This Simple Action Forces Companies to Respect your Data

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We are at an interesting crossroad when it comes to the issue of data privacy. For years it didn't seem to be much of a concern as we generously shared our lives on social media, uploaded files to the cloud, and generally signed up to every free service out there.

We either didn't know or didn't really care about online data privacy…and companies were only too willing to take advantage of this naïve attitude.

As a wise man once said: Data is king.

Online companies, social media platforms, and app developers have all been guilty of collecting volumes of data on their users. After all, the more data they have the better they can sell to you.

One second you're booking a flight to New York, the next second you're seeing banner ads for hotels in New York. In one way it's a brilliant business practice, in another way it's just plain creepy.

Users are starting to agree about the creepiness of data collecting. In recent years the blasé attitude regarding data privacy has shifted. Users are growing increasingly uncomfortable as they become more aware of just how common it is for companies to collect, use, and sell their data.

A trend becomes a movement

Awareness was the first step. The narrative has now changed from "I don't care if Company X has pictures of my dog" to "Why is Company X collecting information about my dog?"

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The second step involved users becoming cautious over how they interact with online services and just what (and how much) data they're willing to expose. After all, if you don't provide much data then there isn't much to collect.

The third, and final, step has been a growing demand for online services to protect our data.

Users are no longer blindly trusting companies with their data. They are making their voices heard to ensure companies understand that user data is not something that should be taken lightly.

What started out as a trend, a minor nuisance to online companies, has evolved into a full-on movement of protecting data privacy.

The U.S. lags behind the world on the issue of data privacy

On issues of online privacy and security there is a certain geographical pattern that tends to occur. Generally speaking, Europe is the first part of the world that starts the movement for greater privacy then the trend slowly trickles to the United States.

Europe was the first to introduce right to be forgotten legislation that gives users the ability to have specific data about their personal lives expunged from the Internet, and specifically from search engines.

As an example if you were arrested for shoplifting when you were 18 and you're now in your 30s and you don't want that indiscretion to ruin your reputation, you can ask Google to remove that part from any search about you.

The right to be forgotten was just the first step. Europe is taking the war for data privacy even further.

In Europe the final countdown has begun on the privacy crackdown

Starting next year the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) will be implemented in Europe. The GDPR is generally viewed as being the most stringent data protection law in the world.

It turns the situation around and forces companies to protect the data of their users. A company will have to get explicit approval for using customer data in any capacity.

They can no longer just hide sneaky data harvesting practices in their terms and conditions like they've been doing for years. Companies know that no one actually reads those things and they were able to get away with it for that reason.

Legislation like the GDPR forces companies to feel the pressure from a legal perspective, which causes them to act more diligently in ensuring that customer data is protected.

What happens in Europe doesn't stay in Europe

The GDPR is forcing companies to take the data privacy of their users very seriously, often at a high cost. However the European Union felt they had no choice but to go ahead with this law since many companies were crossing the line when it came to data collecting.

As always, what happens in Europe eventually makes its way to North America. Efforts are already being made to introduce legislation similar to the right to be forgotten and GDPR in the United States.

Some may think the U.S. isn't the type of country to impose such heavy legislation but there already exists some precedence for data privacy regulation.

