Google Now Allows Gmail Users to Spy on Email Recipients

February 13, 2014 - Tracking how people respond to email messages is nothing new. In fact, the sender of virtually every commercial email message you read gets aggregate tracking information on the messages they send. They know how many messages were sent, how many were opened and how many people clicked through on any links in the messages. This is how advertisers figure out how affective their advertising campaigns are. But advertisers don't typically get information on the individual recipients of the mail messages they send. Google's new Streak plugin for Gmail will change that. And it isn't just for advertisers.

Tweet

```
(function() {
var s = document.createElement('SCRIPT'), s1 = document.getElementsByTagName('SCRIPT')[0];
s.type = 'text/javascript';
s.src = 'http://widgets.digg.com/buttons.js';
s1.parentNode.insertBefore(s, s1);
})();
```

```
(function() {
  var po = document.createElement('script'); po.type = 'text/javascript'; po.async = true;
  po.src = 'https://apis.google.com/js/plusone.js';
  var s = document.getElementsByTagName('script')[0]; s.parentNode.insertBefore(po, s);
})();
```

Google's new Streak plugin will give the sender of an email message a lot of information. That information includes when the message was delivered to you along with information on every single time you opened the message and read it. Additionally, it will tell the sender of the message the recipient's approximate location at the time the message is read along with the type of device that was used to view the message.

By the way, the person reading the message is never notified that they are being tracked.
What Google is doing may sound a little creepy but it is nothing new. For some time now, there has been another application called DidTheyReadIt that has been available to anyoneâ€¦ for a price. That particular application allows users to sign up for a free trial, with a limit of ten messages (at least, that's what they did at the time we tested it a couple of years ago). As with Streak, the mail recipient had no knowledge that they were being tracked.
But Streak may be a bit of a game changer for several reasons. First, while Streak is targeting customers that send bulk email, the plugin is available to anyone. And it costs nothing.
Second, Streak allows users to send up to 200 email messages per month before they are charged.
And third, Streak can be setup to automatically track every single message that a Gmail user sends.
If you receive one of these Streak-enabled messages, it doesn't matter if you use Gmail yourself. You'll still be tracked. And blocking email messages from the Gmail domain probably won't help you any since Google allows its customers to

use Gmail in conjunction with their own domains.

While there doesn't appear to be much data on how Streak works, other similar systems embed a pixel or an image in an email message. Doing that essentially forces the email to communicate every time it is opened up. That's a simplistic explanation but should give you some idea of how such systems work. Of course, Streak could be using some other form of technology that we are simply not aware of at this time.

If Streak does work the same way as similar programs, about the only way to protect yourself is to set your email client so that it doesn't automatically download images. Either that or set it up to convert all mail messages to plain text.

If neither of these options sounds inviting to you, then your options may be limited. It means that the next time you are tempted to tell someone that you never received their message, you might want to think twice. The person you are talking to may already know just exactly when you received it and how many times you read it.

byJim Malmberg

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