

Can we protect against computers being fingerprinted?

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Credit: Wikipedia

Imagine that every time a person goes out in public, they leave behind a track for all to see, so that their behaviour can be easily analysed, revealing their identity.

This is the case with people's online browser "fingerprints", which are left behind at each location they visit on their [internet browser](#).

Almost like a regular fingerprint, a person's browser fingerprint – or "browserprint" – is often unique to the individual. Such a fingerprint can be monitored, tracked and identified by companies and hackers.

Researchers at the University of Adelaide are working to find new methods of protecting against the fingerprinting of personal computers – and are now giving members of the community the chance

to see firsthand their own computer browserprint.

"Fingerprinting on computers is invisible to most people but there are companies out there who are already using these techniques to learn more information about individuals, about their interests and their habits," says Lachlan Kang, a Computer Science PhD student who is conducting this study as part of a wider project on privacy, within in the University's Schools of Computer Science and Mathematical Sciences.

"This can be quite powerful information to have, especially if it's used to tailor advertising to you. In countries that are less benign than ours, it could also be used to spy on people," he says.

"Computer users generally are growing in awareness of [privacy issues](#), but currently there's little that can be done to counter fingerprinting. This is because fingerprints build up in between the websites you're visiting – your browsing history and [personal information](#) can be pooled in the gaps between those websites. Simply clearing your browsing history won't make any difference to this, because the information is already out there."

Mr Kang is seeking the public's help to better understand which fingerprinting techniques are the most powerful, so that he can help to build defences against them.

"Eventually we hope that people will be able to protect themselves from being fingerprinted, or tracked without their consent. But in order to do this, we need to analyse a large number of online fingerprints – as many as 10,000 of them would be helpful. Currently we have 2500, which is a great start," he says.

"No personal [information](#) will be retained for our project. We're simply looking for the data, which will be rendered anonymous for ethical reasons."

More information: For more information or to see your own browserprint, visit: browserprint.info

Provided by University of Adelaide

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