REFLECTIONS ON THE GLOBAL MEDIA LANDSCAPE

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Is Google's Topics API really privacy safe?

Does Google's Topics API, their new technical solution to the privacy vs advertiser war, really help address the ethical and privacy concerns as some claim?

When Google launched Privacy Sandbox in 2019, it was intended to offer a set of solutions to replace intrusive third-party cookies with an ethical approach that respected privacy and supported a robust advertising environment. However, the interest-based advertising solution Federated Learning of Cohorts (FLoC) quickly raised questions about privacy and the ethical use of data. In response, Google released Topics API, a similar solution with improved privacy protection that takes a different approach to privacy concerns, however, there is still room to doubt its success.

FLoC was intended to protect privacy by working with the web browser to understand user browsing behaviour, sorting it into broad user categories known as 'cohorts' (Bindra 2021, Langheinrich 2021). FLoC then connected advertisers to these cohorts of consumers and served them contextual advertising on visited websites (Bindra 2021, Styles 2022). However, industry analysis showed that over time the behaviours and browsing patterns of individuals could still be tracked across websites (Styles 2022). Additionally, the cohort approach could not prevent website tracking methodologies, i.e. fingerprinting, from gaining information about an individual's device and browsers (Langheinrich 2021). This potentially allowed unethical access to first party information and raised the risk of harmful or predatory targeting (Nield 2021, Styles 2022).

Topics API addressed FLoC's weaknesses through several key changes. However, the overall goal remained the same; to facilitate privacy online while supporting a robust advertising ecosystem. As users browse the Internet, Topics API collects up to five topics of interest to the user (Goel 2022, Raphael 2022, Styles 2022). This is an anonymous and randomised process, as topics are generated on the user's own devices, and they are refreshed every three weeks (Goel 2022). Every time a user visits a website, Topics API notifies the site of three topics associated with the user's browser and an algorithm chooses a relevant ad to appear on the page (Raphael 2022). Advertisers only learn about the interests to be served, not the user identity so users remain anonymous. Additional measures also ensure user privacy. The topics are generated by individuals' browsing behaviour, not by externally assigned designations as with FLoC (Goel 2022). Also, if users do not wish to participate, they can withdraw from Topics API altogether (Goel 2022, Raphael 2022). Furthermore, according to Google the list of topics, currently capped at 300 and to be extended over time, are curated to avoid 'sensitive' topics, i.e. gender or race (Lardinois 2022).

At first glance, Topics API seems to have overcome much of the privacy and ethical concerns raised by FLoC. It strengthens anonymization by keeping all of the user's data confined to the browser and by refreshing the topic list regularly it also adds an element of randomization that can prevent privacy breaches.

However, there seem to be some broader issues to consider here. Google is the world's most popular browser so this approach is essentially perpetuating a walled garden in which Google defines what privacy is and how it is enforced (Brownsell 2021, Statista 2019). Also, and of even greater concern, is Google's claim that it is curating the topic list to avoid controversial topics, an action that could seriously infringe personal privacy and free speech. If concerns about privacy are founded in concerns about the realistic risks of what a breach could bring, Google cannot be viewed as not an ethical partner. The company already has a poor track record on this topic, it has provided many oppressive governments with user data and censored content on request (Brewster 2022). For example, in the first half of 2021, Google agreed to 75% of 19,000 Kremlin requests for censoring of content (Brewster 2022). It may seem to be a stretch to equate censoring content to serving contextual advertising topics. However, if Google is making decisions about what topics are 'harmful' or what content should be allowed in specific countries how can Internet users assume that their best interests, and their right to privacy is going to be protected? From this perspective it seems that Topics API could be very detrimental to user privacy, because if Google acts unethically, how would a user even know what they are missing?

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