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Eugene Robinson

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I'm Feeling . . . Surveilled

By Eugene Robinson

Tuesday, January 24, 2006; Page A17

It's so easy, so seductive, such a reliable source of instant gratification. Just put your cursor inside that familiar unadorned rectangle, type a name or a few artfully considered words, click the search button -- I never click on "I'm Feeling Lucky" because luck has nothing to do with it; this is all about having mad skills, about Google mastery -- and within mere fractions of a second you can luxuriate in the illusion of perfect omniscience.

We Google because we think we must, but sometimes we Google simply because we can. When we're feeling especially cocky or especially insecure, we Google ourselves. When I do that, I get links to columns I've written, along with links to screeds that others have written about those columns. But I also get links to material about the pro football player who shares my name, and who once had the misfortune of being arrested for soliciting a prostitute, actually an undercover cop, the night before he was to play in the Super Bowl.

As if that weren't enough, now there's another intruder -- another writer, of all things, who has my name and is also African American. He seems to have worked mainly in magazines, not newspapers, and one link speaks of his "love of crime and mayhem" (only on the printed page, I presume) and his "belief in the transformative power of violence." Both these guys are younger than I am, and since I was here first, they really should be required to use a middle initial or something.

But I digress.

The point was omniscience, or apparent omniscience. All you

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need is a computer and an Internet connection. Google then uses its tens of thousands of servers to let you believe you know all there is to know about everything and everybody. In truth, of course, what you get from a Google search is an overload of information and pseudo-information. If you come across two versions of a fact -- the birth date of an aging world leader, say -- you can go with the one that gets the most hits, but you do so at your own peril. The mob can be dead wrong.

But if Google's search results aren't truly omniscient, it turns out that the company itself is potentially so. Google has the ability to track an individual's searches -- to record where your mind wanders when the boss isn't looking, what political commentators you read, what you're thinking about buying and what price you're willing to pay, even what kinds of fantasies you entertain late at night.

Google is able to know too much, and I guess it's no surprise that the Bush administration wants in on the action. The Justice Department's demand to see an entire week's worth of Google searches looks to me like an attempt by the administration to get its foot in the door, and if I'm right, it's even more of an Orwellian threat than the National Security Agency's snooping on phone calls and e-mails. The NSA snooping is illegal and unforgivable, to be sure, but the spooks want access to communications, and when we communicate with another human being we always censor ourselves to some degree. When we ask a question of Google, it's akin to being in the privacy of the confessional. We lay ourselves bare.

Google is right to resist the Justice Department's overreaching subpoena. Cyber-privacy is going to be one of the great issues of the coming years, as servers fill up with more and more of our most intimate dreams, ambitions, beliefs and fears. It's much easier to store information in cyberspace than to erase it -- it's hard even to find all the actual machines on which a certain computer file resides. Computers do our remembering for us these days, and government can't be given a license to browse at will.

Keeping government at bay will be an ongoing process, because in the Information Age both technology and hegemony are short-lived. Dell clawed its way to becoming the dominant manufacturer of computers, but then hardware became almost a commodity and prices began to plummet. Microsoft has maintained its near-monopoly in operating system software, but Bill Gates is frantically trying to adapt before Google moves that whole business to the Web.

Someday, I imagine, you'll probably be able to type (or maybe just *think*) the name of a person, and a life-size hologram of the subject will instantly appear in your living room. In which case, I hope Gene Robinson the beefy football player and Gene Robinson the violence-loving writer know how to take a joke.

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