate [practically] anything will eventually be fair game.

@AlanS

Thanks for the story behind their motto. Interesting to see that it was not created by Google founders and that the two people (Paul and Amit) had to push it to keep it included on the list of company values. Looking at its history I wonder how much of the company's "heart" is in that...

Carpe • April 25, 2014 3:05 PM

It was always too shady to trust, and it's size has merely reinforced it's untrustworthiness level from a moral and technical standpoint. From a mass consciousness standpoint though, I'm afraid the herd mentality kicks in and does the opposite. It's so pervasive that it has become part of every day lexicon and therefore peoples minds are numbed to the threat it poses.

Let's not forget some of the very first investors in the good ol' big G. Kleiner Perkins Caufield & Byers, who just happened to be in bed with In-Q-Tel, a CIA investment company (that also invested in Paypal, Facebook, and other various curious companies worthy of the time to look up).

I'm of the opinion that Google is simply the digital version of Blackwater, oh, I mean Xe, ahem, I mean Academi...

I mean in the past even though the CIA was barred from domestic operations, they did them anyway through extensive front company relationships that eventually ended up at some nondescript office with minimal staffing. I think they realized with the internet it would only be so long before that stopped being viable (in the same numbers at least) and instead they decided to setup and invest in real companies or compromise already existing companies C levels. I can't remember the book right now but one of *The Company's* top anti-terror guys wrote a book and said exactly that.

They would approach a C level and say, "Hey, don't you want to help protect the country?" And he would say "Of course". "Now hand over the data"/"Now do X merger" etc etc.

Google is just the data mercenary of the world that provides CIA, NSA, DIA, NGA et al plausible deniability.

Carpe • April 25, 2014 3:15 PM

I should note though, that I predict power plays by Google and other mega supranational corporations that might try and separate themselves from their host countries intel

communities... not to sure about the potential dynamics for this though.

Anony • April 25, 2014 5:51 PM

Bruce should make another article titled "Is Google Too Big to be Criticized?"

He's black. He's jewish. Just because he hasn't committed a crime yet doesn't mean he's innocent. After all, he could commit a crime anytime. Is that the vibe?

This smacks of pre-crime. Shouldn't Google actually do something wrong before we keelhaul them?

How would you feel about being convicted of rape just because you have the anatomical equipment necessary to commit the crime.

If Google really wanted to spy for the government, then why spend all that time, effort, and money encrypting data links between data centers?

Are they really storing vast warehouses of information about us? Sure, they could. But are they? Their goal is to make money. Vast NSA-style data warehousing isn't necessarily profitable. All they really need to do is to feed all our data into a decision-network to classify our buying habits. A few bytes of data per person. Granted you want to train the learning algorithms. And improve them. But there's a world of difference between ubiquitous surveillance and merely profiting by matching folks who are car shopping up with car dealers.

Figureitout • April 25, 2014 6:03 PM

Winter

--Hey Shhhhh. Don't tell them what you like. :p

Randalf

--Yeah it gets harder w/ too much technology, still pretty easy now though. Don't know how many "Bob Smith" accts I have at youtube...

Molly Grant • April 25, 2014 10:14 PM

Lets not forget Google censoring firearms, firearm accessories, ammunition, knives and certain outdoor gear from Google Shopping.

F-em all. Simply stop using their crap. Start reading a book instead or go sit somewhere and draw a picture.

DB • April 26, 2014 1:44 AM

@ Anony

Maybe you haven't read the news stories over the past 10 months, where a certain whistleblower released internal NSA documents directly saying that Google was cooperating with them with mass surveillance? I guess a woman reporting that she was actually raped isn't enough evidence for you to get the least bit suspicious, you need 3 or 4 more witnesses to come forward and say they watched or helped or something?

Anony • April 27, 2014 11:51 AM

@DB

I've heard about Snowden's documents. They claimed everyone was cooperating with the NSA on mass surveillance. Everyone denied it, while leaving loopholes for security letters and whatnot where they were legally required to comply.

I've also noticed Google spending a lot of effort, time, and money encrypting all their backhaul links between data centers. Why? The only people they're locking out are the NSA. Why alienate the folks you're spying for?

I see Facebook doing far worse things than Google in terms of widespread spying, yet nobody seems to be talking about them.

Google conducting widespread spying for the NSA may seem possible and even likely, but I have to wonder what their end-game is? How does Google benefit? Once it comes out, and clearly it will eventually come out, they have destroyed their company for no immediate or long-term gain.

Which raises the bigger question of why are we convicting them absent of evidence? Why the witch hunt? Who is beating the drums of war against Google, and what do they have to gain by instilling a mistrust of Google among us?

Full disclosure here: I do not work for Google. (Granted, you cannot verify that.) However I do know a number of folks who have gone on to work there. They are all really quite extraordinarily bright and talented. So I have to wonder, when you take the creme de la creme of technical talent to solve the most difficult technical problems of the day, how long can you expect to keep widespread widely despised spying a secret?

Sue me. I think for myself. I don't just follow the herd. And this is just not adding up.

unclejed • April 27, 2014 4:33 PM

some of the "targeted ads" still aren't as "smart" as they could be.... and are kind of annoying.... somewhere along the process of signing up for yahoo mail, i probably said i am male and what age bracket i'm in, and what zip code i'm in (or maybe the zip code info is yanked from my ip address), so i get ads from some dating website for women in my age group.... did i forget to tell yahoo i'm married already????? or maybe it just doesn't matter to them.... with google, i often get the same ads (as i see on yahoo) in the sidebar when i do a search.... so now i use ixquick instead.... and get better "neutral" results, and my ip address doesn't get recorded... and no ads either.... when i do a search for something, i'm actually looking for something specific, and don't want "targeted" results mucking up the process.... with google search, try this test... do a search for "grid squares" and watch how many results are websites offering to sell you "grid squares".... you can't actually buy "grid squares", because they are lines on a map, but google will offer places to buy them.....

