

Paranoid or Prescient? Daniel Brandt is concerned about Google Print

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Daniel Brandt knows a lot about what Google knows about you. Having spent the past three years studying Google and the ways Google collects personal information, Brandt is the self-appointed “voice of reason” behind the [Google-Watch](#) website. In an email yesterday, Brandt expressed his continuing concerns about Google's data collection and personal privacy. Brandt's concerns have been exasperated by Google's recent mission to digitalize the collections of as many libraries as possible.

Eighteen months ago, Brandt wrote an article published in the newsletter of the American Library Association pointing out nine unique ways Google can be cast in the role of “[Big Brother](#)”. Since then, his concerns have deepened with the Gmail and Google Print (libraries) initiatives.

Brandt's concern stems from Google's use of a single, unifying cookie which tracks a user's experience across all Google services and products. Google saves the IP and search terms used for every query, as it does with any Google service or tool. This information is saved using a single, unique identifying cookie that Google plants on every computer that uses its system. As the firm has acquired millions of email addresses through its popular and rapidly growing Gmail service, linking identifying information caught by the unifying cookie and your computer's IP address to your personal identity is radically simplified.

While offended, Brandt is not terribly concerned about Google using the information itself, at least not on a personal level. With the advent of personalized search, it is expected that marketers will tap into an individual's unique information consumption habits to determine the most cost effective ways of advertising to that individual. Data mining for marketing purposes is hardly new in our society though personalization of search makes that process infinitely more efficient. Marketers may annoy you but their intrusion into your personal life rarely causes problems aside from junk mail and spam email. Brandt is more concerned about the State making assumptions about individuals based on the information they are interested in.

Those of us living outside the United States can be forgiven for forgetting about the powerful Patriot Act quickly enacted (before many legislators had even read it) after the terrorist attacks of 9/11. One of the key provisions of the Patriot Act gives US security forces such as the FBI, local law enforcement, the CIA, and the NSA access to the records kept by public libraries and private corporations. The American Libraries Association (ALA) has taken the US Government to court over the Patriot Act and continues to lobby in Washington to undo some of the more intrusive provisions in the Act. As Brandt wrote yesterday, “...keep in mind that the scale of anything Google does is a million times larger than the scale of anything that involves discrete libraries, access to paper hard copy, and occasional subpoenas for specific information. Perhaps the scale of what Google does is even ten million times larger.”

Brandt would like libraries that contract with Google for access to their collections to force Google to protect the personal privacy of the reading public. This would require Google to cease recording IP information and other identifying information gathered by the single unifying cookie in relation to library searchers. The other alternative Brandt offers is for librarians to deny Google access to any material that has political content or relevance. He feels this is the only way to guarantee the FBI doesn't assume you are a closet communist if you do research on Marxist theory or a state-threatening revolutionary if you research anarchist materials.

Ironically, Google requires the libraries whose collections are scanned to sign non-disclosure agreements limiting public access to both technical and privacy information about the Google Print initiative. In the eyes of those who don't know you personally, you are what you think. Under the US Patriot Act, there are more people thinking about what you think than you might think there are. Those of us living outside the US should realize that much of our personal information is

kept by corporations registered in the United States, thus giving the US government access to these records. The Patriot Act affects all of us, regardless of our nationalities. The vast majority of us will probably never need to care. On the other hand, even Cat Stevens has been banned from entering the United States due to his known religious beliefs. Have you or has anyone you've ever known ordered a copy of the Koran from your local library? For those of us with a memory for 20th century history, Brandt's apparent paranoia suddenly seems prescient.

Brandt believes it is not too late for the American Librarians Association to move to protect the privacy of individuals accessing their collections through Google Print. In an open letter to the ALA, Brandt outlines his concerns and asks for help from the general public.

For more information, please visit <http://www.google-watch.org/appeal.html>