Tracking the Trackers

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ABSTRACT

Online tracking poses a serious privacy challenge that has drawn significant attention in both academia and industry. Existing approaches for preventing user tracking, based on curated blocklists, suffer from limited coverage and coarse-grained resolution for classification, rely on exceptions that impact sites’ functionality and appearance, and require significant manual maintenance. In this paper we propose a novel approach, based on the concepts leveraged from k-Anonymity, in which users collectively identify unsafe data elements, which have the potential to identify uniquely an individual user, and remove them from requests. We deployed our system to 200,000 German users running the Cliqz Browser or the Cliqz Firefox extension to evaluate its efficiency and feasibility. Results indicate that our approach achieves better privacy protection than blocklists, as provided by Disconnect, while keeping the site breakage to a minimum, even lower than the community-optimized Ad-Block Plus. We also provide evidence of the prevalence and reach of trackers to over 21 million pages of 350,000 unique sites, the largest scale empirical evaluation to date. 95% of the pages visited contain 3rd party requests to potential trackers and 78% attempt to transfer unsafe data. Tracker organizations are also ranked, showing that a single organization can reach up to 42% of all page visits in Germany.

Keywords

Tracking, Data privacy, k-Anonymity, Privacy protection

1. INTRODUCTION

Online privacy is a topic that has already become mainstream. General media talks about it, governments have passed legislation [10], and perhaps more revealing is that people has started to take active steps towards protecting their privacy online. According to [30] ad-blocking usage grew by 70% in 2014, culminating in 41% of people aged between 18-29 using an ad-blocker. This figure is consistent with the results of the empirical evaluation of 200,000 users in Germany presented in this paper.

Any person browsing the Web today is under constant monitoring from entities who track the navigation patterns of users. Previous work [19] reported that 99% of the top 200 news sites, as ranked by Alexa, contain at least one tracker, and at least 50% of them contain at least 11. The presence of trackers in popular news domains might be expected—these domains are monetized by advertisement—however that does not make this loss of privacy any less dramatic.

The loss of privacy is not restricted to a particular area of the Web, such as news sites. The results of our large scale field study provide evidence that 84% of sites contained at least one tracker sending unsafe data. Out of 350K different sites visited by 200K users over a 7 day period, 273K sites contained trackers that were sending information that we deemed unsafe. Data elements that are only and always sent by a single user, or a reduced set of users, are considered unsafe with regard to privacy.

Companies running trackers have the ability to collect individual users’ browsing habits, not only on popular sites, but virtually across the whole Web.

Tracking however has very legitimate use cases: Advertisers need to know how effective targeting is and profiles are needed to serve tailored ads. Social buttons and other widgets are convenient ways to share content. Social logins help to consolidate an online identity and reduce the overhead of managing passwords. Analytics tools like Optimizely or Google Analytics help site owners to better understand the traffic they receive, while other analytics like New Relic give site owners valuable insight on performance.

The Web, as of today, has evolved to become an ecosystem in which users, site-owners, network providers and trackers coexist. One cannot consider trackers as mosquitoes that can be wiped out without consequences; US revenues from online advertising in 2013 reached $43 billion [17], and trackers play an important role in this figure. If all 3rd party traffic were to disappear or be blocked overnight, there would be significant disruption to the ecosystem. On the other hand, revenues cannot be used as an excuse if it comes at

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the expenses of the loss of privacy of the users. Privacy is a right that should be protected [27, 35].

In this paper we propose a step further towards the solution of this problem. Unlike other anti-tracking systems like Disconnect, Privacy Badger, Ghostery, Adblock Plus, NoScript and Firefox Tracking protection which are already quite popular, the system described in this paper does not rely on blanket blocking of 3rd parties based on blacklists. Instead, our method, inspired by k-Anonymity [38] with some tweaks to limit known caveats, filters only the data elements sent to trackers that are not considered safe, where safety is determined by consensus among all users running our anti-tracking system.

The advantages of the method presented in this paper are two-fold: 1) it is friendlier to trackers, data needed to run their services will continue to exist, unless of course, it is considered unsafe. And, 2) it offers better coverage, less false positives and faster detection than systems based on curated blacklists. Inspecting the trackers data collaboratively in real-time results in better protection for the users as we will see in detail in Section 5.

An additional contribution of this paper is empirical evaluation of the trackers’ prevalence and reach in the wild. 200,000 Cliqz users have been tracking the behavior of all trackers present in all sites they visit, which constitutes the largest field study about tracking to date, summarized in Section 5.

2. MOTIVATION

This section will cover basic concepts of tracking as well as an overview of the state of the art. For clarity, we will use real-world examples, but without losing of generality.

2.1 Dissecting Tracking

Tracking is a mechanism to record certain browsing patterns of a user in order gain information. A priori there is nothing wrong with it. If a user visits a travel site and then starts to receive advertising about hotels on her favorite news site, one could argue that this is actually a use-case that benefits the user. The re-targeting described does not imply a loss of privacy by default. The loss of privacy comes as a result of how tracking is typically implemented.

A example of a typical implementation is the travel site kayak.de and the news site huffingtonpost.co.uk, which share a tracker owned by Bluekai. There is a piece of javascript code (tags.bkrtx.com/js/bk-coretag.js) that gets executed on the user’s browser every time they visit any page from either kayak.de or huffingtonpost.co.uk.

