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EDITORIAL

The Government and the Web

Published: August 24, 2009

The Obama administration is considering new rules to make it easier for government Web sites to use "cookies" and other technology to track visitors. There are valid reasons for using such tools, but the government has to build in robust privacy protections.

The Clinton administration adopted a rule severely limiting tracking on federal Web sites. Tracking could be done only if officials could prove a compelling need and the agency head had personally authorized it.

Tracking technology can help improve the quality of Web sites by monitoring how many people are visiting and how they use the site, and by personalizing the experience. For example, the Parks Service could offer information based on where a user lives.

Browser makers have made it easier for users to remove cookies or even reject them wholesale. But tracking technology can still present a real privacy risk, especially for the uninitiated. If users give personal information on one government Web site, the government could track visits to its other Web sites, like one offering information on drug addiction or H.I.V./AIDS. It could do this with cookies, or by keeping track of users' IP addresses, which may be tied to specific individuals.

In recent years, the government has monitored some Americans' library use and illegally eavesdropped on telephone calls and e-mail. Privacy groups are concerned that the new rules could pave the way for third parties to collect large amounts of data through government sites — for example, if an agency site posted a YouTube video carrying its own cookies.

The Office of Management and Budget is developing the new rules. Officials say they recognize that people must be told that their use of Web sites is being tracked — and be given a chance to opt out. More is needed. The government should commit to displaying such notices prominently on all Web pages — and to making it easy for users to choose not to be tracked.

It must promise that tracking data will be used only for the purpose it was collected for: if someone orders a pamphlet on living with cancer, it should not end up in a general database. Information should be purged regularly and as quickly as possible. These rules must apply to third parties that operate on government sites.

The Obama administration is working to better harness the power of the Internet to deliver government services. That is good. But it needs to be mindful that people should be able to get help and be assured that their privacy is being vigilantly protected.

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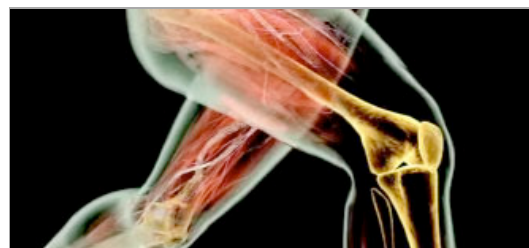
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