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If you want to change your IP address — either because you want to get past a firewall at work or at school, or simply to access another country’s Netflix library — there are two good ways to do so, namely through either a VPN or a proxy. However, though their goal is the same, these two types of service are very different in the way they work. As a result, depending on what you need to do, using a proxy instead of a VPN could end up yielding no result or, in some cases, even end up getting you into trouble. Why You’d Use a VPN or Proxy
The main purpose of both proxies and VPNs is to change IP addresses, also called “spoofing.” Simply put, when connecting to the internet, you send a connection request from your device — be it a laptop or smartphone or anything else — to the server of your internet service provider (ISP). Your ISP then makes the connection from its server to the site you’re visiting and it appears on your screen. When you connect to a site, it requests certain information from you. One of the more important data points is your IP address, which is a set of numbers that smartphones your approximate physical location. This information is used to determine what language the site should be displayed in, what products are offered to you, as well as tailoring ads to you. Spoofing Your IP Address
If you want to avoid websites knowing your location, either because you want the site to offer you different products or because you want to avoid targeted ads, you can spoof your IP by using either a proxy or a VPN. Instead of connecting from your ISP’s server to the website, you make a little detour to a server owned by the VPN or the proxy. This gives you another IP, making it appear to the site as if you were browsing from there rather than your own location. It’s pretty handy, and also is useful for getting around blocks that have been put up. For example, Netflix doesn’t show all content in all countries for copyright reasons. By using a VPN — proxies won’t work, as we’ll discuss later — you can get a fake IP address for another country and watch different shows than you can in your own country. Bypassing Content Blocks
VPNs and proxies also get you past any blocks put up on the other end, by either your ISP, your school, your work, or even your government. Most of these blocks work by disallowing your connection to a site. If you reroute your connection through a different IP address supplied by a VPN or proxy, you can circumvent the block. VPN vs Proxy: The Differences
To reroute your connection, a proxy simply slots itself between your ISP and the site, giving you a fresh IP address. They’re free to use and usually require no signup to use: just go to a site, click a button, and you’re good to go. However, because all it does is reroute traffic, it’s very easy to track down where the connection came from as well as where it’s going. As such, anybody with a vested interest in making sure they know how traffic flows — governments and services concerned with copyright spring to mind — can very easily see what your real IP is by using some very basic tools. Downsides to Proxies
This means that proxies aren’t really that great except for the most basic kinds of IP spoofing. For example, YouTube has only very basic copyright filters in place, so if a video is blocked in your country, chances are using a basic proxy like that of HideMyAss will unblock it. The same goes for many schools, universities, and workplaces: In many of these places, any internet blocks are there mainly for form’s sake, and a proxy should get you past them. When to Use a VPN
However, if you’re up against a tougher block, like when a system administrator gets wise to what pupils and colleagues are doing, or because you’re trying to see what Netflix has on offer in other countries, you’re going to need a VPN. VPNs have several features proxies that not only make them better at spoofing IPs, but also make them a lot safer to use. Their main advantage comes from the so-called VPN tunnel, which is an encrypted connection between the VPN’s server and the website you’re visiting. What the VPN Tunnel Does
If your ISP or the site tries to look where you’re connecting to, all they see is the server’s IP, and a whole bunch of encrypted text. Unless they can crack the encryption — and since it’s usually a really advanced cipher like AES-256, they can’t — they have no idea what you’re up to. Because you’re connecting to an otherwise innocuous IP address and there’s no way to see what comes after or before, most blocks will allow you to pass, meaning you can now listen to YouTube playlists while at work. Beating Regional Restrictions and Censorship
The tunnel also has plenty of other benefits, for one, it makes it so you can torrent movies without getting copyright notices. It’s also good for getting past governmental blocks like those put up by Iran or China, handy for both travelers to those countries, as well as dissidents within them. They’re also great as they add an extra layer of security when on public WiFi networks. However, the most common use for VPNs is to get past the blocks put up by streaming services like Hulu, Amazon Prime Video, and Netflix. Because of copyright claims in different countries, the libraries of these services differ from place to place (Hulu is even U.S.-only). If you want to watch a specific show and it’s not in your country, you’re going to need to use a VPN to spoof the IP address in a country that does have it. Though it may seem a little frivolous, it’s a great way to make the most of your streaming subscriptions. VPN vs Proxy: The Final Word
In short, proxies are unsecured VPNs, or VPNs are encrypted proxies. While proxies are definitely useful little tools when it comes to getting past basic blocks or for simple spoofing, they can’t hold a candle to VPNs. VPNs are a lot more versatile, useful, and secure, so for most people, most of the time, they’re a much better solution than a proxy. FlashVPN (opens in new tab) is one of the most popular free VPN proxy apps for Android, with more than 10 million installs reported on Google Play.The app has adverts - lots and lots of ads, autoplaying, noisy, filling the screen, forcing you to wait - but otherwise it's entirely free, with no signup required and no bandwidth or time limits.The network has grown since our last review, up from 5 to 9 locations: Canada, France, Germany, Hong Kong, Japan, Netherlands, Singapore, UK and US.Want to try FlashVPN? Download it here (opens in new tab)We would normally try to find a little more information about a VPN before we installed it, but FlashVPN just doesn't provide any. There's no website beyond the Google Play page, no contact method other than a generic Gmail address, an address ('128 Aberdeen Main Road') which might host a