
Google Street View: Fender Bender on the Information Highway

In October 2010, the US Federal Trade Commission, according to the US news outlet CNN, ended its Google Street View investigation without imposing a fines. the case of unauthorized WiFi data interception was closed.

Business as usual in the United States.

Not quite. Then until the US Federal Communications Commission confirmed that it has been investigating Google, a fact reported by Karl Bode in DSLReports. Google is back on the US hot seat.

Other countries have flip flopped Google's alleged interception of open Wi-Fi data transmissions. First, the UK Information Commissioner's Office found Google without blame. Then the ICO grabbed a rail on the fast-moving band wagon parading to legal circus setting up around Google's Street View. The issue? Google's Street View vacuum cleaner inhaled a wide range of private information and the scope of the intercepted data continues to expand. One wit noted that Google faced legal probes on every continent except Antarctica. If Google Street View put cameras on a snow mobile, penguins may join the legal eagles circling the world's largest and arguably most controversial ad company on the planet.

Regulators want Google to be as pristine as a Cotswold field dusted with frost. Some government agencies covet a close relationship with Google. The appeal is part cachet and part desire to work with Google on various data-related projects. Other units of governments see Google as an outfit that does what it needs to do to maintain its grip on online advertising. The flip-flopping and about-facing calls attention to Google's global impact. The legal hassles have done little to impede the company's revenue from online advertising. There are some who are resisting Google. China, for example, appears to have a Google policy. And as surprising as it is to me, the commercial television broadcast organizations are blocking Google TV from accessing the content from such channels as ABC, CBS, Fox, and NBC.

The challenge Google faces is rooted in what originally was a single engineer's use of code that gobbled data openly broadcast by open public WiFi devices. The owner of the hot spot should have slapped a password on the device, thus restricting access. A single engineer and then the WiFi device owners share the blame for the WiFi sniffing.

Computer and mobile device users know that Google Street View is the clever name applied to a group of technologies that make it possible for me to get an almost 360 degree view of a location. Google's service became publicly available in November 2008. What struck me when I first looked at the service was its striking similarity to a now-ignored capability developed by Amazon for its A9 search service. Google has become an increasingly "me too" inspired company since 2006, but Google pushed the seamless merging of a map like those on old-style Tom Tom or Garmin devices to a new level. The real world images were merged with the old style highway map. This union kicked open the door to Google mash up advertising that now affects driving directions to the company's tie up with GM for in-vehicle

navigation. Local businesses can buy a “flag” to make it easier for a rushed American to locate a pizza joint selling two 3,000 calories pies for \$15. Google 2010 is less about search and more about matching a chubby and hungry Buick driver to a cheese-and-sausage snack.

To see the Street View service in action, navigate to <http://maps.google.com/help/maps/streetview/>. Google has a feast of links, images, and videos to show the service in action. Street View is woven into the popular Google Maps and Google Earth services. Anyone who has watched television news programs or attended a military briefing has experienced Google Street View. Few news program directors can resist the spectacular effects of flying from 20,000 feet down to street level for a news visual.

The same magnetic pull is felt in corporations as well. The revolution in digital mapping is over. The days of yellow pencils, plastic protractors, and indelible ink have followed the quill pen into history.

With Google’s inadvertent capturing of Wi-Fi data have come dribbles of information. The most surprising revelation from Google in a blog post by Alan Eustace, Senior VP, Google Engineering & Research wrote:

It’s clear from those inspections that while most of the data is fragmentary, in some instances entire emails and URLs were captured, as well as passwords. We want to delete this data as soon as possible, and I would like to apologize again for the fact that we collected it in the first place. We are mortified by what happened, but confident that these changes to our processes and structure will significantly improve our internal privacy and security practices for the benefit of all our users. Source: <http://googleblog.blogspot.com/2010/10/creating-stronger-privacy-controls.html>

Google’s push into the enterprise is becoming more aggressive. One example was the October 2010 announcement in Tokyo. One theme of the Google presentations was the integration of Android Devices with Google applications or “apps”. In the company’s summary of the Tokyo announcements, Google said:

