

## Google Street View.

Google Inc. bills the latest twist on its online maps as "Street View," but it looks a bit like "Candid Camera" as you cruise through the panorama of pictures that captured fleeting moments in neighborhoods scattered across the country.

In San Francisco, there's a man picking his nose on a street corner, another fellow taking out the trash and another guy scaling the outside of an apartment building, perhaps just for fun or maybe for some more sinister purpose.

Further down the highway at Stanford University, there's the titillation of a couple of coeds sunbathing in their bikinis. In San Jose, there's the rather sad sight of a bearded man apparently sleeping -- or did he just pass out? -- in the shadow of a garbage can, with what appears to be an empty cup perched in front of him.

Potentially embarrassing or compromising scenes like these are raising questions about whether the Internet's leading search engine has gone too far in its latest attempt to make the world a more accessible -- and transparent -- place.

"Everyone expects a certain level of anonymity as they move about their daily lives," said Kevin Bankston, a staff attorney for the Electronic Frontier Foundation, a group devoted to protecting people's rights on the Internet. "There is a certain 'ick' factor here."

Google is hoping to elicit "oohs and ahhs" with Street View, which was introduced on its maps for the San Francisco Bay area, New York, Las Vegas, Denver and Miami earlier this week. The Mountain View-based company already is planning to expand the service to other U.S. cities and other countries.

The feature provides high-resolution photos to enable street-level tours so users can get a more realistic, 360-degree look at places they might go or spots where they already have been. To guard against privacy intrusions, Google said all the photos were taken from vehicles driving along public streets during the past year. The photos will be periodically updated, but the company hasn't specified a timetable for doing so.

"This imagery is no different from what any person can readily capture or see walking down the street," Google spokeswoman Megan Quinn said in a statement. "Imagery of this kind is available in a wide variety of formats for cities all around the world."

Google certainly isn't the first company to venture down this photographic avenue. Amazon.com Inc. launched a similar mapping feature in January 2005 on a search engine called A9.com. That search engine's former chief executive, Udi Manber, now works for Google. And Microsoft Corp. began displaying street-level pictures on its online maps for San Francisco and Seattle late last year.

A9's photographic maps, which were abandoned late last year, raised privacy concerns about women being seen entering domestic violence shelters.

Hoping to avoid similar complaints, Google tried to identify potentially sensitive locations by contacting the Safety Net Project at the National Network to End Domestic Violence, much to the delight of Cindy Southworth, the group's director.

"We were thrilled that a major technology company like this reached out in this way to help protect these victims," she said.

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Google also is offering a "help" button on all the street-level photos to provide a link for users to request the removal of an image that is objectionable or clearly identifies a person who doesn't want to be included in the visual tapestry. Company spokeswoman Victoria Grand said Google has fielded "very few" removal requests so far.

Eileen Diamond is hoping she can persuade Google to replace its current picture of a Miami street corner where protesters gather once a week to protest the abortions performed at A Choice For Women. The picture, still available on Google's maps Friday



Street View

afternoon, includes a cluster of protesters standing outside the clinic, an image that clinic administrator Diamond worries will scare away potential patients or perhaps attract trouble makers to the facility.

"It's sort of disturbing because it's certainly not the kind of message we want to be sending out," said Diamond. "It's already very painful for our patients to come in. We want them to feel safe and protected."

As of Friday, Diamond said she was still having trouble finding the right way through Google's Web site to notify the company she would like the picture removed.

Privacy experts believe these kinds of ticklish situations are bound to arise as technology makes it increasingly easy to share pictures and video on the Internet, pitting the rights of free expression against the rights to personal privacy.

"What you have to do is balance out the perception against the reality and I think in this case, the perception is much scarier than the reality," said Lauren Weinstein, co-founder of People For Internet Responsibility, a policy group.

Because Google's street-level pictures were taken in public places, the company appears to be on solid legal ground, according to both Bankston and Weinstein.

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But Bankston doesn't think the law necessarily absolves Google, particularly since the company has embraced "Don't Be Evil" as its creed. He worries that some people in need of psychological or medical help won't seek treatment for fear of being caught in the cross-hairs of Google's cameras.

"There's a distinction between what Google has a legal right to do and what is the responsible thing to do," said Bankston, who believes the company should have blurred the images of unwitting pedestrians before it posted the street-level pictures. "It's a problem we as a society have to grapple with, and I think we are just now seeing the fault lines emerge."

While he thinks some of the issues raised by Google's new service are prime fodder for a healthy debate, Weinstein worries that it might inspire overly repressive laws.

"It's a tough area, but it just seems there is no way around the fact that public spaces are public spaces," Weinstein said. "You don't want to create an environment where it becomes illegal to take photos in public. It can be riskier not to be able to see something than it is to be able to see something."

## [Google Street View](#)

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