

Online Tracking Goes Offline: What are the Privacy Risks?

As we shop online or search the web, most of us are well aware that our online habits are being tracked. However, a new program implemented by Google is taking that tracking offline.

Google implemented a new Store Sales Management Program this May, linking online shopping patterns to Google users' physical purchases in stores. This practice has grabbed the attention of the Electronic Privacy Information Center, which recently asked the Federal Trade Commission to investigate this program.

Google's Store Sales Management Program links credit and debit purchases through a secret algorithm to the online activity of users with the purpose of data-driven advertising. Google has not yet disclosed how data regarding these purchases is gathered, and their method of protecting data has yet to be audited by an outside source. This has raised concern over how protected this data truly is.

Google additionally has not revealed which companies they work with to gather this data or how the data is encrypted. This information is protected by confidentiality agreements, and without knowledge of who Google is working with, it's not clear how consumers can opt out of this program, as the Electronic Privacy Information Center has noted in its complaint. As of now, it seems the best way for consumers to opt out of this new program would be to entirely opt out of all Google web and app tracking, which obviously would greatly limit their use of Google applications.

As it is unclear how this program works to collect data, how the collected data is protected from outside sources through encryption, what companies Google is working with, and how consumers can opt out of this program, a cloud of doubt surrounds this program. Are privacy rights being infringed? Let's see what the Federal Trade Commission has to say.