Internet surveillance providers

Keeping web records longer than necessary won't stop child pornographers or terrorists, it'll only help hackers.

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The administration has opened talks with leading Internet providers and search engines about preserving their records. The Justice Department apparently wants Internet companies to keep two years’ worth of data on where users go, what they search for and to whom they send e-mail. The ostensible purpose is to combat child pornography and terrorism. That’s a laudable goal. It’s not at all clear, however, that this plan would put more bad guys behind bars. It’s more likely that the new troves of data would attract hackers or trial lawyers.

Typically, users are assigned an identifier by their Internet service provider each time they go online. That identifier is collected by the websites they visit, along with some record of what they do at the site. Search engines such as Google also record what users look for, whether it’s discounted barbecue grills or recipes for homemade bombs.

Under current law, investigators need to obtain a warrant to inspect the records of online activity. Before they do, though, they can order Internet service providers to keep a suspect’s records for at least 90 days, no matter how little evidence they’ve obtained. The Justice Department says it’s not trying to make it easier to look at someone’s online activity. It just wants to be sure that, by the time someone becomes a suspect, plenty of footprints. Now the Bush administration wants to make those footprints more enduring.

Before Internet companies or lawmakers agree to this plan, the Justice Department should have to show that the change is needed to put more child pornographers and terrorists behind bars. How many cases, if any, have foundered because investigators should have to show that the change is needed to put more child pornographers and terrorists behind bars. It’s clear, however, that this plan would put more bad guys behind bars. It’s more likely that the new troves of data would attract hackers or trial lawyers.

Prior to the move, the issues at hand are:

- States join forces against electoral college
- Dangerous turf war
- Internet surveillance providers
- Times primary endorsements
- Our presidential pick for ’08 (but you’ll have to wait)

The benefits of the new approach may be questionable, but the risks are not.