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10-5d From Many Privacy Policies to One

For the majority of its history, Google has had separate privacy policies for most of its products, each detailing how Google collects and uses information for that product. By 2012 Google's rapid growth and expansion from just search into an Internet behemoth had resulted in over 70 separate Google privacy policies across its offerings. This was beneficial in one sense, as consumers who took the time to read the policies could understand in great detail how Google was operating each product. On the other hand, the overwhelming amount of policies was confusing, tedious, and time-consuming to sift through, and the average consumer would have been hard-pressed to decipher them.

In 2012 Google announced it was unifying its myriad privacy policies into just one, which would govern Google's practices across its entire organization. At first glance, this seemed like an efficient change. However, it had many subtler implications that sparked widespread concern. Could consumers still opt out of specific information-sharing in individual products? Did the new policy adequately explain all the different ways Google gathered and shared information so consumers could be properly informed? Did the new policy expand Google's information-gathering power under the guise of making things simpler?

One especially concerning aspect of Google's new policy was that it allowed the company to take all the information it gathered on its users across all its products and combine them together. Coupled with the new unified login system, the new privacy policy allowed Google to use information on a much larger and more encompassing scale. Users' Google searches might affect the ads they see on their Android phones, YouTube browsing histories could be combined with Gmail activity to better understand user interests, and more. Was this "all-seeing eye" approach acceptable, especially for such a large company with so many widely used services?

Understandably, the announcement of a unified privacy policy led to considerable backlash. Google received letters from Congress members and U.S. attorneys general expressing concern about the new policy. Competitors such as Microsoft took advantage of the situation to run ads drawing consumer attention to Google's potentially unsettling approach to user privacy. The EU asked Google to delay implementation of the policy until it could study and better understand its implications. In defending itself, Google emphasized that it was not gathering any more information than before, nor was it making any changes to existing users' ability to opt out of information-sharing or use product-specific privacy settings. It was merely making its existing practices simpler and clearer for customers to understand, as well as improving its own ability to serve users by unifying the information it gathered across offerings. It argued the new policy was in legal compliance and refused to delay the transition. On March 1, 2012, the unified policy took effect.

Google's new privacy policy was poorly received in Europe. The EU Justice Commissioner questioned the legality of Google's new policy according to EU law. French data regulators launched an investigation concerning the new policy, believing the policy might not adhere to EU Internet transparency and privacy laws. Google maintained its new policy met EU

regulations. However, in 2013 six European countries banded together to take legal action against Google for not complying with the requests of the government. Google has since been fined by several European countries for breaking their privacy or data protection laws, including nearly \$1 million by Spain and \$204,000 by France. The Netherlands threatened a fine of up to \$15 million if Google does not comply with its desired changes. The company narrowly avoided yet another fine in the United Kingdom by agreeing to change its privacy policy for U.K. users, and there are signs it may make such a change Europe-wide in an attempt to allay the concerns of the EU and its member nations. Google has learned that activities which are legal in one country might not be legal in another.

The public's reaction to Google's unified privacy policy once again brings to light the more general debate over the company's gathering and use of user information. Supporters argue that Google uses this information to create improved services for users. It helps the firm remain competitive with strong rivals such as Apple and Facebook. Critics are concerned that Google is constantly overreaching and seems to have little actual concern for user privacy, only slowing or backtracking when it is forced to by consumer backlash or governmental regulators. Critics are also worried by the ease with which Google appears to change its policies, which could spell trouble for users and their privacy rights. In 2016, for instance, Google—which had previously banned its online advertising subsidiary DoubleClick from using personally identifiable information—removed the ban. Double-Click, which uses cookies to track and store user information, may be able to use personal information to develop more targeted advertising campaigns based on user history. These concerns are especially serious because so many users depend on some aspect of Google, whether it be Gmail, Android phones, or other services.

Chapter 10: Google: The Drive to Balance Privacy with Profit: 10-5d From Many Privacy Policies to One
Book Title: Business Ethics: Ethical Decision Making and Cases
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