*Many Android devices feature tight integration with Google Apps, including native applications for Gmail, Google Talk, and Google Calendar, as well as mobile access to Google Docs. Now any employee with an Android device running version 2.2 - personal or company-issued - can access their corporate information while allowing administrators to enforce data security policies such as Remotely wipe all data from lost or stolen mobile devices, Lock idle devices after a period of inactivity, require a device password on each phone, set minimum lengths for more secure passwords, require passwords to include letters and numbers. When the employee leaves the company, the administrator can withdraw access to corporate info, which allows the employee to continue to use their device if it's their own. Source:
<http://googleenterprise.blogspot.com/2010/10/bring-your-phone-to-work-day-managing.html>*

Shortly after this announcement about ever-closer interlocking of Android and Google Apps, Google sued the US Department of Interior over bidding for an e-mail contract. (Source: <http://articles.latimes.com/2010/nov/02/business/la-fi-google-government-20101102>).

Let's recap. A number of countries are investigating Google's Street View for violations of privacy. Google's position has shifted over time until the company finally revealed that it had intercepted more sensitive data. Google announced enhanced integration of its services for the enterprise. Google filed a law suit against a large US government agency.

The question that struck me is, "Will this sequence of actions have a chilling effect on Google's enterprise sales?"

The Google Search Appliance or GSA was offered to the enterprise market in 2002. In the intervening six years, Google is rumored to have placed upwards of 60,000 of the devices. Google has trimmed the product line and cloud-based search services have been allowed to blossom. One example is Google's Site Search, which provides free Web site search to webmasters. (For details of the Site Search program navigate to <http://www.google.com/sitesearch>.)

Another Google Enterprise success is Google Earth. Google describes the service as "the ultimate geo mash up platform." Unlike the free Google services, enterprises pay for this service. Detailed and current pricing information is difficult to locate. Like other Google services, the license fees are competitive. When I last reviewed pricing data in 2006, the cost was about \$500 per user. Current pricing estimates require a chat with Google's sales department.

Google's Enterprise Apps are competitively priced. The rate on November 10, 2010, was \$50 per user. The number of features, application programming interfaces, and combinations of services available is mind boggling.

The point is that Google is making a play for the enterprise and wants to make crystal clear that its services interoperate, deliver enterprise grade security, and are suitable replacements for on-premises enterprise solutions.

The argument is appealing, but the number of services and their technical polish does not answer the question about Google's legal hassles with regard to privacy and procurement procedures.

My view is that Google may face increasing resistance in the enterprise. The Google TV initiative has stalled due to overly complex interfaces and the absence of some key content. No one in the television business is fighting in the gutter with Google. The tactic seems to be more along the lines of refusing to cooperate with Google.

Google, in my opinion, runs an increasing risk of putting organizations on notice that a deal with Google might be troublesome. Visualize a procurement team working on a tender. A company in the news for privacy issues in dozens of countries either has rotten luck or has a behavior pattern that raises concerns. Then there is the issue of deep integration. With data no longer fully under the control of an enterprise, is Google or any other cloud service in the spotlight appropriate for certain organizations. Finally, there is the litigious side of Google itself. Will a procurement team feel comfortable with a vendor who wants to settle disputes in court, rather than in the cookie-cutter, routinized procurement processes.

My view is that Google management is making an effort to tidy its business practices. The company touted its management by "controlled chaos" early in its history. Now Google is 12 years old, and the methods of the past may not be appropriate to the present financial realities.

The larger concern I have considered is that Google's escalating legal woes and its peculiar executive compensation gyrations may undermine the firm's enterprise efforts. Who wants to move forward when a single employee is offered \$3.5 million to stay on the job or when that company shells out \$1,000 in cash and 10 percent raises to prevent staff from jumping ship.

One final thought: Stay on the lookout for Street View snowmobiles in Antarctica.

Stephen E Arnold, December 1, 2010

Mr. Arnold is a consultant. More information about his practice is available at www.arnoldit.com and in his Web log at www.arnoldit.com/wordpress.