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Cupid aims for background checks

States looking to regulate e-dating

Originally published By DAVID COLKER
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Dating has always been a delicate dance of information swapping: What to reveal when?

Now some lawmakers want to regulate it by **requiring online dating services to conduct background checks on their clients**. (NOTE: CORRECTION ISSUED – the legislation does not require background checks, just disclosure on whether or not sites conduct criminal background screening on communicating members)

The push runs counter to the prevailing sentiment about privacy. In the wake of high-profile breaches at information brokers ChoicePoint Inc. and Reed Elsevier's LexisNexis, state and federal legislators called for tighter control of personal information, with less, rather than more, disclosure.

Most online dating sites, including IAC/InterActiveCorp's Match.com and Yahoo Inc.'s Yahoo Personals, oppose background-check bills in key statehouses around the country. **But competitor True supports them - and, in fact, is bankrolling the campaign.**

True's founder and chief executive, Herb Vest, believes that every online dating service should conduct background checks, as True does.

"The primary motivation is to protect people from criminal predation online," Vest said. "I can't imagine anyone with a hatful of brains being against that." Vest said he spent \$200,000 last year on lobbyists around the country. Although opponents charge that his goal is to gain publicity for his site, the legislation has met with at least some success in four states.

The Michigan House of Representatives late last year passed legislation based on a model bill written by True; it wasn't approved by the state's Senate but was reintroduced in both houses this year. Similar measures are being considered in Florida, Texas and Ohio. A California version was pulled before a committee could vote on it this year.

"This is one of those feel-good kind of legislations that politicians can get behind," said analyst Charlene Li of Forrester Research Inc.

Privacy advocates are alarmed.

"The notion that we should be requiring yet another industry to do background checks is chilling," said Barry Steinhart, director of the American Civil Liberties Union's Technology and Liberty Program.

"It hurtles us further into a surveillance society in which every action is going to be investigated by an entity with no accountability. "Raising the stakes for both sides is that a law in any one state could effectively create a national standard because of the difficulties in applying different local standards to Internet commerce.

The bills generally would mandate that online dating services find out whether clients have been convicted of felonies and post that information or ban convicted felons from their sites. The legislation also would allow sites to forgo checks if they posted prominent messages saying they don't conduct them.

Texas state Rep. Will Hartnett, a Republican, put opponents in the same category as those who would "defend child molesters who prey on people on the Internet." He dismissed the worries about privacy being compromised.

"As far as I am concerned," he said, "anyone convicted of a felony loses the right of privacy."