This piece of javascript typically sends the source page s (the page being visited) in the HTTP-referer as well as the following information:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>blklc=55f6a4d4d</th>
<th>l=<a href="https://www.kayak.de/">https://www.kayak.de/</a></th>
<th>uaf=f82610bef1d54776cede605b90b0c7949</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>m=020810a3483f3c8307ca468f3df92bc02</td>
<td>lang=07ef60bd8a7e967776f0b83775f0b83775</td>
<td>ar=1440r90x24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cpu=4b4e4e6a1f1c93ab1fc93ab1f1c93</td>
<td>platform=6d4f9ad93929d59b3929d59b3929d59b</td>
<td>plugins=d4de4a68c91685d0ff4838ce3714359a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cn=df62d1cfa96f717f2e6a57d912e7102</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Among this data we can see the string 55f6a4d4d which most likely identifies uniquely the user, acting as a uid. We say most likely because there is no way to know with absolute certainty. What we do know however, is that this particular value has only been seen by this user out of a very large population and it does not change when the users visits different sites, therefore, whether it is a user unique identifier (uid) or not is somewhat irrelevant. If it was not, then there is little risk. However, our analysis of tracker reach (see Section 5) shows that this is rarely the case. Bluekai, for example, can track users across 1.3% of all sites and 3.4% of the pages visited by 200,000 users. Trackers can learn a significant portion of the user’s browsing, e.g. do-it-yourself portals, porn sites or medical forums.

At this point two important questions arise: 1) why do site-owners agree to put such code on their sites? And 2) do trackers really want to know all the information about a user? Unfortunately we cannot provide an answer accounting for all the dimensions, but we can share our expertise and learnings from interacting with trackers.

2.1.1 Why site owners use trackers?

The Web has evolved to become a Software as a Service mash-up, where site-owners tend to outsource certain functionalities to 3rd parties. These service providers offer analytics of visits, site performance, social widgets, content aggregation, comments systems, content delivery, and targeted advertising, just to mention some. The side-effect of such services is that 3rd parties have the ability to run their code in the user’s browsers, and consequently, gain the ability to track them.

Take for instance Facebook’s share button. Site owners hope that ease of sharing will translate to more traffic to their sites. If this is not reason enough, there is often also the users’ expectation for sites to have a share button. For one reason or another site owner might eventually add the share button. When that happens Facebook has the ability to become a tracker, as portrayed in the following example.

**Tracking from a free widget:** every time you visit a page with a Facebook component, they will receive the page URL via HTTP-referer as well as the following extra data,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>datr=xzr6VV5c0rsTE_CjXToxF9</th>
<th>lu=TTA08XE9ieLocEDiemu7A</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>fr=0SoRz_e5Wz6i6Q.BV5h.WE.FYS.0.AWZSm</td>
<td>c_user=100002835278978</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

via Cookie when you are logged in. In this case your uid is explicit and known: it is the c_user parameter. When you logout, the c_user parameter is removed but the other
data remains. It is difficult to assess whether the remaining data is privacy sensitive or not. However, by comparing data across multiple users, we find that

datr=zr8yGUSc0VsTE_CjXTxF9

is actually seen once and only once per user in a very large population. Therefore, datr might not be an intended uid, but it can be used as such.

We cannot determine what is the intended use of datr but this question, as already mentioned before, is irrelevant. The data element is unsafe, regardless of its function, because it can be associated to a single user, and consequently, should not be sent to Facebook. This uniqueness may be unintentional—an unexpected side-effect of some other functionality. In such cases we could argue that privacy protection systems like ours do not only benefit users but also benefit trackers since it offers a guarantee that they are not unintentionally collecting user identifiers.

2.1.2 Why trackers track the way they do?

So why do Facebook and Bluekai send a data element that can be used as a uid? Sometimes the motivation may be that they want to learn the user’s browsing behavior, but often it is just a by-product of a particular technical or implementation choice.

In the case of share buttons, displaying personalized information in the context of an external page requires a uid to identify whose information needs to be retrieved. Likewise, Bluekai requires knowledge of users’ intent or interests in order to re-target advertising effectively. To do this Bluekai builds a profile for the user’s browsing history, using a uid as a foreign key to group data by user.

The fact that the need for a uid can be justified due to technical choices does not make it less problematic with regard to privacy. As a matter of fact, we hope that the pressure of anti-tracking systems, including the one presented in this paper, will motivate trackers to rethink their service’s design so that users’ privacy is not compromised as an unfortunate by-product of a particular implementation, especially given viable alternative approaches.

We stress that in all the examples in this paper, we state that companies have the ability to track, but this does not imply guilt on their part. Although trackers in general have the ability to learn private associations, like a user visiting a site s, this does not mean that they will keep this data forever, or that they will misuse it in any way. Data might be deleted upon receipt, or only used in real-time and never stored. This, however, remains a matter of trust.

We believe the vast majority of companies collecting such data are to be trusted. However as long as unsafe data is received there is always a possibility of a privacy breach. Besides hacking, vulnerabilities include disgruntled employees or plain and simple government intervention.

2.2 Related work on Tracking Protection

Much effort has been put into tracking protection. There are many different systems which can be categorized in several groups depending on their modus operandi. However

1Study [3] commissioned by the Belgian Privacy Commission found that Facebook is tracking users when opted out. 2Perhaps the parameter used to hack into accounts.

they all aim for the same goal: to prevent 3rd party trackers from learning information about the user. Note that some systems provide anti-tracking as an additional feature because is related to its main goal. AdBlock Plus’s primary focus, for instance, is blocking advertisement.

NOScript [29] takes the most conservative approach with regard to privacy: it prevents any javascript code from being executed in the browser. This blocks most forms of communication between the user’s browser and the 3rd party, however, this approach can cause a lot of problems with user experience since modern sites rely heavily on javascript.

Privacy needs to be preserved but there is an obvious trade-off between privacy and usability. As a matter of fact this is one of the main issues of anti-tracking, to protect privacy while not breaking, or if that is not possible, minimizing the breakage of the site’s appearance and functionality. This trade-off has some interesting ramifications.

Minimizing site breakage is not only needed for user satisfaction and retention, but it also has an indirect impact on the privacy protection. If sites break, users might attempt to solve it by adding exceptions and by creating custom rules to the anti-tracking engine. These rules may open gaps in their security protection, at least for the majority of users who may not really understand the underlying implications of the whitelisting or the exceptions they are adding.

