

Protect Your Privacy Against Google Interventions

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Learn how to clear your Google data history with this demonstration by Tablet editor Stephen Hutcheon. Privacy commissioners in Asia Pacific have clubbed together to put the heat on Google over its controversial new privacy policy.

Privacy commissioners in Asia Pacific have clubbed together to put the heat on Google over its controversial new privacy policy.

Asia Pacific Privacy Authorities, a body representing the privacy commissioners of New Zealand, Australia, Canada, Mexico, Hong Kong and South Korea, revealed it had written to Google chief executive Larry Page to raise concerns about the policy, which came into effect on Thursday.

The changes let Google combine information that people provide when using different services, such as Google's search service, Gmail, YouTube and social networking service Google Plus, allowing it to better tailor advertisements to match users' interests and so raise more money from online advertising.

The authorities said Google was making it harder for people to segregate their online identities when using Google applications. The policy also removed some obligations on Google to quickly delete data after customer requests and confirmed Google could collect information on race, religion, sexual orientation and health.

The letter, signed by Australian privacy commissioner Timothy Pilgrim, questioned whether Google's "dashboard", which helps people manage privacy settings, was easy to find or use.

Google's global privacy counsel, Peter Fleischer, replied that the new policy would let it better integrate its applications and create a "better experience".

"For example, if a user is signed in and searching Google for cooking recipes, our current privacy policies wouldn't let us recommend cooking videos when she visits YouTube based on her searches - even though she was signed into the same Google account when using both Google search and YouTube."

People could still maintain multiple identities with Google by establishing separate accounts with different Gmail addresses.

New Zealand Privacy Commissioner Marie Shroff said she was not fully satisfied with that response, which was "unlikely to be a complete answer".

"Data protection authorities around the world are examining Google's recent policy changes closely. I expect there will be other questions and concerns to discuss with Google," she said.

Shroff said last month that Google users needed to be aware that the company's business model relied on being able to deliver targeted advertising and that demographic data it collected on users

provided "the raw fuel".

The changes have come in for the sternest criticism in Europe; United States commentators have been more accepting.

Ad Feedback European justice commissioner Viviane Reding has questioned the legality of the policy changes and said if people were to give up their privacy it should be a decision they made with all facts made available to them, not by a company acting in a "sneaking" way.

But news agency Bloomberg said privacy advocates were over-reacting. "Google is not collecting any new information; rather, it is sharing - with itself - more of the information it already has," it said.

"When you're messaging your spouse about dinner from your mobile phone and you see an ad for that takeout Chinese place you searched for a month before, you may find it convenient or creepy, or maybe a little of both. Either way, it is the future."

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