

Facebook's 'dirty tricks' campaign against Google will have unexpected consequences in relation to the way that personal data is used and abused

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The recent revelation that Facebook employed a PR firm to plant negative news stories about its rival Google has exposed the way that corporate attitudes to personal privacy are changing, argues [Edgar Whitley](#). This 'dirty tricks' campaign may have the unexpected consequence of actually refining organisational practices in relation to personal data in ways that are more consumer friendly and as a result, they should be encouraged.



All too often the main concern for companies when it comes to how they handle personal data has been to keep the [Information Commissioner's Office](#) (ICO) happy and to avoid the fines and penalties the ICO can impose. The news that Facebook has employed a PR firm to help [plant negative news stories about Google's privacy policies](#), however, suggests that corporate attitudes to personal privacy are changing.

Although it is easy to play down Facebook's actions as just an example of a corporate 'dirty tricks' campaign, it actually suggests that what an organisation does with the personal data it collects is becoming a strategic rather than operational issue. The technological choices made by all these companies directly influence the use (and misuse) of our personal data. Indeed, Facebook has [faced its own challenges](#) on the privacy front and has had to change its practices to reflect the wishes of its customers. Nevertheless, key privacy related decisions have traditionally been driven by internal (bottom line) considerations with the concerns and expectations of customers, at best, an afterthought.

For example, descriptions of what an organisation does with personal data are frequently hidden behind an impenetrable formal privacy policy (LSE's [privacy policy](#) is over 1000 words long). However the Information Commissioner has indicated, for example, in his [recent guidance](#) on the use of cookies, that this is no longer acceptable. In fact, the guidance suggests that the use of cookies for activities that are not "strictly necessary" for a particular service, for example, providing targeted adverts on web pages, will now need the explicit consent of the customer.

Implementing effective and reliable means for giving (and revoking) consent for the use of personal data are significant [research challenges](#) and whilst the regulatory oversight of the ICO can help speed up the adoption of such practices, what will really make organisations change their practices is when their technological choices have strategic effects on the marketplace: If we make this choice about how we handle personal data, how will our competitors react? Thus, Facebook's 'dirty tricks' campaign may have the unexpected consequence of actually refining organisational practices in relation to personal data in ways that are more consumer friendly and as a result, should be encouraged.