

Inside 1to1 Privacy

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Scratching the Surface on Geo-location Services

You could forgive privacy pundits if they sounded the alarm upon hearing about Quova, a nine-year-old firm that provides geolocation data for organizations like Major League Baseball and Continental Airlines. After all, if there's anything we've learned from *Law and Order* reruns, it's that government officials armed with an IP address can trace a perp down to a specific room in a specific apartment on a specific street in a sprawling urban metropolis.

And that is sort of what Quova enables organizations to do: it provides online businesses with access to a database of locations of IP addresses. In turn, the businesses can employ those addresses for a range of uses, from making sure that online viewers can't access games that are officially blacked out in their area, to serving different banner ads to site visitors based in different regions.

That level of information-gathering on an individual's location constitutes a privacy no-no, right? Actually, Quova says that it doesn't--and privacy pros agree with the company's assertion.

"Anybody who raises eyebrows at [privacy problems posed by technology like Quova's] doesn't understand how it works," says Kerry Langstaff, the company's vice president of marketing. She says this without the slightest hint of defensiveness or exasperation in her voice, instead assessing the challenges faced by providers of geolocation data in a broader context.

Take the *Law and Order* example. In any number of episodes, the sharply attired detective-type person will exclaim something like "we've traced the IP address! He's in apartment 3B!," then promptly rush off to that location and apprehend the bad guy. In reality, firms like Quova can only drill down to within a 20-to-50-mile radius.

"What we've done is map out the infrastructure of the Internet," Langstaff explains. "Over the years, we've learned a lot about how ISPs allocate out Internet addresses. If you're AT&T, for example, you get a bunch of addresses to use and allocate them out to different neighborhoods. Depending on the Internet connection type, the IP address may be dynamic, so the address assigned to a person or device may change each time they log in. That's what companies using Quova get: data about the location of an IP address and how that device has logged onto the Internet, as opposed to the e-mail or street address of a person."

A quick check reveals that Quova clients aren't exactly using the geolocation data for nefarious purposes. In addition to the baseball-blackout monitoring and banner-ad serving (a mainstay of Quova client Continental), the data has been employed by financial institutions (to detect fraud by comparing the physical location of the IP address from which an order was placed with the credit card billing address) and by online-gaming companies (to ensure that players aren't placing bets in countries where such pursuits are illegal). Too, Quova sees great potential in using the IP data to create landing pages with more customized content. For instance, a company doing business in a range of countries can use the IP address information to ensure that online visitors are served a page in the correct language and that prices are listed in the proper currency.

"This isn't just for huge companies," Langstaff notes. "Take a small clothing store - in March, it can use the IP addresses to make distinctions and serve customers more relevant information. Somebody from California would see bathing suits; somebody in New York would see a sale on sweaters."

As for privacy, Quova compiles no personal information whatsoever; everything it collects about the location of an IP address is culled from public records. "All we do is identify where a device connected to the Internet is logging on from. We're just finding the freeway on-ramp, so to speak," Langstaff continues. Asked why some individuals automatically assume some type of untoward activity on the behalf of any company compiling such data, she shrugs, pointing towards the need for more education and awareness.

Alan Chapell, president of privacy consultancy Chapell & Associates, understands the concerns. "There's a guttural, visceral response: 'Some other entity knows where I am.' Left vague like that, of course it's a little bit scary," he says.

Langstaff jokes that there's no such vagueness in the way Quova handles personal data--"we have none of it, promise"--and

says that, in the months ahead, the company will be concentrating on awareness and education efforts about geolocation.

"There are potential uses, especially in the fraud arena, where the IP address data can help protect peoples' privacy," she notes. "Our clients have barely scratched the surface of everything that can be done."

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