We would like to add that besides minimizing malfunctions on the user side, these systems should also try to minimize malfunctions on the tracker side too.

The most common approach to anti-tracking is the use of curated blocklists of trackers, effectively blacklists. Ghostery [13], Disconnect [7], Adblock Plus [31], and beta Firefox Tracking protection [25] use this approach, where communication between the user’s browser and a 3rd party in the blocklist is blocked (limited to Cookies or to the whole HTTP request).

Creating and maintaining precise and up-to-date blocklists is a difficult proposition, as past experience in areas like Spam and Phishing detection systems reported [36, 20]. In order to classify 3rd parties as trackers, one firstly needs to be aware of new domains that appear, and secondly one must regularly re-evaluate that known domains have not changed their behavior. There are however at least two further problems with the blocklist approach:

1) Blocklists typically operate at the level of domain suffixes. Once the 3rd party is classified as tracker it will get blocked. This approach however is very coarse-grained. Our empirical evidence shows (see Sect. [5.1]) that about 78% of requests to 3rd parties blocked by Disconnect’s blocklist exhibit a mixed behavior, meaning that sometimes the content should be blocked and sometimes not. Domain name does not offer the proper resolution for an accurate classification. While the 78% figure is novel, the problem was known. In fact it is the underlying reason why blocklist based systems are evolving to offer a finer resolution control by extending blocklists to accept regular expressions and other case based exceptions. Why would finer grounded resolution matter? It would be reasonable to assume that if a 3rd party is tracking for some cases it should be blocked even when if not. This assessment is however incorrect because of the aforementioned trade-off between site breakage and protection; too aggressive blocking produces site-breakage which

3although there are some which increase the resolution to full URL or some sophisticated regular expressions
if not handled, will force users to abandon anti-tracking or
to create rules that subvert protections.

2) The other problem with blocklists is whether one can
determine if the behavior of a 3rd party warrants inclusion in
the blocklist. The fact that trackers have a mixed tracking
behavior makes this evaluation even more difficult, given
that the case of pure behavior is already a difficult task.
Catching a tracker involves analyzing dozens or hundreds
of requests trying to find a pattern or data element that
is considered suspicious. Furthermore, this behavior rep-
resents an ever-moving target, for example the crackdown
on 3rd party cookies has led to the rise of a multitude of
other tracking methods to replace them, e.g. local storage,
etags, fingerprinting, HTML5 canvas [8, 23, 1]. Every time
a new method to fingerprint is detected, 3rd party trackers
that were considered safe should be reanalyzed for safety.
These issues put those working with blocklists to protect
users’ privacy at a serious disadvantage in the arms-race
against trackers. Additionally, many times data elements
that could be uids will simply escape detection, as we will
see in Sect. 5.3.

Due to the coarse-grain resolution of blocklists, and the
difficulty of detecting a 3rd party by requests inspection,
we decided to explore a more algorithmic solution. In this
respect ours is not the first attempt: Privacy Badger [9]
relies on heuristics to identify tracking domains, however,
it seems that in practice their approach alone leads to a
significant amount of site breakage [11, 18, 19]. We rely on
global information, where users cooperate on tracking the
trackers. Another important difference in our approach is
that we do not focus on identifying and blocking trackers but
rather on deciding which pieces of data sent to 3rd parties
are safe or unsafe with regard to privacy. The empirical
evaluation of our method in Sect. 5 shows greater protection
coverage than state-of-the-art methods based on blocklists,
while keeping site breakage at bay.

3. TRACKING IN THE WILD

Before describing our system let us present our findings
on the prevalence and reach of trackers on the Web.

Using the anonymous data needed to collectively evaluate
safeness (see Sect. 4.1) we can get a comprehensive picture
of the prevalence and reach of trackers for 350,000 different
sites, visited by different 200,000 German users for a full
week period[1]. This is the largest empirical evaluation to the
best of our knowledge. Previous work focused on studying
tracking for a subset of sites, e.g. the top 200 sites according
to Alexa or on a small population[6] and provided evidence
that trackers are present in 99% of the most popular News
sites. Acar et al. [1] analyzed a much larger set of 100K sites
to characterize tracking methods, the study however did not
include real users (traffic was automated using Selenium).
Our results reproduce previous findings as well as provide
and an answer to the question of whether tracking is localized on
specialized domains, like popular and heavy monetized sites,
or it is a wide-spread phenomena that affects the whole Web.

3.1 Prevalence of Trackers

For seven days we observed 200,000 different users vis-
iting roughly 21 million Web pages. The visits went to 5
million unique pages (URLs) spanning over 350,000 unique
sites (domains). Figure 1a shows the number of 3rd parties
that are classified by our method as potential trackers for
each page load (a user visiting a page/URL) as well as for
each unique first party site (domain). Figure 1b shows
the same relationship but counting only the cases when we have
seen evidence of an attempt to send unsafe data to one of
those potential trackers.

In Figure 1a we can see that 95% of page loads produce a
request to a potential tracker, i.e. a 3rd party that exhibits a
connectivity pattern typical for a tracker[6] 24% of the page
loads result in requests to at least 10 of these entities.

As we already mentioned in the discussion about tracker
blocklists in Sect. 2.2 trackers often have a mixed behavior,
and not all 3rd party requests to trackers contain privacy
sensitive data. Therefore, we would like to provide a more
precise picture of the amount of page loads subjected to
tracking. In Figure 1b we only consider page loads that
produce a request to a potential tracker and that the request
contains data considered unsafe, i.e. data elements that are
user identifiers or can be used as such (see Sect. 5.3 for a formal
definition). With this much stricter constraint, the number
of page loads with no tracking involved increases to 22%,
which means that the remaining 78% of all page loads are
subjected to tracking.