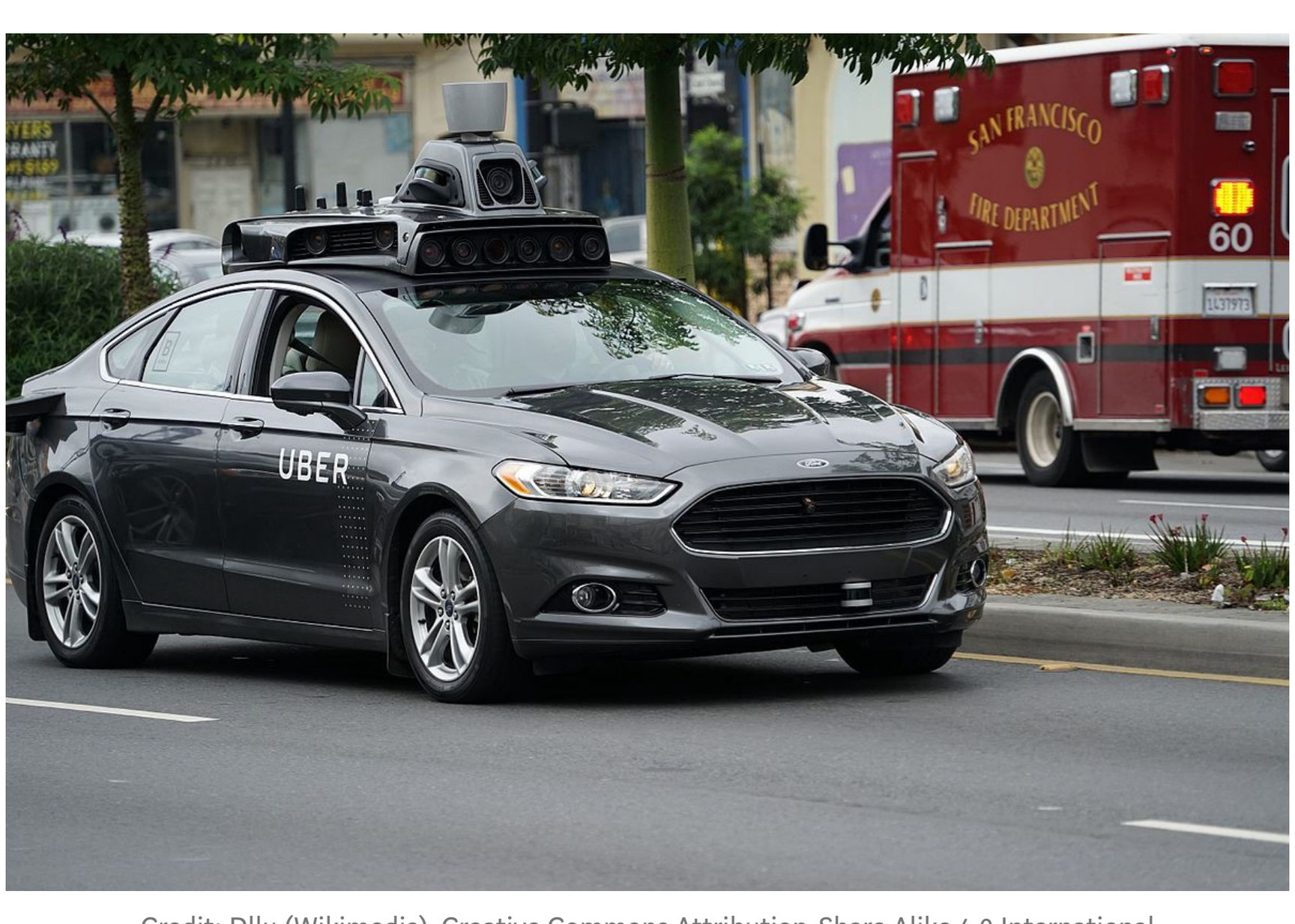
The FTC introduced a law called COPPA in 1998. This law was intended to protect children's data online and some companies have already paid the price for violating the law.

So even in this country the situation is changing. It's clear that if companies want to play fast and loose with user data that they will be facing legislative consequences.

Companies are under pressure and this is their last dance with your data

Legislation aside, the efforts of privacy advocates are already starting to pay off. Many companies are acknowledging the pressure they're receiving from their users to protect their data.

Companies like Uber are making changes to their app due to public outcry over data privacy concerns. Recently AccuWeather suffered a significant backlash when users deleted the app from their devices after learning the app tracked their location against their wishes.



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More than ever companies are concerned about the cost of bad PR and, with the aid of social media, bad PR spreads faster than ever. Simply put, bad PR can literally cause the largest companies to crumble.

The smart companies will realize this and try to get ahead of any potentially issues. Whereas before data privacy was not seen as the kind of issue that concerned the public, the situation is now changing thanks to privacy advocates.

Many online services and app developers are now making changes to their data collection practices in order to prevent bad PR and the kind of backlash that AccuWeather has endured.

The war for data is getting more soldiers

It might seem to be a simple strategy but there is ample evidence that simply raising awareness of a company's data collecting practices, and creating a groundswell of support, is enough to cause them to make changes that ensure the privacy of your data.

A user, on their own, won't make much of an impact to a company but when enough users raise an issue a company will listen. Privacy advocates should continue their efforts to uncover and expose data privacy issues.

Once you are aware that a company is not respecting the privacy of your data you should do your part in spreading awareness of the practice. Use social media and online forums such as Reddit to tell other users about this issue.

Use whatever means is necessary to create enough support that gets the attention of the violating company. If you're a bystander to this issue then no company will make the acceptable changes.

Users have the power to enable companies to make changes and make sure their data is protected at all times. If you value your data you will take the steps necessary to make sure you're winning the battle for your data.

After all, if data is king then you need to make sure you're the ruler of your own land.

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