

Publication of Tax Details on Web Gives Glimpse Into Future

Andrea Di Maio, Massimiliano Claps

The online publication of Italian citizens' income and taxes for 2005 raises a number of concerns but also hints at how public government information could be used in the future.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Event

On 30 April 2008, the Italian Revenue Agency published lists of the declared income and related taxes from all citizens' tax returns for 2005 on its Web site. The Web site collapsed under the resulting high levels of access, while privacy advocates questioned the unusual move. The Revenue Agency removed the lists from its site the next day, but they are still available as simple text files on various peer-to-peer (P2P) networks. On 6 May 2008, the Data Protection Authority ruled that the lists must be permanently removed and their use is illegal.

Analysis

The Italian Revenue Agency claimed that the publication was legal according to legislation that gives the agency director the authority to choose how to publish such lists, but the Data Protection Authority has ruled otherwise. In the past, these lists were available on request from local branches of the Revenue Agency. However, the introduction of the Digital Administration Code in 2005 encourages use of the Web. Consumer associations have challenged this move, but a number of polls launched by newspapers and Web sites indicate that the majority of Italians favor this approach.

This event raises two interesting issues. The first concerns the social impact of technology. Lists that were published for only one day were copied, rearranged and made available through P2P networks such as eMule, which are usually used to exchange music and movies. There is potential to use this information for illegal or marketing purposes. But there is also the opportunity for citizens — accessing this data via social networks— to provide a relatively accurate view of where discrepancies exist, for example, by "mashing up" the data with land and building registries, vehicle registries, chartered accountant registries and other publicly available information

The second is that the P2P networks are now the only sources for such information, and people who wish to access this data need to be able to trust that the lists are accurate and have not been tampered with. Unfortunately, there is no way to ensure this.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Government agencies:

- Adopt a rigorous information management discipline because any public information that is put on the Web will be used, transformed and repurposed by intermediaries and social networks.
- Ensure that public information is accurate, up-to-date and easily mashable. Where appropriate, monitor how it is being used by social networks, to understand how to better structure it.
- Establish adequate identity management provisions for information about named individuals that can be publicly accessed (under freedom-of-information acts or equivalent laws). Track who gets access to the data unless there are compelling reasons not to do so.

RECOMMENDED READING

- "The Real Future of E-Government: From Joined-Up to Mashed-Up" — The ability to integrate information and services more easily with Web 2.0 technologies will cause a fundamental rethinking of how government services are delivered online, and what constitutes government data and processes. **By Andrea Di Maio**
- "Web 2.0 in Government: Blessing or Curse?" — Web 2.0 technologies offer government great opportunities for improved citizen-centricity and participation, but they need to be handled with care because they challenge some of the assumptions that have informed e-government strategies for the past 10 years. **By Andrea Di Maio**

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REGIONAL HEADQUARTERS

Corporate Headquarters

56 Top Gallant Road
Stamford, CT 06902-7700
U.S.A.
+1 203 964 0096

European Headquarters

Tamesis
The Glanty
Egham
Surrey, TW20 9AW
UNITED KINGDOM
+44 1784 431611

Asia/Pacific Headquarters

Gartner Australasia Pty. Ltd.
Level 9, 141 Walker Street
North Sydney
New South Wales 2060
AUSTRALIA
+61 2 9459 4600

Japan Headquarters

Gartner Japan Ltd.
Aobadai Hills, 6F
7-7, Aobadai, 4-chome
Meguro-ku, Tokyo 153-0042
JAPAN
+81 3 3481 3670

Latin America Headquarters

Gartner do Brazil
Av. das Nações Unidas, 12551
9º andar—World Trade Center
04578-903—São Paulo SP
BRAZIL
+55 11 3443 1509