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Wikipedia fights back against Europe's 'right to be forgotten'

BRUSSELS | BY JULIA FIORETTI



Wikipedia webpage in use on a laptop computer is seen in this photo illustration taken in Washington, January 17, 2012. REUTERS/GARY CAMERON

Wikipedia fought back against Europe's "right to be forgotten" by listing the online encyclopedia's articles removed from search results, snubbing a court ruling that allows people to stop personal information appearing under Internet searches.

The Wikimedia Foundation, a nonprofit organization that runs the free online encyclopedia, said on Wednesday that it had received notices from search engines affecting more than 50 links to Wikipedia pages.

In its first public statement against the ruling from Europe's top court in May confirming that people can stop irrelevant or outdated personal information from appearing under searches for their name, the foundation said it would publish each notice for the removal of a link to a Wikipedia page.

"Accurate search results are vanishing in Europe with no public explanation, no real proof, no judicial review, and no appeals process," wrote Lila Tretikov, executive director of the Wikimedia Foundation on its blog.

"The result is an Internet riddled with memory holes — places where inconvenient information simply disappears."

The "right to be forgotten" has divided experts and pitted privacy campaigners against defenders of free speech, who argue that the ruling will lead to people whitewashing their past.

However, search engines are required to take into account the public's interest in knowing certain information about famous or public figures when evaluating removal requests, and the Court of Justice of the European Union (ECJ) said a balance must be struck between the freedom of information and privacy.

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Also, the person requesting that the link be removed is not necessarily the one named in the article, but could be one whose name appears in the comment section.

"The disclosure of the link alone is not too helpful as you have no idea what name on the page asked for link to come down," said Lilian Edwards, a professor of Internet law.

"LINK CENSORSHIP"

Wikimedia had received five notices affecting over 50 links across the British, Italian and Dutch versions of Wikipedia by Wednesday, it said.

Google, which handles around 90 percent of searches in Europe, had received over 90,000 requests under the right to be forgotten by July 18 and was accepting over half of them.

The search engine giant has been criticized for notifying publishers that a link to their website has been removed, a method that can draw unwanted attention to the page in question and feed speculation over who made the request.

"Our concern is that these notifications generate a lot of confusion, and in some ways undercut the request itself by bringing people's names back into the open," Isabelle Falque-Pierrotin, who heads France's privacy watchdog and the WP29 group of EU national data protection authorities, said in an interview with Reuters.

Google says it is necessary to ensure transparency and already notifies the owners of websites that are removed from search results because of copyright infringements.

Wikimedia said it was posting the removal notices in the interests of free speech and transparency.

(Additional reporting by Leila Abboud in Paris; Editing by Erica Billingham)

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