



ICOMP welcomes initiatives on data protection on the Internet – and calls for others to follow suit

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ICOMP, the Initiative for a Competitive Online Market-Place, welcomes the announcement by Yahoo! to anonymise user log data within 90 days with limited exceptions for fraud, security and legal obligations. Yahoo! also announced that it will apply the policy not only to search log data but also page views, page clicks, ad views and ad clicks.

In doing so Yahoo! referred to requests from “regulators, legislators and advocates of consumer privacy from around the globe”.

This announcement follows an earlier announcement by Microsoft, one of ICOMP’s founding members, expressing its willingness not only to reduce its retention period to six months but also to maintain its rigorous anonymisation policies. Microsoft’s anonymization policy deletes not only the entire IP address, but also other data such as so-called cross-session identifiers including persistent cookie IDs .

With these announcements, all but one of the major search engine providers offering services to users in the EU have now publicly announced their willingness to comply with Opinion 1/2008 issued by the European Union’s “Article 29 Working Party” on data protection issues related to search engines⁽¹⁾. Unfortunately the one search engine that is still refusing to comply with the Opinion is also by far the largest player in search. While the announcements by Yahoo! and Microsoft are welcome news for Internet users, the positive effect on their privacy will only apply to one in five searches. Google’s refusal to accept similar limits on its retention of user data means that data collected by Google is still being maintained far longer than necessary. Moreover, the anonymisation techniques applied by Google are well below the requirements of the Opinion and remain a serious threat to users’ privacy⁽²⁾.

Europe’s Internet users deserve better than that. ICOMP calls upon all parties involved to ensure that all Internet search users benefit from rigorous privacy standards. Such standards, applied industry-wide, will give the online market place in search a chance to become more competitive, which is in the interest of users, content providers and advertisers.

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- (1) According to the Opinion search engine providers must delete or anonymise personal data once they are no longer necessary for the purpose for which they were collected. As to the length of this period the Article 29 Working Party saw “no basis for a retention period beyond 6 months”. The Working Party also held that mechanisms that truncate IP addresses by removing the final octet, “may not always be enough to guarantee anonymisation”.
- (2) In a statement issued on 16 September 2009 in response to Google’s reaction to the Article 29 Working Party’s Opinion, the chairman of the Working Party, Alex Türk, made it clear, *inter alia*, that Google’s anonymisation mechanisms are “still insufficient”.



About ICOMP:

The Initiative for a Competitive Online Marketplace ("ICOMP") is an advocacy forum for industry and experts to explore, research and discuss issues and concerns relating to online marketplaces, and to inform and educate stakeholders - including customers, suppliers and decision makers.

Microsoft is ICOMP's initial sponsor. Burson-Marsteller acts as its Secretariat.