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Google Street View: shades of Nazi spy era?

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Google Street View invokes memories of Nazi surveillance.

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Caption:

People gather in front of a German Google Street View car at the Google stand at the CeBIT Technology Fair on March 3, 2010 in Hannover, Germany. Google's Street View project has raised privacy concerns. (Sean Gallup/Getty Images)

FRANKFURT, Germany — It wasn't too long ago that apartment dwellers in Germany assumed that someone, somewhere in the building, was taking notes on everything they did. Even people who owned their own homes could never be certain whether a government mole was listening in on their conversations.

"Making sure the law was kept," said Jobst Krause, a 67-year-old Frankfurter, of the surveillance during the Nazi era.

Krause is too young to have experienced the worst of Nazi surveillance, and he lived in West Germany when the Stasi, East Germany's secret police force, kept tabs on citizens. But he understands the pang of worry that shot through the hearts of many Germans last week when Google, the American search engine giant, announced that it would launch its Street View application in Germany before year's end.

Google began sending camera-equipped cars throughout Germany's 20 largest cities in 2008.

Once launched, the Street View program will offer panoramic, ground-level photographs of most streets in those cities, allowing Web surfers to virtually tour those cities as if they were walking or driving.

The program was launched in the U.S. in 2007, and has since spread through 23 countries. But Google found fierce resistance in Germany, where strict privacy laws and suspicion about the company's reasons for widespread data collection have led to a handful of investigations.

Data protection officials in the regions where Google sent its Street View camera cars insisted that license plates, faces and other identifying elements be obscured, and that residents be able to take a virtual eraser to pictures of their homes.

That's standard procedure for any country with Street View, Google spokesman Stefan Keuchel said. The difference in Germany is that people can request that pictures of their homes be removed from the archive before those pictures ever appear online. Elsewhere in the world, Keuchel said, people can only request removal after the program is launched.

Since May 2009, between 10,000 and 99,999 Germans (Google refuses to release the exact number) have since asked that photographs of their homes be destroyed.

"People are able to contact us via email, fax or written letter," Keuchel said.

That's the problem, said Jan Schmidt, an interactive media expert at the Hans-Bredow-Institut in Hamburg.

"The German view would be, 'I want to be asked first,'" Schmidt said.

German data protection officials required that Google notify residents several weeks before cars with cameras rolled through their neighborhoods. Residents could, for example, tidy up their front lawns or choose another day to sunbathe in the nude. But they couldn't stop the cameras from taking photographs. Even if that were possible, many Germans didn't have any idea what Street View was, nor did they know to watch out for a notification that a car with a camera was set to drive down their road.

Another problem is that people are forced to share personal data with Google in order to opt out, said Johannes Caspar, a Hamburg-based data protection official who is a primary liaison between regional governments and Google. They must confirm their names and place of residence to get their homes removed from the archive.

Caspar said he was surprised last week when Google announced Street View's coming launch.

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"We have raised the question, 'What will Google do with this new data they get because people want to get their houses deleted?'" Caspar said. "And we're waiting for Google to have concrete answers."

Any information Google received from residents who wished their homes to be obscured in Google Street View would be deleted after use, said Keuchel of Google.

"In order for us to blur a house, we need basic information, like name and address," he said. "We are not interested in that data, and we are not using that data for any purpose other than deletion."

While Germany struggled to regulate Google's activities, Caspar said, other companies, including Microsoft, were planning to create similar mapping programs.

"We need a concrete law" to govern how companies gather and use information, he said.

Meanwhile, Google this week launched an online form through which people, until mid-September, can request deletion from Street View. Already there are questions about how the form works. What if someone living in a large apartment building wants to opt out? (Just one request is enough to smudge an entire building, Keucher said.) Can a cafe owner pose as his opponent to get the other cafe virtually deleted? (Every deletion request must be confirmed with a PIN number sent via snail mail.) Is it possible to opt back in? (Google plans to permanently destroy photos requested for deletion. That means a resident can't opt back in until another Google camera car makes the rounds.)

All the hubbub over privacy, Keucher said, is a distraction from what Germans really want: Interactive mapping tools. Among all the countries that do not yet have Street View, Germans are the top users, Keucher said. Every week, a few hundred thousand people (he didn't have the exact number) virtually tour other parts of the world.

Still, about 30 percent of all Germans aren't online, Schmidt said, adding that the people protesting Street View most likely didn't understand what it was.

"They might even think that Google is putting live cameras in front of their house," he said. "A part of the protest is coming out from not knowing what it is all about. And from this, they're saying, 'I'd better be on the safe side.'"

Schmidt plans to sit down with the people who live in the seven other apartments in his building to decide whether to opt out. In his view, the issue isn't about privacy. It's about a business collecting public data for the purpose of profit.

"I don't want to restrict access to public streets, but I don't think it's OK to use public places and extract money from them," Schmidt said. Germans had always been private people, he said, but the constant monitoring that occurred during the Nazi era — and in East Germany before the Berlin Wall fell — meant they were more protective than ever of their private lives.

"Privacy is very important in Germany," he said.

For otherwise informed Germans, there is also concern that Google might not be entirely honest about the information it keeps in its archives. The company admitted this year that its camera cars had grabbed unsecured wireless data in addition to street-level photos. Google later agreed to surrender the data to authorities in Germany and other countries where the collection had taken place.

Krause, the Frankfurter who views Google's actions through a historic lens, said he doesn't have

a problem with the outside of his apartment building appearing online, but he's concerned that Street View might be just the beginning of Google's plans.

"There are rumors that Google deals with our addresses," he said. "But I don't know what's true."

Editor's note: This story was updated to include a response from Google on the issue of personal data collection and privacy.

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