

Google FLoC and Privacy - Why You Should Be Concerned

April 18, 2021 - Let's face it. Google isn't exactly the company that most privacy advocates would hold up as a shining beacon of the way companies that respect personal privacy should operate. If you have an Android phone, they follow you pretty well everywhere you go. If you have any Google smart home devices, they know what you listen to and what you watch on TV. From that, they can tell when you are home or on the move. And if you use Chrome - the most popular browser on the internet - they know what you do online... which sites you visit and how often. What you shop for and what you actually purchase. Google is arguably a company that is heavily involved in surveillance. To say anything else would simply be a lie. So we're taking notice of a new way the company is looking to track internet users through a technology they call FLoC. And the genius method they are using to market it.

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s.src = 'http://widgets.digg.com/buttons.js';
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First the method of marketing. Google is saying that FLoC will enhance user privacy. Just evaluating the source of that statement... Google... we have serious doubts about the claim. To understand those doubts, you need to know what FLoC is.

FLoC stands for Federated Learning of Cohorts. Now, you are probably saying, "That tells me nothing!" And that's probably the point.

Google is saying that FLoC will allow websites to stop using cookies. That's a term that you are probably familiar with but may not really understand. Cookies are small text files that websites deposit on your computer. They allow companies to view the places you visit on the internet, see the purchases you make and deliver targeted advertising to you. They are very bad for privacy but there is really no secret to how they work or their purpose. Many websites won't function properly or let you view their content if you block cookies. Consequently, the idea of getting rid of cookies is quite popular in many quarters. Enter FLoC.

What Google is proposing is something a little different. FLoC wouldn't deposit cookies on your computer anymore. Instead, you would be placed into numbered "interest groups" based on your browsing and purchase history. All of that data would be stored on your computer. And to deliver targeted advertising to you, advertisers would no longer be required to look at the cookies stored on your system. Instead, they would simply read the FLoC interest group number that is assigned to you. Google claims this would enhance privacy because the only thing that the advertisers or websites would see is your group number. They would no longer have access to your browsing history. But let's think that through a little more deeply.

What Google is actually proposing would make Google a lot more powerful. If websites stopped using cookies and turned to FLoC instead, then any advertising platforms other than Google AdWords could have trouble delivering targeted advertising of their own. Google could potentially force them out of business.

And even though websites may not be able to see what you are doing online, Google wouldn't be excluded from observing that information. In fact, for FLoC to work properly, Google's Chrome browser would need to collect data on your web browsing habits. And just because Google is saying that the data would be stored locally on your computer rather than on some server that they own doesn't mean that they won't look at that data.

FLoC is being sold to the public as a privacy enhancement. In our opinion though, it looks more like monopolistic behavior on the part of a company that is attempting to block data access to their competitors. If widely adopted by websites, it has the potential for advertising competitors to Google out of business and damage the way browsers other than Chrome work on the internet. It also has the potential to give Google access to even more of your personal information.

For a company that used to have the slogan "Don't be evil" as the opening to its code of conduct, it sure looks like they are going another direction now. Of course, the company quietly eliminated that slogan two or three years ago. Just something to ponder as you consider what we've written here.

by Jim Malmberg

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