

AOL User Search Data Release

By Yamil Suárez

October 29th, 2007

Overview

- 8/4/06 AOL posted a link to customer search data [TC1]
- 8/7/06 AOL removed link and apologized to customers following a flood of complaints [TC2]
- 8/9/06 NYT article identifies AOL customer using released data [NY]
- 8/14/06 EFF filed FTC complaint against AOL [EF2]

What was in the AOL file?

- Data from 20 million searches by 650,000 customers from March to May 2006
- Data was divided into five fields

[TC1]

AnonID	Query	Querytime	Click URL	Rank
4417749	care packages	2006-03-02 09:19:32	http://www.awe .. repackages.com	3
4417749	care packages	2006-03-02 09:19:32	http://www.anysoldier.com	8
4417749	movies for dogs	2006-03-02 09:24:14		0
4417749	blue book	2006-03-03 11:48:52	http://www.kbb.com	1
4417749	best dog for older owner	2006-03-06 11:48:24	http://www.canismajor.com	1
4417749	best dog for older owner	2006-03-06 11:48:24	http://dogs.about.com	5
4417749	rescue of older dogs	2006-03-06 11:55:25	http://www.srdogs.com	1
4417749	school supplies for the iraq children	2006-03-06 13:36:33	http://www.opec .. qichildren.org	1
4417749	school supplies for the iraq children	2006-03-06 13:36:33	http://www.opec .. qichildren.org	2
4417749	pine straw lilburn delivery	2006-03-06 18:35:02		0
4417749	pine straw delivery in gwinnett county	2006-03-06 18:36:35		0
4417749	landscapers in lilburn ga.	2006-03-06 18:37:26		0
4417749	pne straw in lilburn ga.	2006-03-06 18:38:19		0
4417749	pine straw in lilburn ga.	2006-03-06 18:38:27	http://gwinnett-online.com	9
4417749	gwinnett county yellow pages	2006-03-06 18:42:08	http://directory.respond.com	1
4417749	seffects of nicotine	2006-03-07 19:16:44		0
4417749	effects of nicotine	2006-03-07 19:17:19	http://www.bic.uci.edu	10
4417749	big cuddly dog	2006-03-07 20:05:09	http://www.cuddlycanines.com	1
4417749	atlant humane society	2006-03-07 20:10:59		0
4417749	atlanta humane society	2006-03-07 20:11:16		0

<http://www.aolstalker.com/4417749.html>

The New York Times

Technology

WORLD U.S. N.Y. / REGION BUSINESS TECHNOLOGY SCIENCE HEALTH SPORTS OPINION

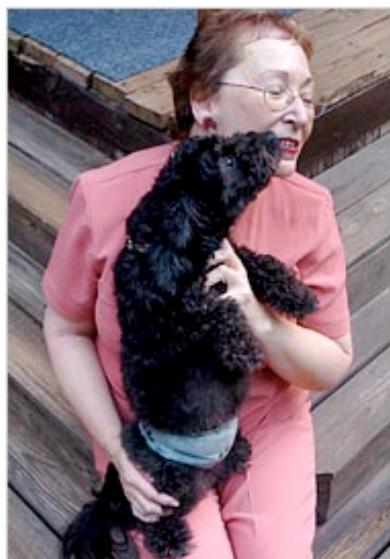
CAMCORDERS CAMERAS CELLPHONES COMPUTERS HANDHELDS HOME VIDEO MUSIC PERIPHE

A Face Is Exposed for AOL Searcher No. 4417749

By MICHAEL BARBARO and TOM ZELLER Jr.

Published: August 9, 2006

Buried in a list of 20 million Web search queries collected by AOL and recently released on the Internet is user No. 4417749. The number was assigned by the company to protect the searcher's anonymity, but it was not much of a shield.



Erik S. Lesser for The New York Times

Thelma Arnold's identity was betrayed by AOL records of her Web searches, like ones for her dog, Dudley, who clearly has a problem.

No. 4417749 conducted hundreds of searches over a three-month period on topics ranging from "numb fingers" to "60 single men" to "dog that urinates on everything."

And search by search, click by click, the identity of AOL user No. 4417749 became easier to discern. There are queries for "landscapers in Lilburn, Ga," several people with the last name Arnold and "homes sold in shadow lake subdivision gwinnett county georgia."

It did not take much investigating to follow that data trail to Thelma Arnold, a 62-year-old widow who lives in Lilburn, Ga., frequently researches her friends' medical ailments and loves her three dogs. "Those are my searches," she said, after a reporter read part of the list to her.

E-MAIL

PRINT

SINGLE PAGE

REPRINTS

SAVE

ARTICLE TOOLS
SPONSORED BY**HOTEL
CHEVALIER**
In Theatres Now!

Why AOL data release was wrong

- users could be identified
- users' search history and site visits could be traced
- Users did not provide consent for data release

Data release violated AOL privacy user agreement

- Agreement allowed sharing “personally identifiable information” with **affiliated providers** when information was necessary to complete a **user requested** transaction
- Agreement did not mention disclosure of search data to researches or the general public

[EF2]

Data release allegedly violated a US law and FTC regulation

- Electronic Communications Privacy Act (ECPA) [EB]
 - USC 18 § 2702 Voluntary disclosure of customer communications or records
- Federal Trade Commission Act § 5(a) [EF2]
 - Covering deceptive and unfair trade practices

Other Customer Privacy Agreement Cases

- FTC v. Toysmart.com (2000) [ST]
 - Judge initially blocked sale of customer data belonging to bankrupt company
- Gonzales v. Google (2006) [NE]
 - Judge blocked release of customer search data

References

- [TC1] TechCrunch.com - AOL Proudly Releases Massive Amounts of Private Data
 - <http://www.techcrunch.com/2006/08/06/aol-proudly-releases-massive-amounts-of-user-search-data/>
- [TC2] TechCrunch.com - AOL: “This was a screw up”
 - <http://www.techcrunch.com/2006/08/07/aol-this-was-a-screw-up/>
- [EF1] EFF.org - FTC Complaint Exhibit C
 - http://w2.eff.org/Privacy/AOL/exhibit_c.pdf
- [EF2] EFF.org - FTC Complaint
 - http://w2.eff.org/Privacy/AOL/aol_ftc_complaint_final.pdf
- [NY] NYTimes.com - A Face Is Exposed for AOL Searcher No. 4417749
 - <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/08/09/technology/09aol.html>
- [BE] Bermanesq.com - AOL Privacy Complaint
 - <http://www.bermanesq.com/pdf/AOL%20Privacy-Cplt.pdf>
- [ST] State.ny.us - Toysmart Bankruptcy Settlement Ensures Consumer Privacy Protection
 - http://www.oag.state.ny.us/press/2001/jan/jan11a_01.html
- [NE] News.com - Judge: Google must give feds limited access to records
 - http://www.news.com/Judge-Google-must-give-feds-limited-access-to-records/2100-1028_3-6051257.html

(all links as of October 2007)