



Evaluation of Historical Data Regarding Consumers' Understanding, Behavior, and Attitudes on Digital Privacy and Online Tracking

Executive Summary

Our report evaluates historical data regarding consumers' understanding of and attitudes about digital privacy and online tracking. Our research aims to develop a comprehensive, historical survey of the evolution of consumer understanding and attitudes toward online tracking methods, detailing how consumers feel about tracking presently through the commission of a nationwide survey. Our historical research is based on a comprehensive review of surveys and studies over the last two decades. Our nationwide survey will assess current consumers attitudes and awareness of tracking technologies and privacy practices. The project will be published alongside a comprehensive assessment of current methods technology companies use to track individuals.

Although many individuals in the US have been using the internet since the mid-1990s, consumers still struggle to understand the myriad ways they are tracked. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, consumer awareness of tracking began with the identification of phishing and spam emails, learning what a "cookie" is, and being aware that websites gather a certain amount of data about them when they visit a website or open an email from them. Although more than half (56%) of adult internet users in 2000 could not identify the primary online tracking tool (a cookie),¹ consumers still worried about their online privacy. For instance, more than half (54%) of adult internet users in that same survey thought that websites' tracking of users is harmful "because it invades their privacy."²

Although individuals' increased use of the internet over time leads to greater consumer awareness of advanced tracing practices like as cross-device tracking; most of these tracking methods are obscured, by design. These factors create an environment in which consumers remain highly concerned about their privacy but still lack knowledge about how their privacy is invaded through tracking technologies. For example, consumer tracking is currently so obscured from the user that individuals conclude that online companies must be listening to them when they speak near a device in order to serve them with such highly targeted and accurate ads. Our

¹ Susannah Fox, *Trust and Privacy Online*, Pew Research Ctr. (Aug. 20, 2000), <http://www.pewinternet.org/2000/08/20/trust-and-privacy-online/>.

² Susannah Fox, *Trust and Privacy Online*, Pew Research Ctr. (Aug. 20, 2000), <http://www.pewinternet.org/2000/08/20/trust-and-privacy-online/>.

Consumer Reports PrivacyCon 2019 Executive Summary

report will demonstrate the challenges consumers face in understanding the ways in which they are tracked and how this information is used, despite consumers' concern for their digital privacy.

Our work on privacy, security, and data issues is made possible by the vision and support of the Ford Foundation, the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, and Craig Newmark Philanthropies. Craig Newmark is a former board member of Consumer Reports.