

Visitor Tracking in Privacy Mode

How Privacy Mode Impacts Website Analytics



Introduction

As web browsers continue to evolve, analytics technology must adapt to the changes to remain effective. Many current and upcoming browsers implement privacy features that can interfere with the 3rd party cookies commonly used for visitor tracking. All major browsers, including Internet Explorer, Firefox, Safari, and Chrome now have a private browsing mode. This paper discusses the privacy mode feature, how visitor tracking systems are affected by it, and the solution offered by HitsLink to ensure accurate visitor tracking.

What is Privacy Mode?

Privacy mode is a new feature on all major web browsers, and its purpose is to prevent other people who have access to your computer from examining the sites you've visited and other browsing data. When a user visits a website, the web browser saves information from the site so it can load it faster. It records the pages visited in the browsing history, so the user can come back later. It may also save cookies that the site uses to provide the visitor with a more personalized experience. Privacy mode automatically discards all of this information as soon as the user closes the browser or chooses to exit privacy mode.

Firefox lead developer Mike Connor spelled out what the browser's privacy mode would encompass.

"[It should] ensure that users can't be tracked when doing 'private' things," said Connor in an e-mail to another Mozilla developer. Specifically, the mode would:

- Discard all cookies acquired during the private session.
- Not record sites visited to the browser's history.
- Not auto fill passwords, and not prompt the user to save passwords.
- Remove all downloads done during the session from the browser's download manager.

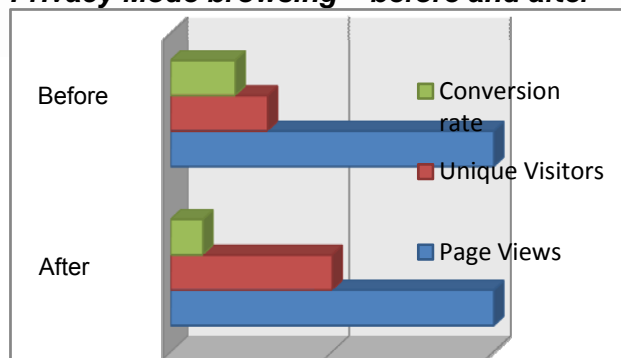
Cookie deletion is nothing new. Users have always been free to delete their cookies, or disable cookies in their browser settings. Privacy mode just makes it automatic.

How does Privacy Mode affect visitor tracking?

Most modern websites use a combination of 1st party and 3rd party cookies to differentiate one visitor from another and provide them with a unique experience. A browser running in privacy mode still allows websites to create 1st party cookies, but it may block 3rd party cookies, and all cookies are discarded when the browser is closed. This means that a website relying on cookies alone cannot recognize a repeat visitor who uses privacy mode to browse the site, resulting in artificially inflated "unique visitor" numbers. This poses two problems for web analytics solutions that rely solely on cookies to identify a visitor:

1. **Skewed visitor numbers** - The number of unique visitors will appear to increase for websites where privacy mode is commonly used, but this might just as well be a side effect of more people blocking cookies and not an actual increase in visitors.
2. **Lower conversion rates** - If you use your visitor statistics to make informed decisions about your business, you may be confused by seeing your conversion rates appear to go down, since unique visitors would be appear to be increasing more than they actually are. More visitors, no increase in sales, signups or ad clicks? Then you may be seeing a result of skewed statistics due to cookie blocking.

Privacy Mode browsing – before and after



Note: In the example above the number of page views is the same. The only change is in perceived number of unique visitors.

HitsLink solves the Privacy Mode issues

In addition to using cookies to uniquely identify a visit, HitsLink also records the IP address and User Agent string associated with each visit. User Agent string identifies the visitor's browser and provides certain system details to servers hosting the sites your visitors browse. If your visitor is using Privacy Mode or has cookies disabled in the browser, the combination of IP Address and User Agent string provide a very good approximation of the unique visitor.

By default, a new visit is recorded once per day per visitor to the site. However, HitsLink allows you to specify a timeout value for a visit. For example, you can specify that a new visit is created when a visitor is inactive for thirty minutes. This capability enables you to customize the Unique Visitor analysis in a way that's appropriate for your web site.

Summary

The introduction of privacy mode makes cookies a less reliable way to track unique visitors. However, HitsLink is prepared with an alternate method to ensure that your traffic is tracked as accurately as possible.

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