

Google clarifies location-tracking policy

August 16 2018, by Ryan Nakashima



In this Aug. 8, 2018, file photo a mobile phone displays a user's travels using Google Maps in New York. Days after an Associated Press investigation revealed that Google is storing the locations of users even if they turn a privacy setting called "Location History" off, the company has changed a help page that erroneously described how the setting works. (AP Photo/Seth Wenig, File)

Google has revised a help page that erroneously described how its "Location History" setting works, clarifying for users that it still tracks their location even if they turn the setting off.

On Monday, an Associated Press [investigation revealed](#) that several Google apps and websites store user [location](#) even if users have turned off Location History. Google has not changed its location-tracking practice in that regard.

But its help page now states: "This setting does not affect other [location services](#) on your device." It also acknowledges that "some [location data](#) may be saved as part of your activity on other services, like Search and Maps."

Previously, the page stated: "With Location History off, the places you go are no longer stored."

The AP observed that the change occurred midday Thursday, three days after the AP's initial report.

The AP investigation found that even with Location History turned off, Google stores user location when, for instance, the Google Maps app is opened, or when users conduct Google searches that aren't related to location.

In a Thursday statement to the AP, Google said: "We have been updating the explanatory language about Location History to make it more consistent and clear across our platforms and help centers."

Jonathan Mayer, a Princeton computer scientist and former chief technologist for the Federal Communications Commission's enforcement bureau, said the wording change was a step in the right direction, but doesn't fix the underlying confusion Google created by storing location information in multiple ways.

"The notion of having two distinct ways in which you control how your location data is stored is inherently confusing," he said Thursday. "I can't

think off the top of my head of any major online service that architected their location privacy settings in a similar way."

Huge tech companies are under increasing scrutiny over their data practices, following a series of privacy scandals at Facebook and new data-privacy rules recently adopted by the European Union. Last year, the business news site Quartz found that Google was tracking Android users by collecting the addresses of nearby cellphone towers even if all location services were off. Google changed the practice and insisted it never recorded the data anyway.

Critics say Google's insistence on tracking its users' locations stems from its drive to boost advertising revenue.

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