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10-5a Search Queries

One of the major privacy criticisms levied against Google is that the company keeps track of users' search terms. Consider all of the things you have ever searched for using Google's search engine. Now consider how comfortable you feel knowing the company has recorded and stored all those search terms ... forever. This tracking cannot be turned off—users can disable their Google web history to remove any external record of searches and prevent the information from being used in certain ways, but Google will continue to record and store search terms for internal purposes. To be fair, this practice is not limited to Google—many other Internet firms do the same. However, because Google is the most popular search engine in the world, it is more heavily scrutinized.

The big question users ask is whether their search terms can be traced back to them personally. Google claims that although it stores users' search terms, after 18 months the data becomes “anonymized” and theoretically untraceable. However, critics debate this claim because supposedly anonymized data from other search engines were later matched to specific users. Google claims it treats this information with respect, using it to refine its search engine. Yet under the Third Party Doctrine and the Patriot Act the U.S. government could subpoena the data if it is deemed necessary for national security. Needless to say, Google's storage of users' search terms is a controversial topic. In fact, several smaller search engines such as DuckDuckGo use the fact that they do not track user activity as a competitive differentiator from Google.



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