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GOOGLE



Google worker fired for stalking teen Gmail users

Sep 15, 2010 Tim Edwards Case highlights how much Google knows about us - and how careful web companies have to be about privacy



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A Google engineer has been fired for using his privileged access to the company's services to violate the privacy of four teenagers. David Barksdale, 27, was a 'site reliability' engineer at Google's campus in Kirkland,

Washington state, when he met the teenagers at a technology group. His job afforded him access to the personal data of the company's Gmail and Google Talk services.

According to [Gawker](#), his breaches of their privacy were initially harmless enough. He was doing no more than showing off his ability to obtain the teenagers' most intimate details.

On one occasion, with consent, he pulled up a teenager's Gmail records and chat transcripts. The teenager wasn't overly concerned; he just thought Barksdale was a "silly" nerd.

But further examples of Barksdale's abuse of his privileges were more serious. Earlier this spring, he viewed call logs from Google Voice in order to identify the girlfriend of a 15-year-old boy, who had refused to name her. Barksdale then taunted the boy and threatened to call his girlfriend.

On another occasion, Barksdale unblocked himself from a teenager's Google Talk contacts list; the ability to block irritating people is a fairly basic function of any social website - and Barksdale rode roughshod over it.

Despite the inappropriate nature of Barksdale's relationship with the teenagers, such as going with them to the cinema, there is no suggestion of a sexual aspect to his dealings with them. But his breaches of privacy were bad enough, and after months of abusing his position, Barksdale was reported to Google by parents of the teenagers. He was fired in July.

After initially downplaying the affair, a Google spokesman said: "We dismissed David Barksdale for breaking Google's strict internal privacy policies. We carefully control the number of employees who have access to our systems, and we regularly upgrade our security controls... That said, a limited number of people will always need to access these systems if we are to operate them properly - which is why we take any breach so seriously."

The seriousness of Barksdale's indiscretions cannot be overstated, because

websites such as Google and Facebook know a shocking amount about their users.

Google logs all the searches you make, and unless you opt out, it uses the information to personalise future searches. The company also keeps detailed records of who is using their site, although these are rendered anonymous within 18 months.

Users of the company's Gmail email service, meanwhile, are obviously giving even more detailed information about their personal lives away. Many people are willing to accept this as the price of a free service, but they are not willing to be taken for granted.

Facebook provoked a storm when it recently released a new application, **Facebook Places**, which had the potential to tell everyone where a user was. The company was forced to simplify its privacy settings to defuse an embarrassing row.

And Eric Schmidt, the CEO of Google himself, warned a Wall Street Journal reporter "apparently seriously" that every young person would one day be entitled to change his or her name on reaching adulthood in order to shake off their youthful internet indiscretions.

Google has been wise to hype its unofficial corporate motto, "Do no evil". If its users are to continue to feel at least marginally comfortable about what the company knows about them, it needs to make sure its employees do no evil either.

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