

DuckDuckGo, a search engine that values the privacy of its users, gets a major overhaul with enhanced search tools to attract new users.

The new features that were announced Tuesday are intended to give more intelligent results and reduce clutter, much like Google, without sacrificing their strict privacy policy, unlike other search engines.

Among the new features are image and video search, auto-suggest, instant answers above links and ads - much like Google's card-based results display - and multiple meanings of searches. Local searches have also improved with an interactive map.

DuckDuckGo was one of several online services that have been quickly gaining attention following revelations made by whistleblower Edward Snowden last year that the US National Security Agency, through its project "PRISM", broke into the privacy of online users with the complicity of major social media and search engines.

According to its privacy policy, DuckDuckGo does not keep search records of its users, does not log IP addresses, and prevents any search information from being leaked to other sites. This makes it different from major search engines like Google, which tracks user search information and IP addresses to provide targeted ads.

While DuckDuckGo does contain ads, they are not based on search information or personal details to determine relevancy to the user.

The company, led by CEO Gabriel Weinberg, focuses specifically on privacy issues to attract a wide range of users who have become wary following reports of US government surveillance of internet traffic.

The site currently hosts an estimated 150 million searches per month, a 300% increase from last year according to Weinberg. This is still a low number compared to industry leader Google, which reportedly processes more than 100 billion searches per month.

Aside from avoiding the so-called filter bubble of specialized results based on personal information, DuckDuckGo also culls its search results selectively from only a handful of sources as opposed to several. The site prioritizes results from crowdsourced websites such as Wikipedia and partner website results.

In May 2013, Edward Snowden revealed the existence of PRISM, a data mining intelligence program by the NSA. Established by the Bush administration in 2007, PRISM collects stored data from search engines and social networking sites to gather information on individual users of potential interest.

As a majority of internet traffic passes through the US, PRISM allows the NSA to intercept internet traffic worldwide, with particular interest paid to current or potential conflict zones and foreign superpowers.

Implicated in the data mining were major software and technology companies such as Microsoft, Yahoo!, Facebook, Google, YouTube, Skype and Apple, all of which either denied any involvement, or admitted to reluctantly giving out selected information to the NSA.

However, the PRISM reports led to a loss of traffic for many of the involved companies, including Google, in favour of sites such as DuckDuckGo.