

CASE 13

In May 2007, Google unveiled its latest offering in the map category: Google Street View. Google Street View is street-level photographic mapping, currently available for certain cities. When first announced, only five cities were included (Denver, Las Vegas, Miami, New York City, and San Francisco), but within half a year the number of cities increased to fifteen. The images, while not real-time, capture the look of a city. Google users anywhere in the world can take their own virtual tours down the same streets and see the same sights.

To prepare a map section for Street View, a specially equipped car drove up and down streets, taking 360-degree pictures of whatever happened to be there at the time. It captured panoramic, photographic imagery from specific streets within selected cities. Later, using Street View, someone can drop down to just above eye level and ride virtually through the streets, zooming in on buildings, faces, cars, and other sights of interest.

The images are stitched together, so that the representations of buildings, and occasionally of cars or of people, are distorted in odd and sometimes amusing ways. Numerous web sites have sprung up to display funny or interesting images “scraped” from street view. One image shows a man breaking into an apartment. Another is of a man urinating on the side of the road. Hit-and-run accidents, drug deals, groping, nose-picking, sunbathing, you name it, whatever people do on or near the street when they think no one is looking can be found on the Internet.

Predictably, some people have been upset to find themselves displayed in awkward, funny, or embarrassing positions. Some parents are not at all happy to have pictures of their children standing on street corners. Some authorities in New York have expressed concern about images from inside various tunnels. One woman was unnerved to see her house on Street View with her favorite cat sitting in the front window. In fact, sometimes the images are so clear that faces are easily identified, license plates are clearly visible, and the interiors of some houses and stores can be seen. Some websites solicit sightings of attractive women.

Google has taken several steps, both anticipating and responding to privacy concerns. Before the release of images for a city, Google contacts women’s shelters and drug rehabilitation centers and removes images from their maps. While in Street View, users can click on “Street View Help,” and find instructions on how to report an inappropriate image. Those caught on camera may request to have their images reviewed and removed or obscured from Street View.

But many privacy advocates say this is not enough. They insist that Google should obscure the faces and license plates of everyone on Street View, and not require people to ask Google to obscure their images. To have an image removed, one has to see it first, by which time many others have seen it as well. The process is cumbersome and time-consuming, as Google's proposed solution requires people to search through *all* the

available video footage to see if their pictures are visible or if the images infringe their privacy. It's not simply a matter of searching for a name, as people's images are anonymous: the database is not readily searchable. Furthermore, the removal process is not automatic. The image must first be reviewed, and even then Google does not guarantee that it will be removed.