Figures 1a and 1b also show that the proportion of unique
domains (sites) with large numbers of trackers is less than
the number of pages loaded with this many trackers, as ex-
pected given the positive correlation between tracker’s oc-
currence and popularity of the sites.

3.2 Trackers Reach

Naturally not all potential trackers belong to the same or-
ganization so it would be incorrect to conclude that a single
organization can track users across 78% of their browsing.
That would only be the case if trackers were to share data,
note that some trackers share data via exchanges, e.g. bid-
ding for users.

To assess approximately the reach of different organiza-
tions we use Disconnect [7] blocklist, which groups its 2000
trackers by organization. Figure 2 depicts the top 20 orga-
nizations ranked by their aggregated tracker’s reach.

All trackers owned by Google combined (according to Dis-
connect’s blocklist) are present on 62% of page loads. If we
restrict the analysis to those page loads with unsafe data
elements, Google’s reach lowers to 42%. This means 42% of
the pages loaded by 200,000 Germans for a 7 days period
produced a request from the user’s browser to a tracker con-
trolled by Google and that request contained data that is or
could be used as a user identifier.

Criteo, an organization that provides ad-retargeting, is
in the 4th position on the list, with a reach of 9% of the
page loads. Note that 9% might look like a modest number,
especially when comparing it to Google or Facebook but it is
not. 9% translates to roughly 1.2 million page loads, about
1.1 tracking signals per user per day.

The results collected from our large scale study are conclu-
sive: tracking users on the Web is wide-spread phenomena
not limited to popular or heavy monetized sites.

users running Firefox nightly (140K) but only 0.5% of those
users had the Firefox anti-tracking enabled.
People who are not concerned about privacy might consider that there is no real risk if an organization such as Google can track which articles they read on Engadget.com or Quora.com since they can be perceived as neutral with regard to privacy. But this is not the full picture, tracking is prevalent on virtually all sites. Trackers owned by Google are also present on pages on AshleyMadison.com, videos on PornHub, posts about diseases of Gutefrage.net and a long list composed of tens of thousands of sites. Organizations able to track users across thousands of sites have the ability to infer aspects like religious beliefs, trade union membership, sexual orientation, etc. Handling this kind of data requires stronger requirements and generally the users’ consent according to German law [5].

4. DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION

As we already stated throughout this paper, our approach is not based on detecting 3rd party trackers but rather on dynamically identifying data elements that are not safe with regard to privacy. In this Section we will formally define concepts like safe, unsafe and potential trackers as well as show how they can be implemented in a system.

4.1 Determining Safeness

The typical approach is based on trying to make sense of what 3rd parties are trying to achieve in order to classify them as trackers or not.

In this paper we advocate for a different approach to the problem, related to $k$-Anonymity [38]. Rather than scanning for data elements that could be used as a user identifier (uid) by analyzing its semantics, origin or method of creation we rely on a simple fact: if a data element was intended by a 3rd party be used as a uid then we should expect that only and only that user is sending that particular data element. Therefore, our rationale is simple, data elements that are only and always sent by a small number of users must be considered unsafe with regard to privacy. Such elements are dangerous since they are intended to serve as user identifiers (uid) or, in the case there was no intention, they could be used as such. On the other hand, data elements, no matter how obscure or suspicious they look, that have been sent by many independent users can be considered safe because the

![Figure 1: Distribution of number of requests to potential trackers.](image)

(a) Requests to potential trackers.

![Figure 2: Top 20 organizations by combined tracker’s reach.](image)

(b) Requests to potential trackers with unsafe data detected.

Figure 1: Distribution of number of requests to potential trackers from 21 million page loads from 200,000 users. The 0 column means that zero trackers were present on the page load, thus no tracking.

Figure 2: Top 20 organizations by combined tracker’s reach. The ownership of a tracker is based on Disconnect’s blocklist [7]. The first column accounts for the percentage of page loads in which a request to the potential tracker is issued by the user’s browser. The second column is when the request also contains unsafe data.
data cannot be effectively related to any particular user (in upcoming Sect. 4.1.1 we will present some caveats of this claim).

We assess safeness as follows: for every request that user’s u browser makes to a 3rd party, the QueryString component of the request is parsed to obtain a list of tuples where each tuple t takes this form,

\[ t = (u, s, d, k, v) \]  

where \( u \) is the user, \( s \) is the source domain (the domain of the page the user visited), \( d \) is the 3rd party domain, \( k \) is a parameter and \( v \) is the parameter value. To mitigate known caveats of \( k \)-Anonymity on high-dimensionality data \(^{[27]28}\) we do not limit \( k \) and \( v \) to be the explicit parameter/value in the QueryString (see Sect. 4.1.1 for further details). For clarity, let us assume that users share the tuple \( t \) with a centralized service hosted by Cliqz without worrying about privacy (see Sect. 4.2) or efficiency (see Sect. 4.3).

The first thing to determine is whether the 3rd party domain has a connectivity behavior that can be associated with trackers. We classify a 3rd party domain as potential tracker if the 3rd party domain \( d \) is \( 1 \) present in more than 20 different source domains \( s \) in a 7 days period, (2) has been seen at least 5000 times in this period, and (3) a proportion of requests have been observed attempting canvas fingerprint, sending private browser data, sending cookie values, or frequently sending QueryString data.

Note that potential trackers can be seen as some sort of a blacklist, however, due to the mixed behavior of trackers we cannot base our privacy intervention solely on it. In the case that a 3rd party is on our list of potential trackers we need to determine their safeness level. We will consider any data element that has been seen at least \( k_o \) times by different users in a \( t_o \) period safe, formally,

\[ \text{safe} \iff |\langle u = *, d, v \rangle| \geq k_o \text{ for } t_o \]  

the values of key and source domains (\( k \) and \( s \), respectively) are aggregated, therefore not shown in the equation.

