

A new battleground in the web browser wars: Privacy

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Google announced a massive shift last week in how it handles cookies, those pesky digital trackers that chase us around the internet and serve up targeted ads that are both creepy yet eerily precise reflections of our wants. The search giant, which just helped Alphabet Inc. surpass a \$1 trillion valuation, said it will eventually stop supporting third-party cookies in its ubiquitous Chrome browser.

The move won't end the Big Brother era of Big Tech, but Google is framing the decision as a significant step away from unbridled [data mining](#). In a blog post, Google references [privacy](#) about a dozen times, an awkward pitch for a company that built a juggernaut of a business by tapping into cookies from its billions of users. Can Google, after pioneering and protecting an apparent invasion of privacy, sell its browser to consumers as a privacy-first service?

Google is going to try. That's because the other browser makers are embracing privacy as a competitive advantage. Apple Inc. added cookie restrictions to Safari several years ago. Microsoft Corp. has been building a raft of tracking-prevention mechanisms into its Edge browser. And Mozilla Corp. has made paid privacy tools a core selling point of its Firefox service, though they've failed to catch on so far, leading to job cuts last week.

When Google first introduced Chrome in 2008, it essentially marketed the new browser as an online operating system, one that would treat popular web services-email, messaging, video streaming-as full-blown applications, rather than clunky web pages. Chrome was a fast, refreshing alternative to Firefox and Internet Explorer. In the decade since, it has soared in popularity: Chrome today boasts 63% worldwide

market share, according to StatCounter.

Chrome also became a huge source of data, facilitating an ecosystem of Google services that kept feeding its advertising engine with more user information. The browser's search box defaulted, of course, to Google, while users could log into the platform via Gmail to seamlessly access its products such Drive, Docs, Maps and YouTube, enabling the company to fill up ever-more jars of cookies. The dominance of the [browser](#) raised privacy concerns. One test last year found a whopping 11,189 requests for cookies in a week of surfing on Chrome. But only recently has Google started comprehensively rethinking its [privacy policies](#), partly due to regulatory pressure and changing consumer sentiments around data collection.

"Users are demanding greater privacy-including transparency, choice and control over how their data is used-and it's clear the web ecosystem needs to evolve to meet these increasing demands," Justin Schuh, director of Chrome engineering, wrote in the blog post last week.

Google deserves a measure of credit for adopting consumer protections that could undermine its relationship with marketers and publishers, and also raise further antitrust scrutiny. Still, such policies stop far short of ridding Google of ad-tracking altogether: They may simply end up increasing the value of so-called first-party cookies, which websites collect directly from their users, rather than through intermediaries. One company well-positioned to keep gobbling those up from its many devoted users? Google.

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