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EPIC DEFENDS PRIVACY OF GMAIL USERS:

FILES COMPLAINT WITH FTC

Leading Privacy Organization says that Launch of “Buzz”
Social Networking Service by Google is Unfair and Deceptive

WASHINGTON DC – The Electronic Privacy Information Center (EPIC) today filed a complaint with the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) charging that Google’s recently launched Buzz service violates federal consumer protection law.

The EPIC complaint urges the Trade Commission to require Google to make the Buzz service fully opt-in, to stop using Gmail users’ private address book contacts to compile social networking lists, and to give Google users meaningful control over their personal data.

“This is a significant breach of consumers’ expectations of privacy,” said Marc Rotenberg, EPIC Executive Director. “Google should not be allowed to push users’ personal information into a social network they never requested.”

Google launched Buzz on February 9, 2010, and quickly activated it for all Gmail users. As soon as users began viewing the service, they were automatically listed as “following” posts from their most common email contacts. Participation in the service also created a profile, which displayed publicly this list of common contacts. Google has since revised the service twice in response to widespread outrage, but privacy violations remain.

According to the EPIC complaint, email providers have a responsibility to safeguard the personal information that users provide and Google has failed to fulfill this responsibility. The EPIC complaint cites widespread opposition to the service by Google users, news organizations, bloggers, and technology experts.

CNET writer Molly Wood wrote, “I *do* have an expectation of privacy when it comes to my e-mail, and I think that even in this age of social-networking TMI, most people still think of e-mail as a safe place for speaking privately with friends and family. And for Google to come along and broadcast that network to the world

without asking first—and force you to turn it off after the fact—is, I think, both shocking and unacceptable.”

Texas attorney Don Cruise highlighted the significant risks to lawyers, journalists, and other people who need to keep the nature of their communications private, describing Google’s actions as “[r]epurposing old data in a way that flouts our expectations of privacy.”

EPIC is a public interest research center based in Washington, D.C. EPIC focuses public attention on emerging privacy and civil liberties issues. Previous EPIC complaints to the FTC have led to the largest judgment in the Commission’s history, substantial changes to online authentication techniques, and the recent decision of the Department of Defense to stop selling a spyware program to military families.

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More information is available at:

EPIC’s Complaint

http://epic.org/privacy/ftc/googlebuzz/GoogleBuzz_Complaint.pdf