What we are looking for is the cardinality of the set of unique users \( u \) for which a given value \( v \) was sent (attempted) to a given potential tracker \( d \). In our current configuration, \( k_o \) is set to 10 and \( t_o \) is set to 7 days, i.e. a data element \( v \) sent to \( d \) will be safe only when it has been seen by at least 10 different users in a period of 7 days. If that condition is not met the data \( v \) should be altered (or blocked) to prevent the potential tracker from receiving it.

The default safeness level for data that has never been seen is, consequently, unsafe. This implies that all new data elements collected by a 3rd party that are bound to become safe must undergo a transient state, in which they will be considered unsafe. That is the only way by which one can be sure that the data is not tied to any particular user.

The transient state can be split in two parts: 1) the time it takes for the value to reach the safeness quorum, determined by \( k_s \) and by the number of requests containing that value. And, 2) the propagation lag, which is the time it takes from when safeness quorum is reached until users learn about it. We defer the analysis of the impact of it to Sect. 5.4 but we can anticipate that it is very small.

\(^3\)The proportions tested for each behavior are 5%, 5%, 1% and 50% respectively.

When the safeness quorum is reached the data element is added to a set \( G_{wl} \) that acts as the whitelist of safe values. This set is shared to all browsers by an updating mechanism described in Sect. 4.3.3 so that local browser can decide locally whether to allow or prevent a value to be sent to a potential tracker. Relying only on \( G_{wl} \) poses a couple of problems that need to be addressed, one is size, which is quite critical since \( G_{wl} \) needs to be transferred to all browsers. The other is the transient state itself, which has to be minimized.

To address the shortcomings from \( G_{wl} \) we introduce another set that is built locally in each of the user’s browser called \( L_{wl} \). This set is built following Eq. 3 which does not require global information,

\[ \text{safe} \iff |\langle d, k, v = * \rangle| \geq k_l \text{ for } t_t \]  

if the same key \( k \) for a potential tracker \( d \) has been seen to hold more than \( k_l \) different values \( v \) for a period of \( t_t \) the whole combination of \( d - k \) is considered safe. In the current configuration, \( k_l \) is 3 and \( t_t \) is 7 days. This means that the user has seen at least 3 different values for the same \( d - k \) combination (key and potential tracker respectively). This helps to decreases the transient state for a wide variety of cases, e.g. a parameter from a 3rd party encoding a product id or a timestamp. In such cases the combination \( d - k \) will be added to \( L_{wl} \) and also considered safe, not by value, but by key, i.e. any value for the key \( k \) and potential tracker \( d \) combination will be allowed.

If the key is considered safe it implies that all values of the key are also safe, and consequently, the key can be used to prune the global set \( G_{wl} \). Instead of holding every possible safe value of \( d - k \) it will only keep \( d - k \) that subsumes them. The pruning is performed locally but it can also be performed globally on the \( G_{wl} \) if certain conditions are met. When a browser adds a new \( d - k \) combination to \( L_{wl} \) it will be sent to the Cliqz service. If more than 10 different people per hour report that a \( d - k \) is safe it will be added to \( G_{wl} \) with an expiration time of two days, this will cause pruning of \( G_{wl} \) with the consequent reduction of size.

4.1.1 Robustness against Attacks

It is important to stress that our method has some angles that an adversary might attack to subvert the safeness evaluation. This would be true even in the case were the inner working of the system were not publicly available. In any case, vectors of attack can be prevented once known.

An adversary might try to exploit the collaborative nature of our system, for instance by creating instrumented users that collude to define a combination \( d - k \) safe when it is not, thus exploiting Eq. 2 pruning on \( G_{wl} \). This can be prevented using anomaly detection and selectively testing the validity of the client’s claims on the server side.

An adversary might also try to attack known vulnerabilities of \( k \)-Anonymity which plays an important role in our safeness quorum. \( k \)-Anonymity suffers from issues on high-dimensionality data \(^{[27]28}\), one can take a combination of multiple variables that are not unique but once combined they become unique. For instance, an adversary might break a 32 bits \( uid \) parameter into 4 different parameters encoding 8 bits each, the values then would most likely pass the safeness quorum since they can only take 256 different values across the whole population. We counter such attacks, departing from vanilla \( k \)-Anonymity, because our list of tuples
4.2 Private Data Sharing

In the previous section we saw that we needed to collect tuples \((u, s, d, k, v)\) to determine safeness. These tuples, however, constitute a privacy breach since they contain the user identifier \(u\) and the source domain \(s\) of the page visited, which is precisely the information that trackers should not collect. Naturally, we do not collect that information either.

To maintain privacy we need to make sure that no user identifier \(u\) is ever sent to Cliqz. The user browser will keep an in-memory counter of the signatures of seen tuples, bucketed by hour. The first time the tuple is seen in one hour period the increment will yield a 1, then and only then tuple \((u\) removed\) will be sent to Cliqz. Following this scheme, users will only send the same signal (tuple) once per hour if seen. As a consequence, the server can assume that a repeated signal in the same hour interval comes from two different users, without having to rely on the explicit user identifier \(u\).

Preventing the user identifier \(u\) to reach Cliqz’s servers is not enough, the tuple still contains sensitive information. By design, our system only requires comparisons between strings, so the real values are not needed and can be obfuscated by a one way function. All values from the tuple \(t\) will be hashed using MD5. Additionally, \(s\) and \(d\) can also be truncated to keep only the first 16 chars of the hash to allow for plausible deniability at the expenses of a very small collision probability. We are aware that a brute-force dictionary attack to reverse the MD5 is possible but quite unfeasible given the wide range of values that \(k\) and \(v\) can take.

The same applies to the tuple \((d, k)\) from the user’s \(L_{wl}\) set. Once per hour, if the browser is active, the full list of items contained in \(L_{wl}\) will be sent to Cliqz.

