What are you exposing when you browse the web?

by Bryan Smith, LTCL Tech Coach

Ever wonder how much information about you is being collected (and analyzed and sold) when you simply browse the Internet? This is a hot topic for tech companies providing you access to the web as well as for companies and organizations who want you to visit their website; and due to this, the answer to the question posed is constantly changing. Read on to understand why you see advertisements on websites that are related to where you are located and your recent activities.

The other day, I was looking for repair parts for my toilet. I used Google's search engine to search on the part number I needed. I clicked on Home Depot because it was listed in the search results, but then discovered that they didn't carry the part. So, I then went to lowes.com, and before I could even type in the part number in their website search, the part that I was searching for as well as the location hours for the nearest store was on my screen. How'd they do that? And why did I continue to see advertisements for toilet parts when I accessed my gmail account for a few days after?

There are at least two ways to look at this. The first is from a point of view of the web working for me. I didn't have to type in the part number on a competitor's website. Or, that while checking my email, I was reminded that my toilet is not going to stop that incessant refilling of the tank every couple of hours and fix itself. Thanks Internet! Another way to look at it is that I have no privacy and does the world really know that I have a broken toilet?!? I guess you can surmise how I feel about it since I'm sharing with you all that I had a toilet to repair.

From any web browser on your computer or phone, websites immediately can see the following information (this list is not exhaustive) about you once you access the website:

- Your approximate location and the time zone where you are located
- Which web browser (incl version and plug-ins) you are using, e.g., Chrome, Safari, Firefox, Edge, etc.
- Which operating system (incl version) of your computing device, e.g., iOS, Android, Windows, MacOS, etc.
- Size and capabilities of the screen you are using
- Your network speed between your device and the website
- What language you speak

Why do they do this? The answer is multifaceted. One aspect is that the website wants to provide a great experience for you, so knowing this information allows the website to speak your language; say

good morning or afternoon; display information that is easy to see and navigate; and display information that is interesting to your location.

At a deeper level, this information and more, is used to create a profile on who you are. While the websites may not know precisely who you are, this information can create a fairly accurate fingerprint of who you are such that targeted advertisements can be sent to you.

Has it always been this way?

It used to be much easier for websites to know who you are by way of things called "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.

While web browsers can disable the use of cookies and delete them after each web browsing session, your Internet Service Provider can see and keep track of the websites that you visit. In my next column, we'll explore this concept of "Private" or "Incognito" browsing, which are terrible terms for the function they provide, as well as go a little deeper into these things called cookies.

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