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10-6 Government Response to Privacy Issues

Consumer concerns over privacy issues prompted Congress to consider new legislation regulating what information Internet companies such as Google can collect and how they can use it. Internet companies, in turn, are attempting to make such legislation unnecessary by developing their own industry standards, such as the “Do Not Track” feature now found on all major web browsers. Such self-regulation is an attempt to ward off federal legislation that could seriously limit the tracking activities of companies like Google.

Some of the ideas that federal regulators have been discussing include a User’s Bill of Rights and a mandatory Do Not Track mechanism. The Bill of Rights would, among other things, require companies to adhere to certain privacy practices. Its intent in this area would be to make Internet privacy policies easier for users to understand. A mandatory Do Not Track mechanism would be comparable to Do Not Call legislation, which makes it illegal for companies to sell to consumers over the telephone if those consumers are on the national Do Not Call registry. A similar law regulating Internet tracking could seriously impact how Internet companies collect information.

Many states are dissatisfied with the lack of federal action on this topic and have passed their own Internet privacy laws. California law, for example, provides special privacy protection to minors online and requires websites to disclose whether they are respecting the “Do Not Track” requests they receive from user browsers. However, more recent government decisions have overturned privacy regulations that would have required Internet providers to get users’ permission before being able to sell their data. Critics claim that the government is failing to address the privacy gap, giving online companies like Google free rein in collecting, storing, and using user information.

Because legislation could be a serious threat to Google, the company spends millions on lobbying and employs lobbyists on its staff. Google hopes to stave off regulation it feels restricts its ability to coordinate targeted advertising or offer customized services to users. However, with privacy issues and Internet breaches becoming a growing concern, the chance of increased regulation in the future is high. Although Google might not be able to prevent legislation restricting some of the activities of Internet firms, it can work with regulators to push for legislation with less of a negative effect on its operations. Google’s lobbyists are having a profound impact on laws safeguarding Internet security.



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