**Internet Data Wars: The First Skirmishes**

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2012 was a year of change. Change that could have far-reaching implications in the near future as internet service providers (ISP’s) and web browser developers look to take advantage of public concerns regarding cookie tracking, distorting the fragile equilibrium of internet data availability and therefore threatening a core pillar of digital communications.

**What’s happening?**

The digital data buzzwords of 2012 were Deep Packet Inspection (DPI) – technology that allows ISP’s to monitor all users’ internet behavior. Up until now an ISP chose to play solely the role of postman, seeing only the addresses of users and their online destination. Extensions of DPI means that they might now also read the ‘letters’ that are being sent and monetise the data they contain.

At the same time, Microsoft caused a stir by announcing it would block user tracking by default in its newest Internet Explorer (IE10).  Some suggested this was directly aimed to disrupt Google’s cookie-based business model, but if implemented fully (something that remains to be seen), it would have a profound impact on the wider digital advertising industry and give DPI by internet service providers further impetus.

**Why should you care?**

This might all sound very techie, but it has much broader significance than at first glance. Developments along the lines of those highlighted above could lead to increased online censorship (as seen recently in Russia and China), and also the disruption of the current equilibrium in data access, shifting control from many to the hands of a powerful few.

Open access to data is important to our industry because many of the benefits of advertising in a digitised world (across platforms) rely on the capture and application of data to increase relevance, reduce waste and improve effectiveness. This ‘holy grail’ of delivering the right message, to the right person, at the right time is in large part reliant on it. Not only do the worst case scenarios of these developments threaten that, but they also take choice away from the consumer and negatively impact their digital experiences.

And it’s not just about pure advertising. Many of the phenomenal examples of branded utility and personalised services that blur the line between product and communications are fueled by open data access. [Nike Fuelband](http://adage.com/article/special-report-cannes-2012/r-ga-s-nike-fuelband-wins-titanium-grand-prix-cannes-lions/235595/), [Carvalho Hosken’s personalized home tour](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nHziNSf8qOo), and Google Now are just three examples of this.

While the apocalyptic outcome in data access may not be on the horizon just yet, and while DPI has many useful applications (internet security, identifying piracy criminals etc. ), it’s important for anyone who believes in the usefulness of open data access to ensure that: a) we keep an eye on developments in this space; b) we ensure our industry maintains the highest standards of privacy compliance to avoid further restrictions: and c) we lobby for a consistent approach to data and privacy from every stakeholder in this arena.

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