Discussion – Big Brother is Watching You!

There are two ways in which websites can watch what you do online. The easiest to describe is the use of cookies and the other is the use of targeted advertising.

I shall start with cookies because they are easier to describe.

Cookies

Cookies are not the monsters that so many people seem to think. Perhaps it is the fact that so few people know what they are or how they work that causes people to panic at the mere thought of a little ol' cookie appearing to devour their computer.

The truth is much more simple.

Cookies are little files which a website can save on your hard disc so that it knows where it is in any transaction which you have with that website. As far as I can discover, all banking websites use cookies so that they know where they are in a series of screens which constitute a single long transaction. They need this information because, by design, the internet is a stateless beast. This means that no transaction can know what went before it unless it manages to store some part of the previous transaction. This is one reason why banks and other websites use cookies to track what is going on.

As an example, when you pay somebody using internet banking, there will be a number of screens involved in this one transaction. While the bank's computer is processing your transaction it will also be processing many other transactions from other customers. The bank's computer must keep track of each transaction for each computer but, because of the way the internet sends information between your computer and the bank's computer, there is no way for the bank's computer to know where it was in your series of transactions.

To overcome this problem the bank places a cookie on your computer so that, when it opens the next screen in the transaction, it can find out which was the last screen sent and which account it is accessing.

I have had to help more than one client who would not allow cookies and then could not access their bank's website. Sometimes the error message was cryptic: *"You cannot access this website now. Please try again later."* but on at least one bank's website the error message was more direct: *"You need to configure your web browser to allow cookies. Please allow cookies then try accessing this site again."*

If only all websites could be so accurate in their error messages: this would make my job and my clients' life much easier.

Third-Party Cookies

Most cookies are placed on your computer by the websites which you visit. There are other cookies called *third-party cookies* (because they come from a third-party to the conversation) and those are the ones that I block. This blocking is easy to do: you will find the settings for cookies in your web browser's settings area. This varies by browser so check your browser.

- **Chrome**: click on the three bars to the right of the address bar then select *Settings*. At the bottom of the Settings page click on *Show Advanced Settings*. Under *Privacy* click on *Content Settings …* and the cookies section is at the top of the new page which opens. Remember to click on *Done* when you have changed your settings here.
- **Firefox**: if you see the menu bar click on *Tools » Options* otherwise click on the word *Firefox* at the top-left of the screen and select *Options » Options*. Click on the tab marked *Privacy* and make the changes you want in the *History* section then click *OK*.
- **Opera**: In the menu select *Tools » Preferences* then click on the *Advanced* tab then click on *Cookies*. Click *OK* when you have finished.

- **Internet Explorer**: in the menu select *Tools » Internet Options* then click on the privacy tab. Move the slider up or down to select the options that you want then click on *OK*.

I feel that it is worth blocking third-party cookies because they are usually used to track your movements so that you can be persuaded to buy something that you do not want. This, in my opinion, makes these third-party sites no better than spammers. And spammers, as we all know, are the internet's equivalent of marketing calls which arrive just as you are sitting down to dinner in the evening!

Summary

In summary, many cookies are useful although I do not allow cookies from third-party sites.

Tracking Your Movements

Cookies are one way that unwanted advertisers track your movements. The other way is to place little pieces of information on web pages which you see. Often these little pieces of information are just one pixel in size, and are so small that you cannot see them.

These little pieces of information are then used to track you like the CCTV cameras in banks and other public places.

You can easily stop them from appearing on your web pages by using two simple programs. These two programs are Ghostery and Disconnect and they operate in different ways.

- Ghostery gives you complete control over which websites may or may not access your surfing habits on this page. It takes more effort to work but shows you all the websites which are freeloading on your web speed and capacity.
- Disconnect is simpler because all the work is done by the people at Disconnect: all you have to do is surf normally. If new tracking websites appear you hope that Disconnect manages to find them for you.

Both of these tools give you amazing control over who can and cannot track you.

Ghostery

Ghostery shows you which websites are tracking you when you are viewing each web page that appears on your screen. It allows you to permit or deny each site's access to your viewing history.

Because you have complete control you will need to be attentive to what is going on behind the scenes and make sure that you stop unwanted websites from accessing your browsing habits.

How do you know which websites are unwanted? Aye, there's the rub!

Disconnect

Disconnect is an add-on to your web browser which automatically blocks all websites which appear on a particular page and have been notified to Disconnect. It allows you to see how many tracking websites have had their means of tracking you stopped.

Further Information

Ghostery	www.ghostery.com
Disconnect	www.disconnect.me