

Internet Search Engines and Our Privacy

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<http://blog.searchbug.com/2013/11/internet-search-engines-privacy/>

Privacy is important to all of us. It's understandable that we don't want our personal information available to anyone and everyone. With more and more of our lives being spent online we can't help but wonder how private our lives really are. Should we be worried about our privacy as we search the web? Let's take a look at what search engines really know about us.

Each of us has an IP address that can be identified on every site we visit. The IP address doesn't give away personal information about us. You could look at it as your internet address, or your domain. An "unresolved" IP looks like a domain and includes information like, location, and internet provider. Let's say however, that you work for a company who names computers after their users; for example, jane.smith.companyname.com. This is rare and doesn't give away anything more than a name. The most a search engine will ever know is that someone who lives in Texas and uses an identified server visited the site.

Cookies are very helpful to search engines like Google in that they give search engines insight into where your IP address pops up. They help search engines know how often users visit their site. They also give insight on each person's behavior. These insights are available for every website owner who chooses to keep track of this data. In a nut shell, it's a business strategy. Search engines want to know what people are interested in so that they can offer more of it.

To search engines you need to be one easily identifiable individual. This is where cookies come in. When your browser talks to Google it does so using a unique numeric ID. This is how search engines know who you are. These sites still have no personal information of yours. It simply recognizes your computer. Because, after all, your entire household could be using one computer and a site would have no way of knowing who is using it at any given moment. Cookies should not be considered a threat. They are simply gathering information about sites (not necessarily you). Its job is to report back and tell site owners what is popular and relevant to users.

Now let's say that you give personally identifiable information to a search engine. Personally identifiable information, also known as PII, means that a company has personal information that lets them know who you are. When it comes to Google cookies, Google has no idea who you really are. They don't know if you have blond hair or red hair, if you're short or tall, if you are male or female. They have no idea. They only know your browser.

However, in another example, say that you are a Yahoo user and you created an account with them; giving your name, address, age, and additional information. This lets Yahoo know who you really are. Yahoo now has personal identification information on you. This means that when you're logged in, Yahoo, or any other search engine where you've logged in, has your search information and your login information.

The next step for search engines is personalized search results. The first attempt at personalized search results was a flop. Yet, just because it didn't work out the first time doesn't mean it won't be attempted again. Search results for this give users customized results based on their age, sex, and other personal information. Thankfully, this would require search engines to need registration from users which means that you could opt out simply by not signing up.

We've already seen some personalization with the search engine Bing that uses social media accounts to share with searchers what their friends are interested in and if they've done a similar search. We also see searches related to our current locations, giving us results in our area. For example, if you search "seafood restaurant" on Google, local results will come up in the search results.

Google and Yahoo (along with other search engines) do not collect personal information on you without your knowledge. As we covered before, creating an account with a search engine does in fact give them your personal information. Any information that Google and Yahoo collect from your account is not disclosed to a third party as stated in their privacy policies. When you do a search on Google that information is recorded. Google records the search, the time of day, the browser type, your internet address, and user ID. All of which is anonymous information. Google also does not give search histories to third parties. If you see personalized ads in your searches, that is the cookies at work.

When a company only knows you by your cookie ID you are completely anonymous. It's only when you login to a user registration system that you become a real live individual, at which point you've given up your anonymity. This may sound scary, but it's not necessarily a bad thing. Search engines like Google and Yahoo are big brands that are trusted by many users. These companies, along with others, have a reputation to keep up and are not looking to break the trust that their customers have in them. In the end, it's up to you on whether you wish to keep your anonymity or not.