Google bans ads for stalkerware apps—with some exceptions

Enlarge / Google’s corporate headquarters.

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Google is trying to make it a little harder for a determined stalker to spy remotely on their spouse, partner, or ex by prohibiting advertising for stalkerware apps on its services—with one giant loophole.

The search giant updated its advertising policy to say that effective August 11, the company will no longer allow “the promotion of products or services that are marketed or targeted with the express purpose of tracking or monitoring another person or their activities without their authorization.” Notably, the ban does not include private investigation services or apps and services designed for parents to track or monitor their minor children.

The change may sound like it addresses only a tiny niche, but the problem of stalkerware is unfortunately widespread. According to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, about one in four women and one in ten men have experienced some form of violence, stalking, or abuse from a partner. About 10 percent of women and 2 percent of men specifically report experiencing stalking by an intimate

partner.

The smartphone era, for all its benefits, has also put a whole new arsenal of control tools at the fingertips of abusers. More than five years ago, NPR reported, “cyberstalking is now a standard part of domestic abuse in the United States,” and it has only grown since. The New York Times found “hundreds” of readily available stalkerware apps in 2018. Earlier this year, one survey found that one in ten Americans admitted to using stalkerware to track either current or former partners—and it can be difficult for victims to tell if a stalking app has been installed on their device. Last year, one man in Australia made international headlines for using “simple technology and smartphone apps” not only to track his ex-girlfriend’s every move but also to remotely control her car.

A group of researchers conducting an experiment in 2017 (PDF) found that searching Google for terms such as “how to catch a cheating spouse with his cell phone” resulted in thousands of ad impressions for stalkerware. Many are listed as “dual-use” apps that have a legitimate purpose, such as child safety or anti-theft protections “but are easily and effectively repurposed for spying on a partner,” the researchers found. Additionally, “a wealth of online resources are available to educate abusers about exploiting apps for [intimate partner surveillance],” with some dual-use developers “encouraging their use in IPS via advertisements, blogs, and customer support services,” the researchers said.

The popularity of “dual use” apps, as described by the study, also effectively makes Google’s ban on stalkerware ads toothless, as many tracking apps already claim to have a legitimate use for parents or investigators.

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