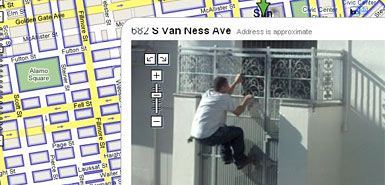
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All-seeing Google Street View prompts privacy fears



Smile you are on Google. Has this man pictured in San Francisco by Google lost his keys or is he up to something worse?

Sam Knight

[10 bizarre sights in Google Street View](http://technology.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/tech_and_web/article1870949.ece)

The latest phase in Google's mission to organise the world's information — thousands of street-level photographs of major American cities — has raised questions that the search engine is invading people's privacy.

The new feature on Google's map service, called "Street View", was unveiled this week at the Where 2.0 conference in San Jose, California, but within hours of the photographs of downtown San Francisco and New York hitting the internet, bloggers were posting images of people, their faces visible, being arrested, sunbathing and urinating in public.

Posting on the website, Boing Boing, one resident of Berkeley, California, Mary Kalin-Casey said that she decided to see what her flat looked like on the site and was surprised to come across a highly detailed photograph of her cat, Monty, sitting in the window.

"I'm all for mapping, but this feature literally gives me the shakes," she wrote. "I feel like I need to close all my curtains now. I'm going to look into whether it's possible for a person to have pictures of their home removed from Google Maps. Meanwhile, I'm happy to show bb readers the photo in the interest of illustrating creepy privacy violations. Heck, the whole world can see him anyway."

The photographs, provided to Google by Immersive Media, an imaging company headquartered in Calgary, Canada, have prompted unease in part because there is no apparent attempt to blur people's faces or number plates or obscure what is happening inside private properties along the route taken by the car-mounted cameras.

Images collected in just two days by the online magazine, Wired.com, show pedestrians picking their noses, police attending a fatality, a man climbing into an apartment block and a possible drug deal. There are also images taken inside New York's tunnels, a practice frowned on by the authorities since the September 11 attacks.

Google has defended the extent of the images, saying they are no different to what people see in their daily lives, and claiming that the website is equipped with "easily accessible tools for flagging inappropriate or sensitive imagery for review and removal". The company also said it approached anonymous shelters such as women's refuge centres and drug treatment facilites before the launch of the service and has removed them from the maps.

A spokeswoman in London said the company would not comment on whether it planned to extend the service across the US or to Britain, but promised respond quickly to parents, for instance, who called with concerns about the publication of images of their children on the street.

"We totally understand those concerns and we hope we've made it easy for people to register them," she said. "From the bottom up, we've taken those concerns into consideration."

But the assurances have failed to mollify privacy advocates. Simon Davies, the director of Privacy International, the London-based surveillance watchdog, criticised Google for failing to consult widely before launching their newest tool.

"The cultural imperative within Google is anti-privacy, no matter what they say," he said. "This is just the latest in a litany of privacy invasions by Google, which they justify by claiming openness as an excuse."

He added: "There is going to be long, bloody battle with Google one day unless they take the privacy message on board. Someone is going to get hurt, lose their job or their marriage because of this product and what will Google say? Buyer beware? But we have no choice."

"Google has to stop and take a breath and become a responsible member of the corporate community. I'm flabbergasted."

Despite reservations, the legal side of the issue is more forgiving. Privacy law in both the US and the UK broadly allows the publication of photographs in public places and Duncan Lamont, a media law partner at Charles Russell, said that the service would be unlikely to face major legal difficulties if it was extended to Britain. "If I was Google in England, I would be pretty relaxed," he said.

Mr Lamont said the sorts of images that people could contest under England's privacy laws would be those of children and those that showed intimate acts in private places, such as sunbathing naked in one's garden.

Otherwise he said the company could be in breach of Britain's data protection laws by inadvertently revealing private information such as visits to a brothel or hospital. "They would have to be unlucky," he said. "But I bet somewhere along the line they will be unlucky."

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