Google's My Activity Page Tells You Just How Closely You Are Being Watched

July 1, 2016 - Just about everyone knows that they are being tracked when they go online. After all, it is the only way to explain why certain types of ads will follow you from website to website. But there is a pretty good chance that you may not be aware of how closely you are being watched. Google is changing that. The company has released a "my activity" page that shows you exactly how closely you are being watched and which will give you control over that information. It is something that everyone needs to be aware of.

Tweet

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(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);
})();
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(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);
})();
```

When I first looked at my own activity page on Google, at first glance I was surprised that it didn't have more information. That first impression proved to be wildly inaccurate. After a little digging, the data it contained was actually a little creepy to look at.

When I first arrived at the page, it provided me with a list of the YouTube videos that I had watched. Really, not very interesting. But in the upper left hand corner of the page, I noticed a menu icon. I clicked on it and was shown a drop down menu. One of the options there was "Other Google activity". I clicked on it. And that is when the creepy fun began.

On the next page that loaded, the first item listed was "Location History." Like millions of people who use Android devices, I use the same Google account on my PC as I do on my phone. So when I clicked on "Location History" I was taken to a map of the places I had been with my phone recently. In the lower left corner, it read "54 Places." When I clicked on that, I was taken to a list of places that I've visited recently. Not just the addresses of those places though. It was a list that provided the names of the establishments I had visited. Places like "Home Depot" and "Costco Wholesale". We were now at the "a little creepy" stage.

From there, I clicked on my visit to Home Depot. From my perspective, that's when things became very, very creepy.

The page that loaded provided extremely detailed information on my trip to the store. It provided a map showing my driving route. It told me that on my trip, I covered a total of 20.7 miles and from start to finish, and the trip took 1 hour and 4 minutes. It told me my total drive time for the trip. And it told me that I was at Home Depot from 2:51 to 3:12 PM.

Given the detailed information provided, anyone else who gains access to my Google activity page could easily find out when I'm at home and when I'm away. That's great for burglars but not something that anyone else needs to know.

Fortunately, Google also provides a way to turn off a lot of their tracking. Going back to the main "My Activity" page, all I needed to do was click on the menu icon again and select "Activity Controls". From there, I turned off all of their tracking with the exception of YouTube - after all, sometimes it's nice to be able to re-watch a video or two.

For the record, some Google applications - like Google Maps - may not function properly if you stop all tracking by Google. But I don't use Google maps and there are plenty of other mapping and navigation applications available that nobody really has to make this type of information available to the company. NOTE: You can also turn off tracking directly from your phone's "Settings" menu. Procedures may vary depending upon the phone's model and Android version.

To find your My Activity page, just go to Google and search "my activity". The very first item you can select from your search results will take you to your page. NOTE: You need to be signed into Google for this to work properly.
byJim Malmberg
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