

TRUMP FTC TO FINALLY POUND GOOGLE'S NUTS FOR SPYING ON ALL CONSUMERS

Google facing FTC scrutiny over privacy — yet again

By [Craig Timberg](#)



Two advocacy groups allege that Google acted in a “highly deceptive manner” in changing its privacy policy in June to allow the merging of data collected by various services owned by the company. (Kim Jin-a/Newsis via AP)

Consumer advocates have [filed a complaint](#) with the Federal Trade Commission charging that Google violated user privacy through a policy change that gives the company more leeway to build profiles of people as they browse the Web and use Google services.

The complaint, submitted Thursday by Consumer Watchdog and the Privacy Rights Clearinghouse, alleges that Google acted in a “highly deceptive manner” in changing its privacy policy in June to allow the merging of data collected by various services owned by the company, such as Google Maps,

Google search and the DoubleClick online advertising service. The result, the groups say, allows for the gathering of more comprehensive information on most people who use the Web.

The changes, which were activated if users opted in when prompted by a query, were widely covered by tech-oriented news sites at the time. Google disputes the allegation that the company acted deceptively and said it made the changes only after testing among users around the world.

[\[Googling yourself will soon bring a new surprise\]](#)

But the consumer advocates contend that Google did a poor job explaining the changes to its users, causing many to accept changes that undermined their personal privacy without understanding the consequences.

“Google indeed has been a serial privacy violator,” said John M. Simpson, privacy project director for Consumer Watchdog. “Something needs to be done that gets their attention.”

The issue is sensitive because of Google’s history of privacy controversies, one of which resulted in a [consent decree with the FTC](#) in 2011 requiring 20 years of audits and promises to not misrepresent privacy policy changes in the future. That decree resulted from Google's handling of user data when it started its ill-fated “Google Buzz” social network.

[\[Pokémon Go had ‘full access’ to the Google accounts of some iPhone players\]](#)

The consumer advocates say the June changes violated that consent decree and that the company should be forced to relinquish the advertising revenue collected since then — an amount that Simpson said could reach into the billions of dollars. The company agreed to a [record FTC fine of \\$22.5 million](#) in 2012 after allegations that the company worked around privacy settings on Apple's Safari browser to track users.

Google's June changes to its privacy policy drew scrutiny in October, when a [report in ProPublica](#) described the shifts as backtracking on a practice, dating to Google's purchase of DoubleClick in 2007, of keeping the advertising network’s data separate from the information collected for other Google products. The June changes, ProPublica wrote, “quietly erased that last privacy line in the sand — literally crossing out the lines in its privacy policy that promised to keep the two pots of data separate by default.”

[\[How to make Google forget your most embarrassing searches\]](#)

Google has portrayed the privacy policy changes as a natural evolution as users access various company services across a variety of devices, and the company said it worked hard to make sure that users understood the changes and how to manage the privacy settings on their accounts.

“This past June we updated our ads system, and the associated user controls, to match the way people use Google today: across many different devices,” the company said in a statement to The Washington Post that echoed the statement to ProPublica in October. “Before we launched this update, we tested it around the world with the goal of understanding how to provide users with clear choice and

transparency. As a result, it is 100 percent optional — if users do not opt-in to these changes, their Google experience will remain unchanged.”

Government scrutiny in the United States, Europe and beyond has become a recurring issue for Google as it has grown into one of the world’s most profitable and pervasive companies. Regulators on several occasions have imposed fines and restrictions that sometimes have served to dampen the company’s rapid growth.

The FTC issued a statement on Monday confirming receipt of the groups' complaint and said the agency is “closely reviewing it.”