Data is sent to Cliqz using the Human Web framework [22], which provides communication anonymity by means of a proxy relay. Furthermore, we must avoid the possibility to create sessions on our server side. To achieve this the browser will send each signal on a new request (to avoid grouping) and the request will be sent at a random time since creation (to avoid temporal correlations).

4.3 Implementation

Let us now present the implementation of the system in the browser. Every request to a 3rd party will be suspended until the checks below are resolved:

1. 3rd party cookies will always be blocked, regardless if the 3rd party is a potential tracker or not.
2. if a GET request, we will build the list of tuples \(T\) from the QueryString data following Eq. [1]. Tuples whose value \(v\) is shorter than 12 characters (or 8 in the case the value is not a word) are excluded. For each \(t\) in \(T\) we will calculate its safeness level,

\[
\text{concat}(H_t(d), H(k)) \in L_{wl}\lor
\text{concat}(H_t(d), H(k)) \in G_{wl}\lor
\text{concat}(H_t(d), H(v)) \in G_{wl} \implies \text{safeness}
\]

by building a string from the concatenation of \(d\), \(k\) and \(v\) hashes, and doing a membership tests against the sets \(L_{wl}\) (implemented as a Dictionary) and \(G_{wl}\) (implemented as a Bloom Filter to minimize size, with a false positive rate of 0.1%). If not safe the data element will be blocked, either by: replacing it by an empty string, replacing it by a placeholder string or by shuffling the value.

3. if a POST request. Data elements in the POST will be blocked by a more conservative criteria. If they match a value of the Cookie, or if they match a value from a call to browser-info like plugins, build-id, oscpu, or if values are also present in the QueryString and were not safe according to the previous point.

4. all tuples in \(T\) are queued for the off-line component of the anti-tracking system.

5. check that exceptions do not apply (see Sect. [4.3.2]).

This real-time checking adds between 1 to 12 ms to each 3rd party request depending on the number of parameters. It is not a negligible amount but note that these calls are usually asynchronous to the page load.

The off-line component responsible for building the \(G_{wl}\) and \(L_{wl}\) sets is run as an independent process decoupled from the real-time requests. The memory footprint can be broken down to 390 KB for \(G_{wl}\) (once implemented as Bloom Filter. \(G_{wl}\) contains on average about 100K elements (28% of them are key-based and the rest are values). On the other hand, \(L_{wl}\) and the dictionary used to keep counters of the tuples’ signature bucketed by hour account for less than 20KB.

The bandwidth overhead details are as follows, besides telemetry, all the signals from the user’s browser to Cliqz servers amount to 90 KB per day on average. This figure does not include maintaining consistency between the global \(G_{wl}\) that the copy running on the users’ browser, which will be dealt in the next section.

4.3.1 Maintaining \(G_{wl}\) Consistency

The global whitelist set \(G_{wl}\) is built in a centralized way, using the anonymous signals contributed by all users running the anti-tracking system. \(G_{wl}\) is highly dynamic, keys and values are added as per Eq. [2] and removed according to their expiration times. The assessment for safeness however is based on the local copy of \(G_{wl}\) in each user’s browser as per Eq. [3]. Thus maintaining consistency among the global and the local copy of \(G_{wl}\) is a key factor in our system.
We rely on an eventual consistency model; changes on the global set will be reflected eventually to the local one. However the time it takes for a change to propagate is important, and needs to be bound. We aim to minimize the propagation lag. That is values that are declared safe on the global \( G_{\text{wl}} \) but that local copies are still treating as unsafe and, therefore, blocking it. However, a fast propagation time also involves higher bandwidth costs for the browsers.

After some experimentation we settled for a setup by which Cliqz publishes a brand new \( G_{\text{wl}} \) set daily as a major version (typically 350 KB) and every 10 minutes incremental additions are published as revisions to that version (typically 1.5 KB). This version/revision setup is due to the particularities of Bloom filters, which allow for very efficient merge operations (N sets can be merged using an bit-wise OR operation) but does not allow set removals operations. Therefore, we cannot provide a fully incremental solution and daily checkpoints, i.e. the major version, are required to accommodate the expiration of keys and values.

With the current setup, a browser that is always online will have to download about 566 KB per day to have a worst-case propagation lag of 10 minutes.

### 4.3.2 Exceptions to the Rule

There are certain cases in which data elements that are unsafe are not blocked for the sake of minimizing breaking the site’s functionality or appearance. As mentioned in Sect. 2.2 site breakage can impact negatively privacy coverage as the result of custom rules or exceptions added by the users trying to make the sites work as expected. This particular issue will further analyzed in Sect. 5.2 where we empirically measure site breakage.

Another exception revolves around 3rd party DOM elements, for instance sites with the Google +1 button, or sites using Disqus to power its commenting system, which in turn allows for OAuth login through Facebook and Twitter. When a user explicitly interacts with a 3rd party DOM element the anti-tracking validation will be suspended for any 1st or 3rd party domain that can be attributed to trigger as a consequence of that event. Unfortunately perfect attribution is not always possible, due to complex work-flows involving callbacks, redirects and nested calls. So we must rely on heuristics to determine attribution. A case by case analysis seems to indicate that our attribution heuristics do not suffer from false positives but we cannot rule out the possibility that they exists. In the case of a false positive attribution we might allow data that did not undergo our safeness evaluation reach a tracker.

### 5. SYSTEM EVALUATION

In this section we will proceed to the evaluation of the anti-tracking system in different dimensions.

#### 5.1 Protection Coverage

The first thing to evaluate is the protection coverage offered by our system compared to related work. We chose Disconnect, since they have published their blacklist, and Kontaxis and Chew (henceforth KC), which is based on a hand-picked subset of 1500 domains of Disconnect’s blacklist selected to minimize site breakage. Although we would have liked to include Adblock Plus in the measurement it was not technically possible.

