

Microsoft unveils new privacy feature for IE

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Microsoft's Dean Hachamovitch, Corporate Vice President of Internet Explorer, speaks at the Internet Explorer 9 Beta launch event in San Francisco in September 2010. Microsoft unveiled increased privacy options Tuesday for the upcoming version of its popular Web browser Internet Explorer 9 including the ability to prevent tracking by third-party websites.

An upcoming version of Microsoft Corp.'s Internet Explorer browser will let users add lists of sites that they don't want tracking them, a peace offering amid uproar over the sneaky ways that websites watch their users as they bounce around the Internet.

The new feature, however, won't be as sweeping as a "do not track" option that the Federal Trade Commission is proposing to limit advertisers' ability to do that. Users will have to create or find their own lists of sites they want to block.

And the feature won't be automatically turned on when it debuts with the

release of Internet Explorer 9 early next year.

Part of the reason for the uproar over tracking is that it's hard to tell which sites you're sharing information with. Websites use many third-party advertising partners, and some may use shady surveillance schemes, perhaps without the knowledge of the websites.

Requiring users to sort out which sites are good and bad puts the onus on the wrong people, said Anup Ghosh, founder and chief scientist of Invincea, which makes software that works with Internet Explorer to improve security.

"With this kind of 'do not track' list, the industry is not held accountable for not tracking. It's the user that's responsible. They kind of got it backward," he said. "Users aren't equipped to make these kinds of decisions, nor do they want to."

A familiar refrain among security and privacy professionals is that Internet users by and large don't fully appreciate the extent to which sites harvest their personal information.

Visiting a modern website is less like a handshake between two friends than it is glad-handing a room full of strangers. Unless you have tinkered with your security settings, in most browsers, you implicitly give any site you visit permission for it and all of its advertising partners to track you. The tracking happens silently, and your browsing habits are sold and analyzed by advertising firms looking for ways to show you more relevant ads.

Ghosh said it would be more useful for Microsoft to work directly with privacy groups to identify and create lists of sites that engage in controversial forms of tracking.

Dean Hachamovitch, who leads Internet Explorer development for Microsoft, said Microsoft isn't doing that because it doesn't want to judge which sites are OK to track consumers.

"Choosing a tracking protection list is a statement around what the consumer wants out of the box, and in some ways that is completely up to the consumer," Hachamovitch said.

Privacy worries and corporate interests often collide in building a browser, which is why the privacy features that do make it into the finished product are often compromises between competing interests.

As a seller of Internet advertising, Microsoft has to weigh two needs: consumers' desire to be completely shielded consumers from tracking, and its advertising customers' need to monitor people to sell them more targeted ads.

Also, an insistence on complete privacy, by turning off tracking features altogether and cranking up the privacy protections all the way, can make surfing the Internet difficult because sites will forget who you are and your browser will forget where it's been.

Jules Polonetsky, former chief privacy officer for AOL Inc. and online ad network DoubleClick, which is now owned by Google Inc., said that although most consumers probably won't use the new Internet Explorer features, they will likely appeal to people who are concerned about online privacy.

Industry trade groups, consumer groups, privacy watchdogs and government agencies will likely create lists of sites for consumers to plug into the new tool, said Polonetsky, who now serves as co-chair and director of the Future of Privacy Forum, a Washington think tank that gets funding from big technology companies and advertisers.

Polonetsky said the features are an improvement over the filtering feature in the current version of Internet Explorer. That feature requires users to turn it on every time they use the Internet. And once it's turned on, it blocks not only online ad networks, but also online news feeds and all sorts of other third-party content that appears on Web sites.

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