number of businesses in Hong Kong, but otherwise no other evidence that the supposed developer (FlashSoftware) even exists. VPN's are supposed to be about preserving anonymity, but usually that's to benefit the customer, not the provider.FlashVPN's privacy policy reveals that the company may disclose information collected on its users (Image credit: FlashVPN)PrivacyA VPN provider's privacy policy is its opportunity to win your trust by spelling out exactly what data it collects, what it doesn't, and how it does its very best to protect your privacy at all times.FlashVPN Free VPN Proxy's lack of a website meant we were already struggling to trust it, and it doesn't help that the privacy policy is accessed by an HTTP connection to a raw IP address (Checking the address out on Google, we found it was also used by LinkVPN and a number of now obsolete VPN apps, again with no real indication who was behind any of them.The privacy policy (opens in new tab) claims: 'We do not monitor your traffic. The only thing we monitor if the IPs you are using to enter our servers are not blacklisted in respected Black lists databases, like spamhaus.org.'Well, okay. Unfortunately, it spoils the effect by going on: 'We may disclose information we collect from you: To the law enforcement organizations, if we obliged to, and Information required in suspect of breach of the law.' So, it does collect information, then?The policy certainly gives that impression, stating: 'We keep all information on highly secured servers based in United Kingdom and USA. All Information might be transferred to other servers we could use and we will take reasonably care with these possible transfers.'We wouldn't take this too seriously. Our guess is that FlashVPN Free VPN Proxy is using a boilerplate privacy policy containing some cobbled-together sentences which tell users what it thinks they want to hear, and if it is collecting information, we'd be astonished if this is being 'carefully transferred' to 'highly secured' servers based in the United Kingdom and USA. This does mean we've absolutely no idea what FlashVPN Free VPN Proxy might be doing with your data, though, and the 'company' doesn't seem eager to tell us. If you place any value in the transparency or trustworthiness of your VPN provider, this probably isn't the service for you.FlashVPN requests access to more permissions than other VPN apps we've reviewed (Image credit: Google)PermissionsApp permissions can sometimes offer clues about their activities, and FlashVPN Free Proxy's are particularly interesting.FlashVPN Free VPN Proxy asks for control over many network functions, much as you would expect for a VPN app: to view Wi-Fi connections, receive data from the internet, change network connectivity, and connect and disconnect from Wi-Fi.It also asks for the 'phone status and identity' permission, which is a little more dubious. Does the app need to recognize when you're receiving an incoming phone call? We don't see why. This permission could be used to obtain your IMEI number, though, a unique identifier for your device. If a developer captured this during connection, it would allow building up browsing histories over time for individual devices.It asks for the right to draw over other apps. That's not uncommon for apps which display ads, because full screen ads will always obscure something else, but it's still not a permission you should accept unless you trust the provider. (An app which can draw over others might be able to fool you into taking actions you wouldn't follow otherwise.)The app asks for permission to read, modify or delete your photos, media, and whatever else you might be storing, too. Many legitimate apps do the same, and this doesn't necessarily mean FlashVPN will behave maliciously, but it leaves that possibility open. As the developer has given us absolutely no reason to trust it, that has to be a concern.The app even displays ads for other more reputable VPN services (Image credit: FlashVPN)AppFlashVPN Free VPN Proxy is not to install, at least if you're not worried about its scary permissions. It's a simple matter of tap, tap, tap - done.After fighting through a succession of annoying full-screen ads, we finally reached the app interface. This works much like every other free or paid VPN app in the world: a Connect button by default connects you to your nearest server, and you're able to manually choose another from a simple location list.Tapping Connect displayed an ad, and another ad, and maybe another (we'd begun to lose track), before finally getting us online. There's no hint of any other features or abilities. No favorites system, no automatic connections, no indicators of server load or latency, no protocol options, no settings at all.Be careful choosing 'Auto select' as you won't know which location you're connecting to (Image credit: FlashVPN)If you've left the app set to 'Auto select' your server, we noticed the interface doesn't tell you which country it's chosen. That's annoying, as we know from experience that not every VPN gives you the location you'd expect.The app makes it more difficult to change locations that it should be, too, forcing you to close the current connection before you begin another.We noticed that we weren't left drowning in ads the next time we clicked the Connect button, though. Seems like the app does give you an occasional break from the marketing overload.We use a number of different speed tests to gauge the performance of each VPN we review (Image credit: Ookla)PerformanceFlashVPN Free VPN Proxy speeds were inconsistent and generally poor during our review, ranging from around 4-20Mbps for our UK location. Quality VPNs typically average 67-68Mbps at the same site.FlashVPN Free VPN Proxy correctly replaced our own DNS server, but with public services (Cloudflare, Google) rather than its own.We had occasional difficulties with some sites thinking we weren't in the countries we selected, for example seeing the UK server as being in France or Germany. Geolocation is an uncertain business, though, and problems aren't unusual. Most sites saw our virtual location correctly, and worked just as we would expect.FlashVPN proved to be reasonably successful at site unblocking, too, with the app allowing us to access BBC iPlayer and US Netflix. It failed with Amazon Prime Video and Disney+, but that's not unusual, even for commercial VPNs.Final verdictWe like that FlashVPN is free and unlimited, but we hate the lack of transparency, and the need to give an app from an anonymous developer the right to read and modify your storage. If you can live with that, it might be worth using for simple site unblocking tasks, but we wouldn't trust it with anything faintly confidential or important.Also check out our complete list of the best VPN services

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