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Google pushes U.S. states to open public records

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Google has been working with state technology officers to create virtual roadmaps by which search engines can find the databases that store public records.

WASHINGTON (AP) -- By providing free consulting and some software, Google is helping state governments make reams of public records that are now unavailable or hard to find online easily accessible to Web surfers.

The Internet search company hopes to eventually persuade federal agencies to employ the same tools -- an effort that excites advocates of open government but worries some consumer-privacy experts.

Google plans to announce Monday that it has already partnered with four states -- Arizona, California, Utah and Virginia -- to remove technical barriers that had prevented its search engine, as well as those of Microsoft and Yahoo, from accessing tens of thousands of public records dealing with education, real estate, health care and the environment.

These newly available records will not be exclusive to the search engines owned by Google, Yahoo and Microsoft.

Patrice McDermott, director of OpenTheGovernment.org, a coalition of more than 65 watchdog groups that advocate greater government openness and accountability, lauded Google's efforts. Since the September 11 attack on the United States, many public agencies have tried to restrict certain data from the Internet due to concerns about national security.

Despite the obvious benefits of this Google initiative for those conducting Web searches, privacy advocates said they are worried about unintended consequences, cautioning that some records may contain personal and confidential information that should not be widely available.

Marc Rotenberg, executive director of the Washington-based Electronic Privacy Information Center, said many public health and financial records should not necessarily be widely available because they often contain citizens' Social Security numbers. Such information should be redacted from records regardless of whether they're viewed online or in person at a government office, he said.

Rotenberg also said Google has a "checkered past" on privacy, noting that the company tracks Internet search users who access government data in order to target ads at them. EPIC recently filed a complaint with the Federal Trade Commission urging it to investigate Google regarding such activities, as well as its proposed acquisition of online advertising company DoubleClick.

Officials from states partnering with Google are hopeful that the education and tools provided to them by the Mountain View, California-based company will make it easier for average citizens to navigate agency Web sites.

"Unless you had a master's degree in government administration, you probably wouldn't find the actual information you're looking for," said Chris Cumiskey, Arizona's chief information officer.

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J.L. Needham, who manages Google's public-sector content partnerships, said at least 70 percent of visitors to government Web sites get there by using commercial search engines. But too often, he said, Web searches do not turn up the information people are looking for simply because government computer systems aren't programmed in a way that allows commercial search engines to access their databases.

Still, if users can't get the information they're looking for, they blame the search engine, not the government, Needham lamented. The remedy, which Google has been working on with state technology officers for roughly six months, is to create virtual roadmaps by which search engines can find the databases that store public records.

"We have a vested interest in ensuring that the results we provide in every area, including government services, are high quality, authoritative and trustworthy," he said. Google has had discussions with several federal agencies, including the departments of Education and Energy, about making their data easier to access, Needham said.

Not all government officials have responded favorably to Google's effort, Needham said, sometimes because they assume Google is trying to sell them a new service.

California's chief information officer, Clark Kelso, said he is concerned about the consumer-privacy issues raised by this initiative and he has directed all state agencies to redact Social Security numbers and other confidential information from documents that will now be available online.

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