We choose an direct empirical evaluation rather than a side-to-side comparison on a limited set of sites like [33]. Such experiments provide more detail on the inner workings of the systems analyzed but they cannot quantify the privacy protection in a real-world scenario. Since we have the luxury of data on 350K unique sites visited by 200K users we believe that a direct evaluation is more relevant.

Table 1 depicts the requests contingency tables for the 3 anti-tracking methods in two different scenarios, requests to any page, and requests to pages from the top-200 visited sites in the US, according to Alexa. The contingency table splits the requests according to two different attributes: 1) \( s \) and \( \neg s \), whether the requests contained only safe data elements or not. And 2) \( b \) and \( \neg b \) whether the 3rd party of the request was in the blacklist of the method. Each set of four values in the table add up to 100% of the requests.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>All Pages</th>
<th>Alexa top 200</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>US domains</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>( b ) ( \neg b )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cliqz</td>
<td>( s )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>( \neg s )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disconnect</td>
<td>( s )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>( \neg s )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KC: Kontaxis &amp; Chew (est.)</td>
<td>( s )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>( \neg s )</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Table 1: Privacy coverage contingency tables. For each configuration the contingency table shows the percentual breakdown of request to 3rd parties according to whether they are in a blacklist (denoted \( b \)) or not and whether they contain unsafe data elements or not (unsafe denoted \( \neg s \)). Note that \( b \) for the case of Cliqz means that is on the list of potential trackers, not necessarily blocked. Whereas \( b \) for Disconnect and KC means that is on the blacklist, therefore, blocked.

8Since we do not know which subset was picked we evaluated 1000 random subsets based on Disconnect blacklist and kept the one with better protection coverage.

9Adblock Plus blocklist contains a large number of regular expressions which cannot be evaluated with the data available to us. For privacy reasons the 3rd party domain for each requests is hashed, see Sect. 7.2.
Less aggressive blocking has the side-effect of allowing requests that should have been blocked. For KC, using the best estimated subset of Disconnect blacklist, we observe that 30.0% of all requests were not blocked and contained unsafe elements (¬b ∧ ¬s), thus we can consider these as misses in privacy protection. For the full blacklist of Disconnect the misses percentage drops to 15.3%. According to our safeness criteria, both systems allow a fair amount of requests that contain privacy sensitive data. Note that for Cliqz (¬b ∧ ¬s) is not zero but 4%, this accounts for the number of requests with unsafe elements send to 3rd parties not in our list of potential trackers. These requests are allowed regardless of the safeness level because we consider 3rd parties that do not meet the criteria for potential trackers are not dangerous, due to lack of reach (see Sect. 4.1).

Taking this into consideration we should revisit the percentage of misses for Disconnect and KC to exclude requests not present in our list of potential trackers, i.e. not dangerous because of limited reach. The revisited misses figures are 12.3% for Disconnect and 25.4% for KC, still very high, showing that both systems let a fair amount of requests to potential trackers containing unsafe data pass through.

The same analysis can be performed by the requests to the top-200 sites according to Alexa. Results are consistent, and, as one might expect, popular sites have better protection coverage. Still, the coverage offered by Disconnect is not total. 5.9% of the requests still contain unsafe data elements. 4.7% in the case we exclude requests not in our list of potential trackers.

The better performance in terms of coverage of our system mostly arises from the ability to block not at the coarse-grained level of the 3rd party request, but rather on the requests’ individual data elements.

Figure 3 depicts the cumulative probability that a tracker present both in Disconnect blacklist and in our list of potential trackers contain an unsafe data element. We can observe that as many as 78% trackers have a mixed behavior, sometimes sending unsafe data sometimes not. Thus a heavy-side function like a binary classification blacklist will not be a good fit. Anti-trackers already realized that blacklist need a finer-grain resolution to deal with the mixed behavior of trackers. Allowing exceptions and/or rules based on full URL or even regular expressions, like Adblock Plus are attempts to increase the degrees of freedom of the blacklist classification. However, it is highly unlikely that a case-based approach will be as scalable and as effective as looking at the safeness level of individual data elements.

5.2 Measuring Site Breakage

We now turn to evaluate the site breakage produced by our system. We already mentioned multiple times that the trade-off between breakage and protection coverage is not trivial. Increasing protection at the expenses of increasing site breakage can lead to a decrease of protection. If site breakage is high users will eventually take action either by removing the tracking protection or by creating custom rules or too general exceptions that are bound to decrease their protection. User intervention, while an interesting feature for power-users, can be considered harmful if abused.

Measuring site breakage on 350K sites is something that cannot be achieved with typical QA. KC proposed an indirect measurement, monitoring how many times users click on the button to temporally disable anti-tracking. This has some limitations: 1) it assumes that users are likely to interact with a new UI element that they are not familiar with. And 2) not all systems under study have such button, and if the button exists, we do not have access to the signal.

We decided to use an alternative measure based on the page reload rate. The underlying assumption is that when users experience a site with broken functionality or appearance they will attempt to reload the page, which is a more natural action on a browser.

Table 2 shows the observed page reload rates based on an A/B test of our users running different anti-tracking browser extensions. The first group is a control group, users that have no anti-tracking present. The second group are users running Adblock Plus. From our data we see that 33% of requests are from browsers running Adblock Plus. Firefox 3rd Party Cookie Blocking [24], seen on 2% of requests, and other anti-tracking extensions, including Disconnect, had too few users for reload rate to be measured with statistical significance. The last group of users are running the Cliqz anti-tracking, as presented in this paper. Note that these groups are independent, but thanks to the large population in each group we can assume user behavior is consistent.