DB • April 27, 2014 7:41 PM

@ Anony

Everyone denied it, while leaving loopholes for security letters and whatnot where they were legally required to comply.

The loopholes aren't just for where they're all "legally" required to comply... granted many companies thought

they were being patriotic and helping the "good" guys, but many have gone far beyond what is legal. Now it's come out that those supposed "good" guys didn't always have our best interest at heart, and they have to pretty much cover it up and hope for the best to keep from going bankrupt.

Why alienate the folks you're spying for?

60% of the American population disagreeing with what the NSA is doing is a pretty big motivator. Especially when a certain percentage of that threatens to do business elsewhere if it can find a way to. And that's not even counting international, which is far worse numbers...

I see Facebook doing far worse things than Google

I'd agree there. I'm not sure the difference. It could be everyone likes to rag on the larger guy. It could also be that it's easier to just "not use" Facebook, whereas Google provides so many more-essential services we've all come to rely on so that becomes a bit harder... It could also be a generational thing as to who uses which more. It could also be the phrase "Don't be evil" backfiring on them, when it now seems totally hypocritical. Maybe people (perhaps undeservedly) trusted Google to be better, and now they feel more violated when that trust is broken, compared to companies they never did trust in the first place. Remember back in the early days of Google, when they were the good guys taking down evil corporate America?

why are we convicting them absent of evidence?

You think the "Snowden documents" as you called them, were all just stuff that Snowden concocted from his own faulty memory and wrote down? You don't consider them

evidence at all? Not even in the slightest? You don't think maybe they're actually "NSA" docs rather than "Snowden" docs? So maybe the NSA itself has actually unwittingly accused them of cooperating with them, in their own internal documents? I totally fail to see where you're getting "absent of evidence" from... there's lots of evidence. You just seem to be ignoring it. It's not just one document either.

I do not work for Google... However I do know a number of folks...

I haven't worked for Google myself either, but I've worked for large companies like that. Of course they're full of bright people, good people, friends of mine too, etc... That doesn't mean a mistake can't be made at the corporate level, or at the individual level with some admin, or infiltration or blackmail or whatever. Also this is the natural result of terrible policies in Washington, throwing American companies under the bus! Put a very large percentage of the blame there.

Full disclosure here too: I hope that my own being "pissed" at them, and raising alarm bells etc, rather than just witch hunting, will actually goad them into improving, and turning what I say into a negative self-fulfilling prophecy... I'd like nothing better than to be "proven wrong" about something bad, terrible, and evil.

Come on Google (and Facebook, and the rest), prove me wrong! Here's how: use all your lobbying power to convince Congress to change the law so you can't be legally secretly compelled to lie to me anymore nor violate my basic human rights. And make me your customer instead of your product, that's really detestable to me (like selling me off to the highest bidder like some kind of

slave). And help push true proper end to end encryption tech past our human rights hostile government too, please. None of these are quick, they take time, I understand that.

Devil's Advocate • April 28, 2014 10:40 AM

Dear Mr. Schneier,

In contrast to you, I would blame the Search/Internet Industry not for being intransparent, but for not offering ME, THE USER a paid alternative to selling my data to the advertisement industry.

What about an ad-free Google with no data retention for 1\$ a month? There are several mail services that charge that much. Wait, that thing already exists and costs nothing: startpage.com!

Cheers,
Devil

AlanS • April 28, 2014 8:40 PM

@Bruce

You already answered your own question: The business model of the Internet is surveillance. You trust them as much as any business given that you understand that their motivation is to make money. You trust them less as their business is to make money from personal information. And you trust them less again because they traffic in personal information while their leadership spouts techno-utopian nonsense.

See for example, Schmidt and Cohen's The New Digital Age and the various interviews they gave at the time of the book's publication. The book was published a month before the first Snowden revelations so it comes with advance praise from Michael Hayden (and other worthies). Amusingly--something of a contrast with Hayden--on the book's promo site the first link featured is Assange's scathing commentary, The Banality of 'Don't Be Evil', in the NYT (Assange is featured in the book).

Schmidt: quoted on NPR: Google Execs Talk Privacy, Security In 'The New Digital Age':

One of our core concerns is that unless people fight for privacy, they will lose it in countries which have no history of concern over privacy. In the Western world, the governments will ultimately figure out a balance between these two: the legitimate use ... by the police of this kind of information, and the incorrect use by others. But in many countries, there's no history of privacy at all, and so the government can go in and essentially create a police state without any protections for citizens, and no one will even notice. And once those systems are in place in those countries, it'll be difficult to reform them.

No worries here because Western governments (not their citizens) will figure it out? Is that another example of "trust us"? A little ironic, post-Snowden.

Cull The Nonsense • January 17, 2015 5:31 AM

Most emphatically YES! Google's not only "too big to trust", but it's arrogant, dishonest, sly, cocky and obscenely greedy.

I'm looking forward to the day when it's toppled from its self-absorbed lofty heights and hits the ground with an enormous crash.

What an entertaining spectacle that will be! And then the world will breathe a huge sigh of relief - one corporate monster down, several more to follow - together with their political puppets.
