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Study from Vanderbilt Finds Google Tracking is even Creepier than you Thought

A new study from a Vanderbilt professor, released today, shows that Google's tracking of users is probably a lot worse and creepier than the average person likely releases. For one thing, the study that was commissioned by the trade group Digital Content Next walks through "passive" data-collection done by Google often without the user's knowledge. Such as when users switch to an incognito browsing session online, the results of which Google can retroactively link back to the users thanks to how deep its digital tentacles reach into the rest of that same user's online experience. "That's not well understood by consumers," Douglas Schmidt, the author of the study and a Vanderbilt professor of computer science, told the publication AdAge about those findings. "But if you read the fine print on 'incognito' mode it brings up a whole lot of disclaimers." "A person fires up a private browser session in Chrome. On websites that run ads from Google's online ad marketplace, anonymized cookies are dropped on the browsers associated with the user. If the same person leaves private browsing mode and logs into a Google service like Gmail or YouTube, the act of signing into Google makes it possible to connect the earlier web activity to the now identified user. (Unless, that is, the cookies expired or were manually deleted by the user.)" Google is disputing that characterization. According to a spokeswoman, Google doesn't "join signed-out activity with your Google account information." However, the report — again, which Google is disputing — stresses that while some information "is typically collected without identifying a unique user, Google distinctively possesses the ability to utilize data collected from other sources

to de-anonymize such a collection." Among other findings, meanwhile, if an iOS user decides to avoid using any Google product at all and visits only non-Google webpages — well, you can run but you can't hide. The number of times data gets communicated back to Google's servers in that scenario is still, per the study, "surprisingly high" and driven by advertiser and publisher services.