The baseline page reload rate is 0.001, approximately 1 reload for every 1000 pages visited. For users running Adblock Plus the reload rate increased almost 10% from the baseline, so it is plausible to assume that the increase of the page reload rate can be attributed to site breakage caused by it. For Adblock Plus, some breakage could be caused by its DOM manipulation phase, which is independent from the anti-tracking dimension. Note that users running Adblock Plus might have created custom rules and exceptions to decrease the site breakage they experience, such users are included in the results.

Figure 3: CDF of the number of requests with observed unsafe data-elements by 3rd party domains contained both in Disconnect blacklist and on Cliqz list of potential trackers. Both blacklist have ~2000 domains each, intersection is 447.

Table 2: Page reload rates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>reload rate</th>
<th>% increase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Baseline (No Anti-Tracker)</td>
<td>0.00101</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cliqz</td>
<td>0.00104</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adblock Plus</td>
<td>0.00110</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cliqz acting as Blocklist</td>
<td>0.00125</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

10 For privacy reasons we cannot collect the users’ Adblock configuration to assess the level of customization.
Table 3: Origin of unsafe data. Cookie corresponds to the transmission of a cookie value in another part of the request (i.e. an attempted circumvention of cookie blocking). 2) Javascript fingerprinting refers to an attempt to send private values generated from javascript functions (e.g. browser-info, names of installed plugins, build-id, oscpu and other and OS information). 3) Canvas fingerprinting accounts for a method of generating unsafe data using the HTML5 canvas element. 4) Unknown accounts for the rest.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>unsafe data creation method</th>
<th>Proportion of unsafe requests</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cookie value</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Javascript fingerprinting</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canvas fingerprinting</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For users running Cliqz the page reload rate increased 5% over the baseline, thus we can conclude that our anti-tracker still produces undesired site breakage. However, it is less than the community-optimized Adblock Plus, without having to resort to user intervention of any kind.

We also include the page reload rate for a modified version of our system (Cliqz) that acted as a blocklist. Any request to a 3rd party in the list of potential trackers was blocked. In such scenario 83.5% of the requests would be blocked (as per Table 4) instead of 51.7%. This aggressive blocking did not increase privacy coverage—blocking requests to potential trackers if all data is safe has no benefit and it should increase the chances of site breakage. The observed page reload rate supports this claim: during the period 11 that Cliqz acted as a blocklist there was a 25% page reload rate increase over the baseline.

### 5.3 Unsafe data origins

The common approach to finding trackers involves introspection of the requests sent to 3rd parties to find common patterns to generate uids. Thus we can quantify how many unsafe requests detected by our system could have detected solely by their creation method.

Results summarized in Table 4 show that 58% of unsafe requests are due to attempts to circumvent Cookie protection, for instance, sending cookie values on the QueryString. Fingerprinting based on exploiting javascript, including strict Canvas fingerprinting, accounts for 15.5% of the observed unsafe requests. Finally, for 40% of the unsafe requests we cannot determine the origin of the unsafe data elements, illustrating the difficulty of data inspection.

### 5.4 Measuring Transient State

Finally we measure the effect of the transient state, produced by the time it takes to reach the safeness quorum plus the propagation lag. During this time data elements that are truly safe are treated as unsafe by our system, i.e. they are temporarily miss-classified.

Rather than measuring time, which has factors that depend on externalities like popularity (to reach safeness quorum) we focus on measuring the number of occurrences of the phenomena. To that end we force the users’ browser to keep a record of data elements that were declared unsafe for few days and reevaluate their safeness level periodically to see if its classification changes to safe. The frequency of such cases gives us the miss-classification rate.

Results show that approximately 650M data elements are analyzed per day. 0.8% of them are declared unsafe. Only 0.07% of the data elements declared unsafe were caused by a miss-classification due to the transient state. Therefore, we can safely conclude that the effect exists but it is almost negligible.

### 6. CONCLUSIONS

In this paper we proposed a novel approach to prevent online tracking. Thanks to a large scale empirical study, involving 200,000 users in Germany, we showed the protection coverage achieved is better than other systems, such as Disconnect, which failed to account for at least 12.3% of the requests that contain privacy sensitive data, despite having aggressive blocking rules. We also showed that the extra privacy protection does not come at the expense of breaking sites’ functionality or appearance, the disturbances to the user can be measured to be half of those caused by mature and highly optimized systems such as Adblock Plus. All this with a system that is purely algorithmic, and requires no user intervention at any time.

The novelty of our approach is its departure from the traditional blocklist approach. Rather than trying to identify 3rd parties as trackers we increase the classification resolution by basing our decision on the data elements of the requests. We have built a system that efficiently, and respecting the privacy of the users, allows them to collaborate to collectively determine if the data elements present in a request are safe or not. Only those data elements that have been seen by enough independent users will be considered safe. Thus, data that is intended by trackers to serve as user identifiers (uids), or that is unique enough that it could be used as such, are filtered out, protecting the user’s privacy.

The proposed model is inspired by k-Anonymity, although it departs from it in several ways to cover for some known vulnerabilities.

Our large scale empirical study based on more than 21 million pages visited on 350,000 different sites by 200,000 users over a week allows us to evaluate the prevalence of trackers in the wild. We have shown that trackers are present is more than 95% of the pages visited by Germans, and as little as 22% of the page loads do not attempt to transfer data that is considered unsafe with regard to privacy. We also provided evidence of the reach of the organizations behind trackers, establishing a ranking.

Despite the very positive empirical results obtained by our system we cannot call victory against online tracking. The arms-race will continue, the system presented in this paper is making the life of trackers much more difficult, but there are still ways in which trackers can continue to monitor the user, even with our system in place. Future work will focus on extending the protection against some attacks to subvert the system, as well as improving the overall efficiency of it.

### 7. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank all Cliqz users who by using Cliqz contributed with the anonymous data required to develop, test, and eventually operate, the tracking protection system presented in this paper.
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