

Google Gives Brazilian Cops Special Tool to Censor Internet Content

Contributed by Elma Lia Nascimento
Thursday, 30 November 2006

Google is giving the Brazilian Federal Police the weapons they always wanted to clean up the Internet. The cops are being allowed to browse Orkut, Google's social networking site, as if they were a Google administrator with power to delete pages and get access to such information as the users' IP (the identifying number of all computers that access the Net).

The federal cops will be able to do all of this without the need of any court order, even though they will still need judicial permission before they can really get their hands in more personal identification.

For months now, the Brazilian Justice had been after Google trying to force the Internet search company to erase pages the Brazilian authorities consider objectionable, including those promoting pedophilia, child pornography, illegal drugs and hate crimes such as racism, anti-Semitism and gay bashing.

Several lawsuits brought up by the Public Ministry were filed against Google in different courts. The American company is charged with hiding information on people who created what the Brazilian government considers illegal communities or spread criminal messages in its Orkut service.

According to information released by the Federal Police and Google, when the police flag a page they consider illegal, a Google worker takes the page off the air posting in its place a message with the Federal Police logo.

The Google service is active for three weeks now even though it was being kept as a secret. For the Brazilian authorities the new tool is good not only for them, but also for Google, which, according to them will be able to avoid hosting criminal communities,

Google Brazil told reporters that the use of the tool will be extended soon to other Brazilian authorities besides the Federal Police as well as to governments from several other countries.

Just last week, federal chief judge of the TRF (Regional Federal Court), Fábio Prieto de Souza handed Google a victory when he canceled fines that had been imposed on the company for non compliance with court decisions requesting information from Orkut customers.

If the decision had been confirmed Google would have to start paying 50,000 reais (US\$ 23,000) a day until the data were handed over to the authorities.

De Souza wrote in his decision: "It's not incumbent on the Civil Justice to set up deadlines for the compliance with orders issued by the Criminal Justice and even less to determine if the observance of those orders is satisfactory or not."

Commenting on the decision, Durval Noronha, Google's lawyer in Brazil, told reporters that the decision was important because it showed that the prosecution action was inadmissible: "The ludicrous lawsuit collapsed," he stated.

Prosecutor Sérgio Gardenghi Suiama, however, vowed to appeal the decision arguing that Google is a multinational doing business in Brazil: "The core issue of the case is, first of all, to set the civilian and criminal responsibility of the Brazilian subsidiary of a transnational economic group, regarding a service provided in Brazil, for Brazilians."

David Jeske, Orkut's chief engineer in Brazil revealed that's taking in average one day to exclude an offending item after the page is flagged by the cops. He didn't disclose, however, how many pages have already been excised from the community site.