

PUBLICLY PERFORM

Dear Linux Magazine Reader,

You'll find the word privacy on thousands of commercial websites. Poke around for a link to the site's "Privacy Policy." Often the homepage links directly to the Privacy Policy page, but sometimes it is buried in the Terms of Use, and sometimes, for restricted websites, the best way to find it is to click the link to "Create a New Account."

How much privacy is "enough" depends upon the user, but in general, people seem much more cavalier about sharing personal information than they used to be.

Everyone has the general sense that they are giving up some measure of privacy by participating in any form of web-based services. Many of these services are actually provided at no-cost, but a commercial site needs some kind of "revenue model," and the only tool one of these sites really has for getting money is data. The vast and lucrative Google ad machine, for instance, is entirely based on the idea of matching an advertiser with an ad reader. The ad reader is you, and everything they know about your habits and beliefs improves their ability to serve you an ad that will provide a value-added click-through rate exceeding random.

Google's search policies are well documented, but some of their other products are much less discussed. In particular, I was curious about the Google Docs tools. It is one thing to let the world watch what you do when you search the Internet; it is quite another to store your spreadsheets and word processing files on someone else's servers. So I surfed to the Docs site.

The Google Docs privacy page is written in very plain and accessible English, however, it doesn't exactly spell out a complete picture of how Google uses personal data. It lists two types of "Personal Information": Account Activity and Content, stating: "We use this information internally to deliver the best possible service to you, such as improving the Google Docs user interface and maintaining a consistent and reliable user experience." The "such as" echoes throughout the system of Google legal documents. In one sense, it is useful to clarify the meaning by providing an example; however, the careful reader yearns for more than just this one example to build a more complete picture of where the data will go.

A link at the end of the policy leads to the "full Privacy Policy," a more general document for all of Google's tools. The combination of these two privacy policies gives the impression that Google does indeed reserve the right to search online docs for information that could help with targeted advertising, although they do place restrictions on their ability to share or sell information to third parties.

One interesting piece of the privacy puzzle is the "Terms of Service," a separate document defining the licensing and ownership of documents saved in the Google Docs system. The Google Docs Terms of Service is an addendum to the Google Terms of Service. Perhaps the most confusing part is Section 11.1, which provides Google with a "worldwide, royalty-free, and non-exclusive license to reproduce, adapt, modify, translate, publish, publicly perform, publicly display, and distribute any Content which you submit, share, upload, post, or display on or through the Service for the sole purpose of enabling Google to provide you with the Service in accordance with the Google Docs Privacy Policy."

This clause provides a very broad license for Google to do whatever they want to do with the content. Rather than explicitly stating any restrictions, it refers to the Google Docs Privacy Policy to limit this sweeping power; however, a close reading of the brief Docs Privacy Policy leaves many questions about what these limitations actually are. The Google Docs Help section has an entry titled called "Understanding Section 11.1 of our Terms of Service," in which they state that the reason for Section 11.1 is simply to allow Google to display the data in the way that you specify; however, terms like "reproduce," "adapt," "modify," and "publicly perform" have meanings that would seem to go beyond this innocent explanation.

My little study reminded me of something I already knew: Before I click "I Accept" on any Terms of Service statement, I'd better read it.



Joe Casad, Editor in Chief

