



I'm safe if I use Private or Incognito browsing, right?

by Bryan Smith, LTCL Tech Coach

In my last column “What are you exposing when you browse the web?”, we explored what information websites collect and why other websites seem to know your browsing history. This column is going to explore the concept of private or incognito browsing and why these are terrible terms for the function they provide, as well as go a little deeper into these things called cookies. Read on to understand the function of these modes in your web browser.

Most web browsers have an optional feature called private or incognito browsing (for the remainder of this column, this will simply be referred to as private browsing). Seems like a good option if we want to protect our privacy and safely browse the Internet. For details on how to enable this mode, search the Internet for “private browsing” and the name of your web browser, e.g., Chrome, Firefox, Safari, Edge, etc., or ask one of our Tech Coaches at techcoach@laketravislibrary.org. But before you decide that this is going to keep all of your browsing private, keep reading, because while this feature sounds like “anonymous” browsing, it is not (which is why I think these are lousy names for this feature).

The function provided with private browsing has some nice benefits. There are basically three functions that this feature provides when you shut down the app or close the private browsing:

1. Erase all your browsing history
2. Erase all your search history
3. Erase all auto-fill information

Why would you want this? Well, it keeps your web browsing private from others who may use the same computer/device. Think of a shared computer or tablet... you may not want your family to see that you were shopping for jewelry right before someone’s birthday.

So, should you always use this feature? I don’t, and here’s why.

1. Erasing browsing history. I find this handy when doing research because as I continue to search for web sites/pages, I will often see in my search results that I have already visited that webpage (on my web browser, the link is purple instead of the normal blue). This tells me that I don’t need to click on that link because I’ve already been there. In private browsing mode, this history is not kept.
2. Erase all your search history. I like my browser saving my search history because I don’t use bookmarks (a way to save and go to favorite websites easily) very much, and so I just type the first

couple of characters of where I want to go, and the browser displays a list of best guesses. So, when I type the letters “ho”, the first recommendation is Home Depot – yep, I search there a lot.

3. Erase all auto-fill information. Again, this feature saves me time by guessing what I want to type into text boxes on a website. For example, if the text box is prompting me for first name, if I type the letter “B” in the box, my browser recommends “Bryan”, and I can just select it.

Note that even in private browsing mode, bookmarks and downloaded files are still kept even after the app is closed or private browsing is closed.

So, I wish this feature wasn’t called private or incognito... I wish it was called “Leave no tracks on this computer/device when I quit”. OK, it doesn’t exactly roll of the tongue, but it’s certainly more descriptive!

Cookies

In the [last column](#), I introduced the concept of “cookies” which are pieces of information stored in your computing device that kept track of your activities (think of them like breadcrumbs that track where you’ve been) when browsing the web. Private browsing mode will erase these cookies after your session, but you can also independently disable the use of all cookies regardless of using private browsing. Folks commonly do this to prevent as much browsing information as possible from being shared with websites. However, non-browsing information, like your location and attributes of your computing device can still be seen and cannot be easily disabled.

And don’t forget, your Internet Service Provider can see and keep track of all the websites that you visit, and websites know the last time you visited (through the use of cookies).

This is a constantly changing area and is of high interest in this current age of bad actors trying to get your money, your identity, or to just upset you.

Tech Coach Assistance

Tech Coaches are now providing remote Tech Coaching. Simply send an email to techcoach@laketravislibrary.org and one of our coaches will respond to assist you with any questions or challenges you may have.