

Google reverses decision to delete British newspaper links
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Google Inc yesterday reversed its decision to remove several links to stories in Britain's Guardian newspaper, underscoring the difficulty the search engine is having implementing Europe's "right to be forgotten" ruling.

The Guardian protested the removal of its stories describing how a soccer referee lied about reversing a penalty decision. It was unclear who asked Google to remove the stories.

Separately, Google has not restored links to a BBC article that described how former Merrill Lynch Chief Executive Officer E. Stanley O'Neal was ousted after the investment bank racked up billions of dollars in losses.

The incidents underscore the uncertainty around how Google intends to adhere to a May European court ruling that gave its citizens the "right to be forgotten:" to request the scrubbing of links to articles that pop up under a name search.

Privacy advocates say the backlash around press censorship highlight the potential dangers of the ruling and its unwieldiness in practice. That in turn may benefit Google by stirring debate about the soundness of the ruling, which the Internet search leader criticized the ruling from the outset.

Google, which has received more than 70,000 requests, began acting upon them in past days. And it notified the BBC and the Guardian, which in turn publicized the moves.

The incidents suggest that requesting removal of a link may actually bring the issue back into the public spotlight, rather than obscure it. That possibility may give people pause before submitting a "right to be forgotten" request.

"At least as it looks now, there are definitely some unworkable components," said Electronic Frontier Foundation activist Parker Higgins. "We've seen a number of situations in the past few days, where somebody in an effort to get a certain thing forgotten has brought more attention to it than ever was there before."

"It does make you think that maybe if you're actually trying to make an episode of your history be forgotten, this channel maybe isn't the best way."

Google's objective is to protect the reliability and effectiveness of its search franchise. It remains uncertain how it adjudicates requests, or how they intend to carry them out going forward.

"Their current approach appears to be an overly broad interpretation," a spokeswoman for the Guardian said. "If the purpose of the judgment is not to enable censorship of publishers by the back door, then we'd encourage Google to be transparent about the criteria it is using to make these decisions, and how publishers can challenge them."

Google, which controls more than 90% of European online searches, said it was a learning process.

"This is a new and evolving process for us. We'll continue to listen to feedback and will also work with data protection authorities and others as we comply with the ruling," the company said in a statement.

Notifying media outlets about scrubbed links has the effect of enhancing transparency, privacy advocates say. It might also prompt European courts to re-examine aspects of the ruling, including how it affects media outlets' coverage.

"It's terra incognita for everyone," said Jonathan Zittrain, co-founder of the Berkman Center for Internet and Society. "If sites that receive the notices choose to publicize them in ways that end up boomeranging against the people requesting, that might cause the courts to examine what those sites are doing." – Reuters, July 4, 2014.

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