

## Is Google's New Search Feature The New Privacy Villain Of The Internet?

January 12, 2012 - The Electronic Privacy Information Center (EPIC) has asked the Justice Department to look into Google's new search feature, called Google Plus Your World. They seem to think that the feature, which includes results from your friends and acquaintances on the Google+ social network in your search results, compromises user privacy. They are also saying that the feature may violate a settlement agreement that Google entered into with the government regarding privacy policies. Very frankly though, we really don't know what all the ruckus is about. And it is worth pointing out that we usually agree with EPIC.

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(function() {  
var s = document.createElement('SCRIPT'), s1 = document.getElementsByTagName('SCRIPT')[0];  
s.type = 'text/javascript';  
s.src = 'http://widgets.digg.com/buttons.js';  
s1.parentNode.insertBefore(s, s1);  
})();
```

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(function() {  
var po = document.createElement('script'); po.type = 'text/javascript'; po.async = true;  
po.src = 'https://apis.google.com/js/plusone.js';  
var s = document.getElementsByTagName('script')[0]; s.parentNode.insertBefore(po, s);  
})();
```

One of EPIC's biggest concerns seems to be that Google's new search feature includes search results from Google+. Those results will show up for anyone who is a member of Google+, who is signed into Google, and who conducts a search on Google. The content shown in the results needs to be relevant to the search terms and would come from friends and acquaintances on Google+. Search results are also drawn from the overall internet, just as they were before Google launched the new feature.

Presumably, by drawing content from people you know, your search results will be more relevant to your interests. From that stand point, the new feature is a nice improvement.

Furthermore, the new feature doesn't make anything public that wasn't already public. It just organizes content or profiles from Google+ based on your search terms. That makes it very difficult to see how the feature negatively impacts privacy.

EPIC is arguing that users should have to "opt-in" for Google to have permission to distribute Google+ content through

their search results. While we've been big fans of "opt-in" for years, in this particular case it would do absolutely nothing to protect user privacy.

For years now, Google has offered users the ability to search content on a specific website. All you have to do is type out a search term and then follow it with "site:" and the site you want to search. So, for instance, if you were looking for Ugg boots on Zappos.com, you could simply type out "Ugg site:zappos.com" and you would get search results relevant search results only from Zappos.

This same method can be used to search any social network. Want to find personal profiles on Facebook or LinkedIn? You can do it if you know the name of the person and confine your search to those sites. Presumably, this would also work on Google+. That is, unless the government forced Google to exclude its own sites from using that specific search feature. Frankly, that would be an unreasonable request.

We've been warning people for many years now that you shouldn't be posting things on the internet that you want to remain private or which might be embarrassing. This remains true today. But if you post something on Google+ that comes back to haunt you, forcing Google to eliminate that information from their search results isn't going to make it any less public. It should also be noted that any order that Google stop returning Google+ content in search results would likely raise First Amendment issue and wouldn't prevent other search engines from indexing Google+ content.

EPIC has also asked that the government look into antitrust implications of Google using Google+ content in results. The argument is that Google is promoting its own products and services over those of its competitors. That's a legal issue that we're not prepared to address. What we can say is that we really don't see how Google's new search feature reduces the privacy of anyone who is already posting information to the internet.

by Jim Malmberg

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