Google's G1 phone makes it easy to track surfing habits

By Leslie Cauley, USA TODAY

The new Google phone, dubbed the G1, has been touted as a working man's smartphone — a cheap, Web-friendly wireless device that can make life easier for millions of consumers.

The G1, as it turns out, also stands to make life a whole lot easier for Google — by making it a snap to track your movements on the mobile Web and send you ads as it does on the desktop. The device, sold exclusively by T-Mobile, gives Google access to your e-mail, instant messages, contact lists, Web-search history and geographic location. By keeping tabs on your mobile life, Google can quickly figure out what sort of ads to send your way, and when.

MARKETING MOVE: Google's ad strategy goes mobile

"It's like a walking surveillance device," says Jeffrey Chester, executive director of the Center for Digital Democracy, a consumer watchdog group.

It's never been easier to get information on the run. Smart devices such as the G1 and Apple iPhone let you put the Internet in your pocket and go — down the block or across the country. But this convenience could cost plenty in lost privacy, consumer advocates and tech analysts say. Once data have been collected and warehoused, you lose control of it forever.


Mobile consumers are especially vulnerable, Markey says. Unlike PCs, cellphones tend to be used by one person exclusively. The information they telegraph — on Web browsing, lifestyle and more — tends to be "highly personalized."

That's the main reason mobile data are so prized: The information is incredibly accurate. It's also why Markey and other privacy advocates say the debate about online privacy will become even more intense as advertising migrates to the mobile Web.

Mobile advertising is still relatively new — G1 users, for now, get ads only through search results, for instance — but it's clearly a hot spot. The market is expected to...
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7. View documents
What Google does: Stores viewed documents/attachments on Google servers. Also scanned for viruses.
* = Information Google collects is associated with the user's unique registration information and can be cross-referenced with non-G1 data that may become available.
Sources: Google/USA TODAY research

reach $2.2 billion by 2012, from about $800 million now, according to JupiterResearch. Ultimately, it could surpass the traditional Web, now a $20 billion ad market.

Yahoo, Microsoft and other ad-supported search engines collect information as Google does. But the sheer size and scope of Google's data-mining operation — the Web giant performs more than 80% of all desktop searches worldwide — makes it a uniquely pervasive presence, says Chester.

Google and Yahoo, the two biggest players in search advertising, say their self-imposed privacy policies are sufficient to protect consumers, noting that they do not collect or store information in a way that can be directly tracked to an individual.

Peter Fleischer, global privacy counsel for Google, says Google tries to make privacy language as "transparent" as possible. Anne Toth, head of privacy for Yahoo, says, "Trust is a fundamental part of our business."

Privacy policy smorgasbord

Both companies have one master privacy policy and individual ones for each product. Google currently has more than two dozen, including a separate one for the G1.

To help people make sense of it all, Google devotes a video channel to privacy at its YouTube subsidiary. The videos, just three to five minutes each, feature Google employees talking about the sorts of information that Google collects and why. Generic safeguards, such as how to manage cookies, are also discussed.

Fleischer says the videos are Google's attempt to make privacy policies more accessible. "The average consumer is not going to read them," he says. "We might as well face that fact as an industry."

Joseph Turow, professor of communications at the University of Pennsylvania’s Annenberg School for Communication, says privacy policies, in general, are nearly impenetrable for average consumers.

"It's crazy," Turow says. "I don't think anybody could possibly go through these multiple layers and understand them."

The new Congress might pass an electronic bill of rights this year, which would likely include tough new privacy rules for Internet companies, Markey says. Now, Internet companies must abide by certain privacy rules — regarding children, for example — but their privacy policies are largely voluntary.

"We cannot make a national privacy policy based on the current pledge of the current CEO of a company," Markey says.

Markey wrote the landmark 1999 law that requires phone and cable TV companies to give consumers an "opt-in" choice for deciding whether their personal data can be used for commercial purposes. He says Google, Yahoo and other companies should be held to the same standard.

