

Congress Recent Decision Repealing Online Privacy Rules Will Have Little Consumer Impact

April 7, 2017 - If you listen to the media reports about last week's congressional repeal of FCC privacy rules you may think that Chicken Little is alive and well, and that the sky is falling. The rules which went into effect in the last days of the Obama administration placed significant restrictions on what internet service providers (ISPs) could do with the information they collect about their customer's internet usage. On paper, they sound great. But in reality, they were flawed and probably would have had little impact on the average consumer's online privacy.

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s.src = 'http://widgets.digg.com/buttons.js';
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})();
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When the rules were proposed, we called them a "good start" and hoped that they would be used as a blueprint for future privacy regulations. We also pointed out that they would have limited effect. Why? Well, because they only impacted ISPs. To give you an idea of how little impact that has, think of it this way. Do you get your internet service from the same company that you use for internet searches? Probably not.

Although Google does have an ISP, it is separate from Google search. So, while Google's ISP was prevented from selling or sharing your data, Google search wasn't impacted at all. And since roughly two thirds of all internet searches are conducted by consumers using Google, the FCC rules were completely inadequate to protect anyone's privacy.

When you throw in websites like Yahoo, Bing, Amazon, etc. and realize that none of these companies would have been impacted at all by the rules, you get a pretty good idea of the FCC's impact, or lack thereof.

Ideally, nobody should be able to sell your data without your permission. In reality, we're a long way off from that ideal world. Therefore, it is up to consumers to protect their own information, and there are some tools out there that can help you.

If you really want to shut out your ISP, get a virtual private network (VPN) service. There are a number of low cost providers of these services and they can prevent your ISP or anyone else from learning about you. If you don't want to spend any money, then use a browser or plug-in that can mask your identity, like TOR. It isn't as effective as a VPN but it will significantly help to protect you.

We weren't any happier to see congress' action on the FCC's privacy rules than most of our counterparts. But we think it is important for everyone to understand the impact of those rules on privacy. From our perspective they were very limited indeed.

byJim Malmberg

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