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BERLIN — European privacy regulators and advocates reacted angrily Saturday to the disclosure by Google, the world's largest search engine, that it had systematically collected private data on individuals since 2006 while compiling its StreetView photo archive.

After being pressed by European officials about the kind of data the company compiled in creating the archive — and what it did with that information — Google acknowledged on Friday that it had collected personal data on individuals around the world. In a blog post on the company's Web Site, Alan Eustace, Google's engineering chief, wrote that the information had been recorded as it was sent over unencrypted residential wireless networks as StreetView cars with mounted recording equipment passed by.

The data collection, which Google said was inadvertent and the result of a programming error, took place in the all countries where StreetView has been catalogued, including Germany, where the service is not yet available, the United States, Britain and France. Google apologized and said it never used the information, which it plans to delete in conjunction with regulators.

But in Germany, Google's collection of the data — which the company said could include the Web sites viewed by individuals or the content of their e-mails — is a violation of privacy law, said Ilse Aigner, the German federal minister for food, agriculture and consumer protection. In a statement released by her ministry on Saturday, she demanded a full accounting.

"Based on the information we have before us, it appears that Google has illegally tapped into private networks in violation of German law," Ms. Aigner said. "This is alarming and further evidence that privacy law is a foreign concept to Google."

Johannes Caspar, the data protection supervisor who is leading the German government's dealings with Google on the issue, said the company's revelation of illegal data collection will be taken up by the Article 29 Working Party, a panel of European national data protection chiefs that advises the European Commission.

"This is a data scandal of a much larger magnitude," said Mr. Caspar. "We are talking here about the large-scale collection of private data on individuals."

He declined to speculate what possible action European officials might take.

Mr. Caspar said he had inspected one of Google's StreetView recording vehicles at the company's invitation earlier this month and had noticed that the recording device's hard-drive had been removed. When he asked to view the drive, he said he was told he couldn't read the information anyway because it was encoded. He said he pressed Google to disclose what type of information was being collected, which prompted the company to examine the storage unit.

"I am glad that this cat-and-mouse game with Google is finally over," Mr. Caspar said. "I hope now that the company does what it says it will do."

Google has recently contended with other privacy missteps, including the introduction of its Buzz social network earlier this year that publicly exposed people's closest e-mail contacts without permission.

"I think this is going to damage the company irreparably," said Simon Davies, the director of Privacy International, a London-based group of privacy advocates from 40 countries. "Three years ago the company was wearing a halo. But over the past year it has moved substantially in the direction of being perceived as Big Brother."

Kay Oberbeck, a Google spokesman in Hamburg, said the company was in contact with data protection officials in Germany and in the rest of Europe to address their concerns. He disputed the notion that Google was recklessly collating private information, saying the company's services are designed to let users control what information is made public.

"This was obviously a mistake and we are profoundly sorry," Mr. Oberbeck said. "We take individual privacy very seriously at Google. There was a breakdown in the communication between teams and within teams and we are investigating this and want to take up the lessons we learn from this to improve our processes and to have instruments installed which are really robust to make this never happen again."

Google has hired an outside auditor to investigate what private data was collected through StreetView. Mr. Oberbeck acknowledged that the improper collection of data came to light after German data protection officials asked Google two weeks ago to detail exactly what information it had collected from household wireless local area networks

Initially, Google had told German officials that the data it had collected was limited to just two bits of information: the publicly broadcast ID number of the device, which is called a MAC address, and the name assigned to it by the owner.

But in its review, Mr. Oberbeck said the company learned that its data collection performed by roving StreetView vehicles was much more extensive, including the record of Web sites viewed by the user and potentially the contents of e-mails when users did not secure their wireless networks with a password in a process known as encryption.

Despite its internal efforts to address the situation, Google may face an uphill battle in Germany overcoming skepticism about its intentions. So far, thousands of Germans have signed up to have their property excluded from Google's StreetView archives.

Brad Stone contributed reporting from San Francisco.

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