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Center for Survey Research & Analysis

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University of Connecticut Releases Poll on Government Investigation of Internet Search Engines

The Bush Administration recently asked a federal judge to order the Internet company Google to turn over records of all searches performed with its search engine in a random week to facilitate their efforts to determine the extent to which web searches turn up objectionable sites. Other companies operating search engines have complied with the request, but Google refused, claiming that the release of such information threatens the privacy rights of its users. A new national poll by the Center for Survey Research at the University of Connecticut shows that although the public is split over whether companies should turn search information over to the government, they do not support either Internet companies storing such information or the government monitoring it.

Americans divide over whether companies operating search engines should turn over information on users' search behaviors to the government: 50% say the companies should not comply with the government's request while 44% say the companies should.

Companies Should Turn Over Search Queries to the Government

Yes	44%
No	50%

Surprisingly, there is no difference between the preferences of Internet users and non-Internet users. There are, however, large differences among partisans, in all likelihood due to Republican control of the government. Sixty-seven percent of Democrats say the companies should not turn over search information to the government, compared to 30% of Republicans. Among Independents, 42% say the companies should turn over the information to the government.

While the general public is divided over Google and other companies turning over individual search records to the government, they clearly oppose the tactics of both sides. Sixty-five percent of Americans oppose government monitoring of ordinary Americans' search behavior, compared to only 30% who support it.

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Support for Government Monitoring the Internet Search Behaviors of Ordinary Americans

Yes	30%
No	65%

They are similarly opposed to Internet companies storing their search information in the first place. Six in ten Americans oppose companies permanently storing users' search information, compared to 32% who support the activity.

Views about Companies Permanently Storing the Search Behaviors of their Users

Support	32%
Oppose	60%

This appears to arise from concern that search records would not remain private. Only 13% of the public feel "extremely" or "very" confident that the search behavior collected by Internet companies will remain private. One-third feel "somewhat" confident, and half are either "not too" confident or "not at all" confident.

Confidence That Search Behaviors Will Remain Private

Extremely Confident	5%
Very Confident	8%
Somewhat Confident	34%
Not Too Confident	30%
Not At All Confident	21%

According to Professor Samuel Best, Director of the Center for Survey Research and Analysis, "The public appears none to happy about the manner in which their Internet search queries are treated. They strongly oppose both companies permanently storing their search behaviors and the government monitoring them."

Use of search engines are prevalent among Internet users: currently, 71% of Internet users utilize search engines at least once a week, 39% utilize them at least once daily, and 23% utilize more than once a day.

Use of Internet Search Engines

More than Once a Day	23%
Once a Day	16%
3 to 5 Days a Week	18%
1 to 2 Days a Week	14%
Once Every Few Weeks	11%
Less Often	16%

Among all Internet users, only 13% admit to having searched for websites they would not want others to know about.

Searched for Web Sites You Would Not Want Others to Know About

Yes	13%
No	85%

Moreover, only 19% of Internet users those report stumbling upon websites they would not want others knowing about at least occasionally. Forty-two percent come across such sites infrequently, while 36% claim never having done so.

Accidentally Came Across Web Sites You Would Not Want Others to Know About

A Great Deal	6%
A Fair Amount	13%
Not Very Much	42%
None at All	36%

According to Professor Best: “Skepticism about the privacy of Internet search queries may be influencing how search engines are used. Internet users seem to avoid searches that might lead them to web sites that, if exposed, would make them embarrassed or uncomfortable.”

These results are based on a national survey of American adults, conducted by the Center for Survey Research and Analysis (CSRA) at the University of Connecticut. The survey was conducted by telephone with a scientific sample of 800 Americans from across the nation. Interviews were conducted from Tuesday January 31 through Sunday February 5, 2006. Sampling error is 3.5% at the 95% level of confidence for results based on all adults. Error for subgroups is higher. Attached to this release are the survey questions used.

Internet Search Engine Survey
(Note: Marginals rounded to nearest whole number)

The government has requested that companies operating Internet search engines, such as Yahoo, Google, and Microsoft, turn over information on the search terms used by its visitors in a random week to determine the degree to which objectionable sites are searched. Some of the companies do not want turn over the information saying that it would violate their privacy policies. Where do you stand on this issue? Should the companies turn over the information to the government or should they refuse the request?

Companies should turn over the information..... 44%
 Companies should refuse the request..... 50%
 Don't Know/No Answer (vol)..... 7%

Companies operating search engines say they store information on users' search behaviors to improve search performance. Critics say that it threatens users' privacy if the information is stolen or shared without their permission. Do you support or oppose companies permanently storing search behaviors of their users?
 (PROBE: SUPPORT/OPPOSE STRONGLY/SOMEWHAT)

Strongly Support..... 13%
 Somewhat Support..... 19%
 Somewhat Oppose 27%
 Strongly Oppose 33%
 Don't Know/No Answer (vol)..... 8%

Generally speaking, how confident are you that the information collected by companies operating search engines will remain private - extremely confident, very confident, somewhat confident, not very confident, or not at all confident?

Extremely Confident..... 5%
 Very Confident 8%
 Somewhat Confident 34%
 Not too Confident 30%
 Not Confident at All 21%
 Don't Know/No Answer (vol)..... 2%

Do you support or oppose of the government monitoring the Internet search behaviors of ordinary Americans?
 (Probe: Support/Oppose - Strongly/Somewhat)

*** Quarter Sample ***

Strongly Support..... 9%
 Somewhat Support..... 21%
 Somewhat Oppose 19%
 Strongly Oppose 46%
 Neither Support nor Oppose (vol) 1%
 Don't Know/No Answer 5%

How often do you use search engines, such as Google or Yahoo, to find web sites on the Internet - more than once a day, once a day, 3 to 5 days a week, 1 to 2 days a week, once every few weeks, or less often?

More than once a day..... 23%
 Once a day 16%
 3 to 5 days a week..... 18%
 1 to 2 days a week..... 14%
 Once every few weeks 11%
 Less often..... 16%
 Don't Know/No Answer (vol)..... 2%

Have you ever searched for web sites using a word or phrase that you would no want others to know about?

Yes..... 13%
 No 85%
 Don't Know/No Answer (vol)..... 2%

When you use search engines on the web, how often do you accidentally come across web sites whose content you would not want others to know about - a great deal, a fair amount, not very much, or none at all?

A great deal.....	6%
A fair amount.....	13%
Not very much	42%
None at all.....	36%
Don't Know/No Answer (vol).....	3%