Privacy Group Objects To DoubleClick Deal

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Google's proposed $3.1 billion purchase of online ad firm DoubleClick would merge two powerful digital data gatherers that track people's online activities, raising serious privacy concerns that the Federal Trade Commission should investigate, consumer advocates allege in a complaint to be filed with the FTC today. The deal would create a firm with access to more information about consumers' Internet activities than any other company in the world, the Electronic Privacy Information Center said in its complaint.

"Google will operate with virtually no legal obligation to ensure the privacy, security and accuracy of the personal data that it collects. At this time, there is simply no consumer privacy issue more pressing for the commission to consider than Google's plan to combine the search histories and Web site visit records of Internet users," the complaint says.

Google, which operates the world's largest online search engine, has already been met with opposition to its proposed merger. This week, Microsoft, which was outbid for DoubleClick, urged the government to look into antitrust and privacy issues related to creating such a large advertising firm.

Google commands 60 percent of the U.S. market share in online search advertising revenue, according to research firm eMarketer. DoubleClick reaches 80 to 85 percent of Internet users with its display and video ads, according to EPIC.

Now Google wants to merge data from Google and DoubleClick to profile and target Internet users, said the complaint, in which the Center for Digital Democracy and U.S. Public Interest Research Group joined. Google executives have said they are...
interested in "third-party cookies," the tracking technology used by DoubleClick to analyze online consumer behavior.

Google officials said that they have not seen the complaint but that they think it has no basis. "User, advertiser and publisher trust is paramount to the success of our business and to the success of our acquisition," said Nicole Wong, Google's deputy general counsel. "We can't imagine taking any actions that would undermine these relationships or the trust people have in using our products and service."

Wong also said that the data DoubleClick collects belongs to its clients and so DoubleClick has "limited rights" to use it.

Last month, Google announced a policy under which it will not be able to track a search query back to an individual after 18 to 24 months. Google said it did so partly to address the concerns of European privacy officials about the company's data-retention practices.

But Alexander Dix, chairman of the European Union's International Working Group on Data Protection in Telecommunications, said Google must further improve its privacy policy. Although the new policy is an improvement, "the requirements of the [European] Data Protection Directive are still not being met," he said in an e-mail yesterday.

The EPIC complaint noted that Google collects its users' search terms in connection with their Internet protocol addresses and does not offer people the opportunity to "opt out" of the collection.

In 1999, DoubleClick drew criticism when it announced a plan to merge an offline database of consumer records with its online user-history database. The ensuing uproar and a 2000 FTC complaint filed by EPIC led DoubleClick to cancel the plan, but since then, the online ad industry has become more sophisticated.

The consumer groups also want the FTC to order DoubleClick and Google to destroy cookies that can identify users and to order Google to give people access to the personally identifiable data the company keeps on them.

Staff researcher Richard Drezen contributed to this report.
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