

Consumer Watchdog calls for investigation of Google

The group asks Congress to check on Google's 'cozy' relationship with the Obama administration

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- Consumer Watchdog, an advocacy group largely focused in recent years on Google's privacy practices, has called on a congressional investigation into the Internet giant's "cozy" relationship with U.S. President Barack Obama's administration.

In [a letter sent Monday](#), Consumer Watchdog asked Representative Darrell Issa, the new chairman of the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee, to investigate the relationship between Google and several government agencies.

The group asked Issa to investigate contracts at several U.S. agencies for Google technology and services, the "secretive" relationship between Google and the U.S. National Security Agency, and the company's use of a U.S. National Aeronautics and Space Administration airfield in California.

ANALYSIS: [The Google-NSA alliance: questions and answers](#)

Federal agencies have also taken "insufficient" action in response to revelations last year that Google Street View cars were collecting data from open Wi-Fi connections they passed, Consumer Watchdog said in the letter.

BACKGROUND: [Google stops sniffing Wi-Fi data after privacy gaffe](#)

"We believe Google has inappropriately benefited from close ties to the administration," the letter said. "Google is most consumers' gateway to the Internet. Nonetheless, it should not get special treatment and access because of a special relationship with the administration."

Consumer Watchdog may have an ally in Issa, a California Republican. In July, [he sent a letter to Google](#) raising concerns that White House Deputy Chief Technology Officer Andrew McLaughlin, the former head of global public policy for Google, had inappropriate e-mail contact with company employees.

A Google spokeswoman questioned Consumer Watchdog's objectivity. Some groups have questioned the group's relationship with Google rival Microsoft, and Consumer Watchdog's criticisms of online privacy efforts have also exclusively zeroed in on Google, with the group rarely mentioning Microsoft, Facebook and other Web-based companies in the past two years.

"This is just the latest in a long list of press stunts from an organization that admits to working closely with our competitors," said the Google spokeswoman.

But Consumer Watchdog gets no funding from Microsoft or any other Google competitor, said John Simpson, consumer advocate with the group. "We don't have any relationship with Microsoft at all," he said. "We don't take any of their money."

Consumer Watchdog has decided to focus on Google's privacy practices because the company's services serve as a gateway to the Internet for many people, Simpson said. If the group can push Google, "without a doubt the dominant Internet company," to change its privacy practices, other companies will follow suit, he said.

"Google's held itself to be the company that says its motto is, 'don't be evil,' and they also advocate openness for everyone else," he said. "We're trying to hold them to their own word."

Consumer Watchdog, in January 2009, suggested that Google was [preparing a lobbying campaign](#) asking Congress to allow the sale of electronic health records. Google called the allegations "100 percent false and unfounded."

In September, Consumer Watchdog [bought space on a 540-square-foot video screen](#) in New York's Times Square, with the video criticizing Google's privacy practices.

In April, Consumer Watchdog officials called for the U.S. Department of Justice [to break up Google](#). They appeared at a press conference with a representative of the Microsoft- and Amazon.com-funded Open Book Alliance.

Consumer Watchdog's latest complaints about the relationship of Google and the Obama administration are [outlined in a 32-page report](#).

The paper questions a decision by NASA allowing Google executives to use its Moffett Federal Airfield near Google headquarters. Although H211, a company controlled by Google top executives, pays NASA rent, they enjoy access to the airfield that other companies or groups don't have, Simpson said.

The paper also questions Google contracts with the U.S. Department of Defense and other agencies, suggesting that, in some cases, Google contracts were fast-tracked. The paper also questions Google's relationship with the U.S. National Security Agency and calls for the company to be more open about what consumer information it shares with the spy agency.

When asked if other companies, including broadband providers, should disclose what customer information they share with the NSA, Simpson said they should, too.

"I understand the NSA is a super-secret spook organization," he said. "But given Google's very special situation where it possesses so much personal data about people, I think that there ought to be a little more openness about what precisely goes on between the two."