# Google Map’s tracking problems keep piling up

Last August, The Associated Press and researchers from Princeton University teamed up to investigate how Google Maps tracks user’s locations and incorrectly claimed Google tracks users’ movements whether they “like it or not” – even when “explicitly” told not to. These claims are simply not accurate. Despite the erroneous claims, this article has been picked up by dozens of media outlets, sparked a class action lawsuit and resulted in official investigations in two states.

According to the article, a search query like “chocolate chip cookies” has “nothing to do with location.” This claim is not correct. First, to ensure speedy results Google uses user location to direct queries to the nearest available Google data center. Secondly, good search engines return helpful results to “users in their specific language and location.”

For instance, a user who searches for “chocolate chip cookies” might intend to find “chocolate chip biscuits” depending on their language and/or location. Bing and Google both use location signals for every query for a variety of reasons across multiple devices signed in or not. But only Google includes the location of the query at the bottom of each search result page.

The article states, “Google wants to know where you go so badly that it records your movements even when you explicitly tell it not to.” This claim is not correct. Instead of telling Google they did not want to be tracked by turning off “Web & App Activity,” which stops Google from saving data to a user’s account, the investigators turned off Location History, a

Google Maps setting that only stops the Google Maps from storing new locations in a user's private timeline. If these investigators were using a Google Account through work, school or another group, they may not have been able to disable this feature because it may be governed by their network administrator.

According to this article, Google Maps automatically stores a location snapshot when opened or weather updates are received. What good is a map of another town? What good is weather information for another place? Either way, Google Maps data does not have to be tied to an individual account. For instance, phones send anonymous location data to Google which Google combines with anonymous data from other users to identify traffic patterns. You don't have to be signed into an account to use Google Search or Google Maps on a mobile or desktop device. It means your device could potentially be "tracked" but not you. Users don't have to use Google Maps to have the ability to turn off weather updates.

The article alleges that, "storing your minute-by-minute travels carries privacy risks and has been used by police" to catch murders. This is nothing new as phone privacy has been an issue for years. That is why criminals, spies, anonymous sources, journalists and other people that don't want to be tracked use "burner phones."

The problem is, cellular devices have to know where they are in order to handoff services between cell towers to avoid interruption. Cellular devices have unique identifiers and send out anonymized data that can be connected to a specific user when associated with an account for a specific individual. Even with GPS turned off and no Google account, cellular devices send out signals that can be tracked. Cellular networks, apps with location access, wearable devices and even car navigation systems collect similar data. If you use a cellular or connected device and its unique identifier can be connected to your name, there is a chance you could be

tracked by police.

Investigators seem to have the biggest issue with Google's support page for Location History. Previously the page said, "You can turn off Location History at any time. With Location History off, the places you go are no longer stored." Given that a user's timeline in Google Maps displays their Location History, turning it off prevents new locations from being "stored" in their timeline. In context, what the page said was accurate, but Google added additional detail after the article was published. Ironically, Google used to provide far more detail about Location History, but in recent years has started "simplifying" documentation in an attempt to make easier for users to understand.

These investigators seem confused about differences between account settings, device settings, app settings and web settings. In addition to app settings like Google Maps Location History, many mobile devices have location services settings. Turning off location services on modern mobile devices stops apps like Google Maps and other services from accessing device location information but search engine results and ads on desktop and mobile use internet IP not device location information.

Google clearly states, "When you use Google services, we may collect and process information about your actual location. We use various technologies to determine location, including IP address, GPS and other sensors that may, for example, provide Google with information on nearby devices, Wi-Fi access points and cell towers."

Location History is a "preference" in Google Maps and does exactly what it claims. It was originally introduced in 2009 as part of Google Latitude. Users have to opt in to use Location History, which grew out of Google's most popular feature requests "allowing you (but not your friends) to see where you've been at any point in time." Google Location

History allows users to store, view and manage past locations. Because of the uproar in 2013 when Google retired Latitude, Location History was integrated in Google+ and Maps. Google officially launched “Your Timeline” in Google Maps on July 21, 2015. Location History is not available in all regions and has age restrictions.

If you don’t want Google to know where you are, Google can’t help find your phone, ensure your account is not hacked, send 911 to you in an emergency or provide the search results you intend to find.

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