



You've Got Jail

http://www.truthdig.com/report/item/google_spying_pornography_20060124

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By Robert Scheer

In case someone in the Justice Department is reading this, let me hasten to explain why I just clicked on the Victoria's Secret online catalog photo featuring a certain "Very Sexy Lace & Mesh Garter Belt." AOL made me do it.

Yes, the very same AOL which, like Yahoo and MSN, but not Google, has readily agreed to let you government snoops scrutinize the search words and results from their online search engine data archives. If AOL is going to let the government know where I've been, they should admit they entrapped me!

(Honestly, officer, I heard that perky voice say "you've got mail," and then this ad popped up, and there was this lady in her undergarments, and anyway it was just research.)

OK, so for the time being, the Bush administration claims that it won't try to connect my name, or yours, with the massive bits of raw data they are demanding from the companies with the most popular search engines. Apparently they are seeking evidence to prove that online porn is very popular and easily accessible as part of a last-ditch lawsuit to implement the 1998 Child Online Protection Act blocked by the courts.

I'm not sure that proving the popularity of pornography is going to make the case for censoring it, but the point here today is my extreme discomfort with the Justice Department's cozy relationship with online giants like Microsoft and AOL, who already know way, way too much about how we as individuals use the Internet. Why should I trust the Justice Department any more than I trust the NSA bugging phone calls and scanning e-mails without warrants, or Homeland Security looking for terrorists by scrutinizing bookstore purchases and library check-outs?

Bottom line is these guys in the Bush administration are obsessed voyeurs, poking their noses into everyone's business, whether the excuse is squelching pornography or preventing terrorism. They simply do not believe civil liberties and privacy are important. It is an executive branch power trip, and completely anti-democratic.

Corporations, of course, are not built to think about such lofty ideas as democracy, however, focusing instead on the bottom line. In the world of high-tech privacy, companies like AOL are also two-timers, collecting data on us users of their services so they can better feed us advertising and other revenue generating products, even as they try to protect that data from identity thieves.

In acquiescing to the unwarranted demand of the Justice Department to pore over the companies' records, AOL, Yahoo and Microsoft are sliding down a slippery slope, unconvincingly claiming the data dump to the feds has no implications for online privacy. Does anybody think they won't cooperate if the government comes back and asks for IP addresses — your computer's unique signature on the Web — for everybody who dared type in questionable searches like "growing marijuana" and "fertilizer bombs?"

The fact is, until Google made its demur public, these companies didn't even tell us about the deals they were cutting with the feds, and they are still not being forthcoming with what exactly they've given up to date. We only have their word that they are protecting our privacy.

"This is the government's nose under the search engine's tent," said Marc Rotenberg of the Electronic Privacy Information Center. "If companies like Google respond to this kind of subpoena ... I don't see why the next subpoena might not say, 'Give us what we asked for the last time — plus a little more.'"

Fortunately, Google, the latest high-tech upstart giant, dared to challenge the government's claim of an unbridled right to break into our information-age virtual homes. While avoiding the privacy argument as the others did because individual IP addresses were not requested at this time, Google forthrightly sounded the alarm on government arrogance.

"Google is not a party to this lawsuit and (the DOJ's) demand for information overreaches," said a company statement. The subpoena is "overbroad, unduly burdensome, vague and intended to harass," argued a company lawyer.

Whether their motivation is moral or simply concern about the bottom line, it is a good thing Google has the corporate guts to resist an administration that is addicted to overreaching.

As for the guardians of my data over at Time Warner's AOL, I can only hope that when the spooks take their information demands to the next level, that AOL will back up my plea that it was merely a slip of the mouse that hyper-linked me to the Victoria's Secret catalog, and not verboten lust.



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