

\$750M class-action lawsuit filed against Bell Canada for alleged privacy breach

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REUTERS/Shawn Best

A \$750-million class-action lawsuit has been launched against Bell Canada for allegedly tracking what its cellphone customers browsed on the Internet and selling the information to advertisers.

In 2013, Bell Canada began the controversial Relevant Ads Program that allegedly tracked, collected and sold its customers' and Virgin Mobile users' Internet browsing data. The lawsuit seeks damages for the alleged breach of privacy.

Last week, the privacy commissioner asked Bell to change its policy of having customers opt out if they don't want their personal information collected for use in targeted advertising.

The commissioner said Bell's customer profile database "raises privacy concerns" because it tracks what customers browse online, what apps they use and what TV shows they watch and combines with account data — including credit score — to target ads at them.

Bell subsequently agreed to stop building the profiles, promised to delete the data, and to adopt an "opt-in" policy for any similar programs in the future.

"The Relevant Ads Program was a misguided attempt by a Canadian telecommunications company to generate advertising revenue. If allowed to proceed, it constitutes a threat to the core privacy rights of all Canadians," Ted Charney of Toronto-based Charney Lawyers said in a release Thursday night.

The allegations haven't been proven in court.

In addition to monetary demands, the lawsuit also asks for an expert to be hired to oversee and confirm that Bell has destroyed its customers' personal information, as promised.

All Bell wireless customers who had data plans with Bell between Nov. 16, 2013, and April 13 may be eligible to join the lawsuit.

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