

KEYNOTE "PRIVACY TRACKING"™ SERVICE COULD FINALLY BRING TRANSPARENCY TO MURKY WORLD

from The Privacy Times

June 27, 2012 - A leading Internet company will soon unveil a potentially ground-breaking program for identifying the tracking of Web site visitors by behavioral advertisers.

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In testing its new "Web Privacy Tracking" service in recent months, Keynote Systems found that secret tracking of Internet users by third-party advertising companies "with little or no regard for privacy standards" is the new norm.

While debate has raged in recent years over the privacy implications of behavioral advertising, there has been lack of systematic, empirical evidence of how much tracking occurs, and which companies do it. In fact, because of the surreptitious nature of behavioral advertising, major Web sites often don't know the true extent of the tracking their visitors that takes place or who's doing it.

Keynote's new service could change all of that which is precisely why it's a potential "game-changer" in terms of transparency and accountability.

In testing its "Web Privacy Tracking" service on the Web sites of 269 of its corporate clients, Keynote discovered that

tracking was rampant. While much of it was performed by well-known ad firms like DoubleClick (owned by Google) that were under contract with the Keynote client, the Keynote survey discovered that some tracking was done by ad firm "sub-contractors" unknown to the client. That discovery likely will result in revisions in the client's contract with the ad firm, Keynote officials said.

Keynote Systems, which trades on the NASDAQ exchange, describes itself as "the global leader in Internet and mobile cloud testing & monitoring," having the "world's largest on-demand performance monitoring and testing infrastructure for web and mobile sites comprised of over 4,000 measurement computers and mobile devices in over 275 locations around the world."

That infrastructure enabled Keynote to survey 269 Websites across four industries " News & Media, Financial Services, Travel & Hospitality and Retail. The survey found:

- 86 percent of 269 leading websites analyzed had third-party tracking cookies and 60 percent had at least one tracker that violated "good industry privacy practices," defined as having "anonymized data," and offering consumer "tracking, and being a participant in industry privacy self-regulatory programs.

- 56 percent of the ad companies that tracked were not part of an industry self-regulation program; 41 percent did not offer an opt out, and 27 percent did not promise to anonymize data.

- 96 percent of the News & Media sites had trackers, while 94 percent of the travel sites, 84 percent retail sites and 73 percent of Finance sites did.

- Nearly all Travel & Hospitality and News & Media Websites have third-party tracking.

- Nearly three out of four Financial Services sites expose visitors to third-party behavioral tracking; of the Financial Services sites analyzed 52 percent had one or more third-party trackers which failed to comply with good industry privacy practices.

- Of the 211 third party trackers found during the survey, only one committed to honor "Do Not Track."

- News & Media sites exposed site visitors to an average of 14 different third-party trackers, while Finance sites averaged four different third-party trackers; travel sites averaged 7, and retail sites averaged 10.

"The Web advertising ecosystem is sprawling and complicated, with hundreds of

ad networks all competing to gather as much targeting data on consumers as they possibly can," said Ray Everett, Keynote director of privacy services. "It's very much still a "wild west" mentality and the activities of aggressive tracking companies can place Website publishers in a difficult position: how do you monetize your Website without alienating your visitors and exposing yourself to legal risk?"

Everett said contributing to the lack of transparency for Internet users in the "Ad Ecosystem," was the fact that a single Web page might have: (1) Dozens of content elements; (2) Twelve third-party content providers; (3) Ten advertising components with tracking; (4) Constantly rotating pool of ad content providers and (5) Geo-targeting of content and ads based on viewer's location.

Behavioral advertising, a common use of third-party tracking data, is an increasingly common practice on the Web and one of the key ways Websites fund their operations. Third-party trackers place cookies on the browsers of site's visitors to track a user's clicks and path through the Web. They also can make note of things like what the visitor buys and where the visitor goes once they leave.

"The number of Websites that allow visitors to be tracked by third-parties may be surprising to some, but as consumers begin to understand that their online behavior can be recorded, enterprises will have to work even harder to ensure that consumers' privacy expectations are met," said Ray Everett, Keynote director of privacy services.

Leveraging what he called Keynote's "Transaction Perspective data," Everett said the Web Privacy Tracking service matches tracking events to domains, and matches domains to tracking organizations, and also matches organizations to their stated privacy policies.

Included is a "Privacy Dashboard," that enables Keynote's Web publisher clients to

define their preferred privacy practices, and filters data to display inconsistencies or potential violations of the Web publisher's privacy policy.

For example, Keynote's service identifies the major online ad networks, like Google Display Network, formerly DoubleClick, and Microsoft's Atlas Technology, which place ads

on major publishers. But it also identifies the smaller firms that end up placing ads through the better known ad networks. Some of the smaller firms identified in Keynote's testing included Flashtalking, KN Dimestore, Commission Junction, Insight Express, Scorecard Research, Smart AdService, and Pointroll.

Everett said Keynote has worked with PrivacyChoice, the Santa Cruz, Calif.-based company that provides anti-tracking programs to consumers. Headquartered in San Mateo, Calif., Keynote's 4,000 customers include American Express, AT&T, Disney, eBay, E*TRADE, Expedia, Google, Microsoft, SonyEricsson, T-Mobile and Vodafone. (www.Keynote.com)

Jeffrey Chester, head of the Center for Digital Democracy, said while "Keynote is offering better identification of tracking for publishers, what online users require are tools that makes visible the stealth ways digital marketers have shaped the Internet to ensure that our data can be collected."

"Regulation is required so that consumers know that their online behaviors are being silently analyzed using superfast computers that seamlessly integrate online and offline data. The Web pages they visit, including on their mobile devices, are being purposefully constructed to ensure a user gives up their data; and social media operates using stealth viral marketing methods designed to have one's friends encourage you to provide more of your personal data, he said.

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