

FROM: NO CCTV

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Attn: News Desks
Political, Home Affairs Correspondents

-- BEGINS --

GOOGLE STREET VIEW NOT UP EVERYONE'S STREET

Google has launched its controversial Street View feature in the UK, publishing street level photographs of 25 cities on the internet. Street View is an extension of the Google Maps technology that already displays overhead satellite images.

Street View is a clever toy that allows people to view tourist attractions, historic sites and monuments. However, Google has also captured residential streets allowing anyone with a computer to view images of people's private homes. Often people have been captured by the system too. Google says that as the images were taken on public land they are within the law, that their system blurs faces and number plates and that you can ask to have images taken down. The obscuring is done by computer and just a scant browse through Google's images shows that it does not always work - as a result some people's faces or car number plates are clearly visible. Even where faces are obscured it can still be possible to identify people.

Whilst it is one thing to film historic sites or monuments, it is another thing to film people's private homes, driveways, gardens and cars. Surely Google should have sought the permission of people before they took the photographs. Google's claims that the system records no more than you could see just walking down the street is disingenuous - the images are more like driving down the street in a double decker bus with a long lens camera and not everyone in the world is able to walk down a quiet suburban road in Sheffield.

Google is effectively saying that privacy no longer exists. What is more no-one really seems to be able to explain the point of filming people's houses. A surprising number of posts at the end of news items seem to be from people who are thrilled to have their house on the net - surely they could just step out of their front doors and marvel at the real thing! In a celebrity dross driven world it's almost as if nothing exists until it's been on the telly or in this case the computer screen.

It is up to us to define privacy as new technology emerges - we need a certain amount of privacy to lead our lives. For instance in 2007 Facebook ran into trouble [1] for broadcasting people's online purchases to their friends - suddenly people realised that if you want to surprise someone with a present then you need some privacy. We all tell white lies, like telling your Auntie that the curtains she wants to give you are too big for your living room, lovely though they are. What happens when your Auntie goes on Google Street View and sees your windows are in fact the right size?

Even though faces and number plates are obscured, somewhere Google holds the unobscured images. Google's assurances that people can request that images be taken down does not address the issue that Google has a database of these images. Will they actually permanently delete all versions of the images that people ask to be removed? Who will have access to the database of images? As well as the originals held by Google, images may be cached elsewhere on the net or they may have already been downloaded on to individuals' computers.

In his book No Place to Hide [2], Robert O'Harrow Jr. looks at companies that harvest databases for data matching and profiling. They are able to construct dossiers of individuals

in the USA using extremely powerful data matching techniques on super computers. One such company was Seisint who created a data-searching product called "Matrix" which: "gave investigators nearly instant access to a rich dossier on virtually any adult in America". O'Harrow recounts how in 2002 Hank Asher, Seisint founder and inventor of Matrix, used the system to construct a profile of the so-called "Washington sniper" [3].

"It wasn't long before he had a suspect and passed along the man's name and number to police. His work was a testament to the power of Matrix. It was also wrong. "So I ran a profile of the distance of every one of the murders, and I came up with a guy that lived like a hundred feet from one of them, five hundred feet from another, two thousand feet from another. I mean, the glove fit," he said. "And I sent that up to them and I can't imagine what that poor fellow..." Asher laughed in an embarrassed way about his mistake. "

Seisint has since been acquired by the UK based Reed Elsevier Group.

It is likely that police, security services and local authorities will make use of Street View. Another technology in the pipeline is image searching [4] based on a starting image. When that is perfected it will be possible to enter say an anti-war poster and then search Google Street View images to find places where such a poster is displayed. Whilst this feature may not be on the front page of Google it is likely that police and security services will have the ability. Of course currently the images are not right up to date but commercial applications of the data are likely to drive the need to take the photos more often.

In a Times article [5] in 2007, Technology lawyer Struan Robertson of Pinsent Masons said that whilst it is fine to take snaps of other people without their consent the rules are different for Google:

"if we're taking snaps for commercial use, in which individuals are identifiable, there is no such exemption. The subjects must be notified, and that is hard for Google to do. Even a loudspeaker on top of the camera cars ("Hi, it's Google here, say 'cheese' everybody!") might not suffice.

The law sets extra requirements for so-called sensitive personal data: it demands explicit consent, not just notification. That means when taking pictures of someone leaving a church or sexual health clinic – which could reveal a religious belief or an illness – camera cars might need to pull over and start picking up signatures."

It is also strange at a time when photographers in the UK are being treated as terrorists [6] that Google are allowed to photograph with impunity. Last year the UK police launched an advertising campaign [7] in several UK cities, informing people that they should view photographers with suspicion. This ridiculous poster campaign led to a string of parodies [8] being posted on the internet.

Privacy International is planning to legally challenge [9] Google Street View. Even if Google wins a legal challenge and is acting within current legislative law what about common decency and fairness? Just because a technology exists does not mean we have to use it, we must think carefully about its implications.

We need to draw limits of what is and what is not acceptable in terms of Google's mapping technology. It is up to us to preserve some privacy. That said, not all uses of Google Street View are bad - for instance it can be used to highlight the position of surveillance cameras in our cities!

-- ENDS --

References:

- [1] See <http://www.binaryfreedom.info/node/258>
- [2] <http://www.noplacetohide.net/>
- [3] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2002/oct/22/usgunviolence.usa4>
- [4] <http://news.cnet.com/2100-1038-5182775.html>
- [5] <http://business.timesonline.co.uk/tol/business/law/article1893385.ece>
- [6] <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/7892273.stm>
- [7] http://www.met.police.uk/campaigns/campaign_ct_2008.htm
- [8] <http://boingboing.net/2008/03/05/remixing-the-london.html>
- [9] <http://www.out-law.com/page-9889>

NOTES TO EDITORS:

1. No CCTV is a UK group campaigning against the excessive use of surveillance cameras in the UK. Their homepage is at www.no-cctv.org.uk
2. For further information contact Charles Farrier at press@no-cctv.org.uk