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## It's The Users, Stupid! Towards User-Centered Privacy Standards by Considering Default Settings

### **Serge Egelman**

Computer Science Division  
Electrical Engineering and Computer Sciences  
University of California, Berkeley  
Berkeley, CA 94720  
egelman@cs.berkeley.edu

### **Position**

*"If you choose not to decide, you still have made a choice."*

*-Rush*

In order to create truly effective privacy standards, default settings need to be included in the specifications. The corollary to this is that if default settings are not specified, implementers will interpret the standards in different ways, and other stakeholders will cite this divergence as evidence that the standard is not working. We saw this occur with an early version of the W3C's Do Not Track (DNT) standard: Microsoft proposed enabling DNT by default for users of Internet Explorer 10 [1]. In response to Microsoft's move, the advertising industry wrote a letter to Microsoft claiming that their decision will harm consumers [2], leaving open the possibility that advertisers may simply refuse to recognize DNT headers when transmitted by IE 10 users. Mozilla has taken a similar position, claiming that the decision to enable or disable DNT "must be the user's choice" [3].

While stakeholders on both sides continue to argue which default setting is most supportive of user choice, none of these stakeholders are bothering to ask the user directly. There are essentially two states for a DNT setting: enabled or disabled. Whichever one remains the default, a choice is being made on behalf of users. In order to avoid presumptuous arguments about what users actually want, it is imperative that users' preferences be adequately represented.

McDonald and Cranor conducted early work on user acceptance of behavioral advertising [4,5]. They found that when outright asked if users support being tracked across websites so that they can receive tailored advertisements, only 20% support the notion.

At the same time, this is not a decisive argument for enabling DNT by default: users have different reactions to DNT based on how they are asked. In the aforementioned studies, users were simply asked whether they would be comfortable being tracked. In a subsequent study that I performed, when users were provided with monetary incentives to keep behavioral advertising enabled, the vast majority of them supported tracking [6]. Thus, we need to pay careful attention to methodology when gauging user preferences.

Moving forward, all stakeholders need to come together to agree on both the benefits and concerns surrounding DNT. These pros and cons need to be presented to users when studies are performed so that their results are ecologically valid. Until we do this, it is impossible to say which setting supports the most users by default.

### References

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