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## Privacy Groups Ask for Online 'Do Not Track' List

By Ryan Singel 10.31.07 | 8:30 PM

A coalition of privacy and consumer advocacy groups are asking government regulators to create a "Do Not Track" list that Americans can use to block online advertisers from silently recording people's browsing habits. Advertisers use the data to display targeted ads.

The groups petitioned the Federal Trade Commission on Wednesday to establish the anti-tracking measure, loosely modeled on the popular and successful anti-telemarketing National Do Not Call Registry. The proposal is timed to an FTC-hosted conference devoted to the topic of behavioral online advertising.

The FTC's "Ehavioral Advertising" town hall meeting in Washington, D.C., Thursday and Friday comes as the FTC and Congress are showing renewed interest in how online advertising services track netizens, largely due to Google's proposed \$3.1 billion purchase of DoubleClick, an online ad-serving and tracking company.

The FTC is in a "second stage" review of that purchase, which generally indicates the government will impose conditions on an acquisition or merger.

World Privacy Forum director Pam Dixon, who coordinated the proposal, argued that online marketers and the [Network Advertising Initiative](#) industry group have failed to police themselves.

"If you look back at the Do Not Call list, it was at one time managed by industry. But it didn't gain widespread acceptance until the FTC took it over," said Dixon. "The industry has had seven years to prove they can manage online opt-outs. It is time to move toward something structured like the Do Not Call list to address the problems we are seeing, and have now seen for seven years."

Technically, the [proposed list](#) (.pdf) would work very differently from the Do Not Call Registry. Any advertiser that tracks user behavior would have to report what servers they use to serve up a cookie or other tracking device. Individuals would then update their browsers to include a plug-in that could download the list and block some or all of the tracking cookies.

Like the Do Not Call Registry, government regulators would have the power to enforce the measure against companies that secretly track users or keep more information than they say they do.

The National Advertising Initiative, whose members are advertising companies that use tracking cookies on a wide swath of websites, lambasted the idea as "unprecedented" and "disturbing." The NAI said current protections, such as its opt-out page, are adequate, and that all browsers already have the ability to block tracking cookies.

"This proposal for a government-run blacklist would break both the basic functionality and economic models of most, if not all, e-commerce and content-driven consumer websites," the NAI said in a press release. "It is disturbing to think that, under the proposal, the government would step in with a downloaded application that would need to 'call home' to the government on a regular basis."

According to the petition submitted to the FTC, tracking of individuals on the net is widespread and insidiously secret. "This expansion threatens privacy in new ways that consumers are largely unaware of," the groups wrote.

The Center for Democracy and Technology, the Electronic Frontier Foundation and Consumer Action were among the nine groups that signed onto the proposal.

However, the Electronic Privacy Information Center, the Center for Digital Democracy and U.S. PIRG -- the groups

that are asking the FTC to impose stringent privacy conditions on Google's proposed acquisition of DoubleClick -- did not sign on to the proposal.

The CDD's Jeff Chester said he didn't sign on because the proposal doesn't go far enough. "The plan doesn't address the full range of privacy threat from online marketing," Chester said.

EPIC's Marc Rotenberg argued the proposal too narrowly thinks of the online-marketing problem as if it were spyware. Instead, Rotenberg suggested, "You have to look at the data collections of the largest search companies."

Search engines generally keep logs of what terms a searcher uses over time, and sometimes what sites they click on. Most of the major search engines, including Google, Yahoo and Microsoft's Live.com, have recently committed to making their logs anonymous after some period -- 13 months for Yahoo, and 18 months for Google and Microsoft.