With mobile becoming an integral part of day-to-day life, he also thinks other changes are in order, such as: An individual should have the right to see the data a company has amassed on him or her and be able to have that record expunged. And, he says, a company should not be allowed to deny a service — say, mobile search — just because a consumer doesn’t want personal data collected.

One thing everybody agrees on: The mobile Web is exploding.

According to Forrester Research, about 54.4 million people — consumers and business users — surf the mobile Web. By 2013, that number is expected to more than double to 110.7 million, Forrester estimates. Total

http://www.usatoday.com/tech/wireless/phones/2009-02-08-google-g1-web-tracking-privacy_N.htm
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Falling prices on cool new devices have helped. The G1, sold by T-Mobile with a two-year service contract, costs $199. The 3G iPhone — sold by AT&T with a two-year contract — starts at $199. That's less than half the $500 sticker price of Web-enabled mobile devices a few years ago.

Another factor: Consumers are dumping land lines by the millions, creating a new generation of wireless-only homes and users. According to the government, about 16% of U.S. homes are mobile-only — up from 6% in 2004 — and thousands of wireless converts are snipping the cord daily.

The combination — cool devices, cheap prices, a friendly mobile Web and the rise of wireless-only users — is redefining the broadband game, says Forrester analyst Doug Williams. "Now, there are plenty of consumer-friendly applications that provide for a unique consumer experience when you connect to the mobile Web," he says.

The G1, in many ways, embodies the best and the worst of the mobile Web. The device is based on the new Android operating system, whose development was overseen by Google. More than 30 companies participated in the development of Android, but Google had decision-making authority over design, engineering and more.

The G1 is high-performance and incredibly easy to use. It comes preloaded with familiar Google applications, allowing users to reach, with one click, some of its most popular services: Google Maps (MyLocation, satellite, traffic and Street View), Gmail (e-mail), YouTube, Google Calendar and Google Talk (IM service).

It also has a touch-screen, traditional qwerty keyboard and a 3.2-megapixel camera. Music player? Of course. You can also add and subtract applications.

On the downside, once you fire up the G1, you're on Google's radar — whether you like it or not.

To use the device, users must set up a Google account. The registration process creates a "personal identifier" — basically, a number that Google uses to store information about you, which Google does not consider to be personal information.

It enables Google to field your search queries quickly when you're on the run. It also gives Google access to your contact lists, IMs, e-mails, personal calendar, social networking and video downloading — the videos you'd fess up to publicly, as well as the ones you might not. As for all those "personal photos" swapped with pals on Facebook, MySpace and Twitter: Google can grab those, too.

Everything gets crammed into your personal "file," so to speak, along with a lot of other stuff — such as where you bank, shop and cruise on the Web when you're lonely, bored or just in the mood for a little fun.

You can't see what information is collected

Once your information has been collected and stored, there's no way to get rid of it. You can't see what's been collected or have it expunged. It's Google's for as long as it wants to hold onto it.

Cole Brodman, T-Mobile's chief technology officer, says some of the privacy concerns around the G1 highlight the challenge of trying to "blend the Web world with the mobile world in a way that doesn't violate" consumer privacy, particular in the area of mobile advertising.

Carriers for years shied away from mobile advertising, in part because they were limited by law and in part because they didn't want to risk offending customers. But the world is changing, he says.

Brodman says the mobile world is in flux right now, noting that ad-based companies like Google didn't exist until fairly recently. Neither did the concept of "contextual" advertising — Google's mantra — which is the idea of providing users with advertisements that are relevant to their day-to-day lives.

How to determine what's relevant? By keeping close tabs on your online life, of course. Figuring out what's helpful, and what's just plain intrusive, is the real trick, Brodman says.

"There are a lot of new business models out there," he says. "Some of them are exciting, and some will probably be a little scary, just like the Internet."
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**By the way, posting online for the world to see doesn't make you that much smarter.

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