

lingua business

Tracked Down

By Paul Gibson



On August 1, 2008 Yahoo, Google and other internet companies were asked to appear before the US House Energy and Commerce Committee, to respond to allegations that they were tracking the movements of users on the web to later target them with specific advertising.

The committee, one of the oldest committees of the US Congress, promotes commerce while protecting public health and consumers in the marketplace. As a government regulator, they asked 33 different internet companies if they were tracking or recording consumer behaviour on the internet, to later use this information to send them specific ads that seemed to match consumer behaviour. What seemed like an ordinary appearance, turned quite interesting due to the responses the committee received.

Take Google for instance. While they pointed out they were not targeting consumers based on the information they get from tracking consumer web use, they asked for more consumer privacy and further limits on government access to consumers. (If you try and limit our use of this information, we should limit yours too!) The fact is that Google knows and tracks each and every click, page visited and user information through a technology called DPI, Deep Packet Inspection.

But Google is not alone. Yahoo also was asked to appear before the committee and respond to the same question. They proceeded to highlight their “opt-out” policies which allow users to “opt-out” or “refuse to” receive ads at all. Among the interesting developments of these policies, is the special protection for minors or children under the age of 13. However, for as much as they swear protection or even transparency in advertising, the collection of data does not stop. This service simply prevents ads from appearing on the users’ screens at their request.

Clever but silly response from AOL (America Online) to the question: Has your company done an analysis of the legal effects of using this information? AOL’s response? “AOL’s online advertising practices are designed to comply with applicable law.” Saying how these practices were designed says nothing about their compliance to today’s laws and regulations.

Cablevision responded by saying that they do not permit the use of their network to tailor or facilitate the tailoring of internet advertisements. However, a quick look at their sites quickly reveals the presence of search and advertising from unaffiliated third parties. So yes, they not only facilitate it, but they also make a profit from it.

Finally, Microsoft Corporation also offered some careful responses and assurances that this practice was not present in any of their sites or online advertising policies.

On an interesting note, **Edward Markey**, the chairman of the committee proposed an “opt-in” permission from consumers, before allowing their behaviour on the web to be tracked - a proposal, which I believe, looks good on paper, but will never come to light.

Is it right for major internet players to track your movements online so they can better match their advertisements with your needs and desires? Maybe not, but that won't stop the collection of data, and after all, you are the one visiting their sites and using their service.