

Ad trackers and surveillance

What is wrong with them, and what you can do

THE QUESTION

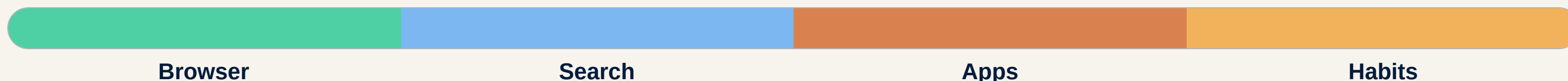
Who is watching what you read, search and tap?

THE PROMISE

Plain facts, and steps you can take today.

OUR JOB

See the trackers, understand the harms, and choose tools and habits that fit you.



How tracking works

1. Identify

A cookie, a device detail or an advertising ID marks you



2. Collect

Pages and apps send what you view, tap and where you are



3. Combine

Ad companies and data brokers join the pieces into a profile



4. Use

Ads, prices and offers are chosen for the profile

- Cookies and tracking pixels from outside companies
- Fingerprinting: telling browsers apart by their details
- Tracker code (SDKs) built into apps
- The advertising ID on a phone
- Data brokers who buy, combine and sell profiles

Many free services are paid for by advertising that runs on data about you.

What is wrong with it

Privacy

Detailed profiles of your habits, interests and location, built without a clear choice.

Security

Ads can carry scams and malware. The FBI has advised using an ad blocker for search ads.

Manipulation

Messages aimed at moments of worry or weakness, and offers that differ by person.

Little control

Consent pop-ups and hidden settings make real choice hard.

Young people

Data collected from children and teens, often with weak protections.

Everyday cost

Heavier pages, slower loading and more battery and data use.

Not every ad or use of data is harmful. The problem is the scale, the secrecy and the lack of choice.

What to watch for in the demo

On the web

- Which requests go to outside companies
- What each one learns about you
- What a blocker stops, and what it misses
- What can break when you block more
- What a search reveals

On your phone

- Trackers found in an app's code
- Permissions an app asks for
- Why a report is not proof of activity
- The advertising ID and how to reset it
- Questions to ask before you install

Predict: when you open a news article, how many of its requests go to companies other than the site itself?

Write down a number. We'll check it on an example page in the lab.