



Not all tracking is bad, but it should be carefully controlled ■

Cookies and Council Benefit Web Pages

We have all probably been on a website to look for a new cooker, toaster or camera, only to be then bombarded with adverts for these when we visit other websites. But how does this happen? Surely not every website knows I'm in the market for a new camera – or does it? In some ways, yes. When you visited a website, you probably allowed a small file called a cookie to be dropped on to your browser by accepting the privacy conditions. These cookies are called tracking or advertising cookies because they track you and your preferences and what you were interested in.

Tracking or advertising cookies record data such as your browsing activity, purchases, preferences, IP address and geographical location along with other information.

When you visit a website, the browser will check for the existence of cookies and will read the cookies before loading a page, essentially getting information on your personal data and browsing habits before it even loads the actual page you are accessing. Cookies aren't bad, they won't harm your computer or device as they are simply files of text information; however, it is what is done with the data they hold and how it is used that can be damaging.

We are probably all aware that our data is being used covertly. A prime example of data use was Facebook with the Cambridge Analytica data scandal back in 2018. This was where a data analytics company, called Cambridge Analytica, harvested data from Facebook in an attempt to influence the outcome of the 2016 American elections. The data was collected by Facebook via an online app called **'thisisyourdigitallife'**. The app not only collected data of the person using it but also the app user's Facebook friends. The data amassed information on millions of Americans and was then used to target these people with information aimed at swaying their voting intentions.

Whilst tracking cookies are perhaps not as offensive as the **'thisisyourdigitallife'** app,

they do undertake the same activity in that they collect personal data and use that data to customise a user's browsing experience.

It is therefore worrying that earlier this year a BBC investigation reported they had found 950 advertising or tracking cookies embedded in council benefit pages.

The BBC took a snapshot in October 2019 of over 400 council web pages. This snapshot found that:

- more than half of UK councils had third-party advertising cookies on their benefits pages – a total of 950 cookies
- more than two-thirds of councils did not appear to ask for the correct form of consent under privacy laws
- examples of targeted adverts on benefits pages seen by the BBC included high-interest credit cards, Black Friday deals, sports cars with features for disabled people and private funeral care plans.

The worrying aspect of collecting data is the type of adverts that are being shown or targeted at visitors as a result, such as high interest credit cards.

In 2018, the BBC reported that some authorities that were displaying adverts were generating thousands of pounds from the online adverts and click throughs.

The BBC reported that Sheffield Council had 25 third party advertising cookies on its benefit pages. A spokesperson for the authority said *"Whilst we are reviewing our use of advertising, currently this is an important revenue stream which is used to help fund improvements to our site for citizens."*

"The advertising is carefully controlled, and many categories are not allowed where we deem this to be potentially harmful, particularly to our most vulnerable users."

However, the disability charity **'Scope'** was unhappy and stated that *"These targeted trackers are cause for concern. Being served an advert for a credit card or low-cost loan while applying for state financial support could lead to debt and financial insecurity. Everyone needs to do all they can to make sure disabled people are not unfairly targeted when trying to seek out support."*

It is so disturbing, that the Information Commissioner Office (ICO) is now investigating the lack of transparency and consent that some authorities are applying when using cookies. The ICO has highlighted that the setting of non-essential tracking cookies is illegal.

It is inevitable that local authorities are looking for income streams and it should be noted that they already advertise on roundabouts and council vehicles etc. Advertising from websites by use of cookies or direct advertising, is just another way that authorities can raise additional funds in today's cash strapped environment. In 2018, the BBC reported that some authorities that were displaying adverts were generating thousands of pounds from the online adverts and click throughs.

Not all tracking by cookies are bad and as such, if relevant, adverts being displayed may be a good thing. What is important however, is that authorities must ensure that when data is collected and used that full consent has been obtained and that targeted adverts are of a category that are suitable for the person to whom they are being delivered.

It should be remembered that people visit council benefit web pages for help and information and not to be targeted for a high interest credit card.

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