

discussion of the HTTP protocol, including its headers and status codes, is given in [Krishnamurthy 2001].

How does a browser decide which header lines to include in a request message? How does a Web server decide which header lines to include in a response message? A browser will generate header lines as a function of the browser type and version (for example, an HTTP/1.0 browser will not generate any 1.1 header lines), the user configuration of the browser (for example, preferred language), and whether the browser currently has a cached, but possibly out-of-date, version of the object. Web servers behave similarly: There are different products, versions, and configurations, all of which influence which header lines are included in response messages.

2.2.4 User-Server Interaction: Cookies

We mentioned above that an HTTP server is stateless. This simplifies server design and has permitted engineers to develop high-performance Web servers that can handle thousands of simultaneous TCP connections. However, it is often desirable for a Web site to identify users, either because the server wishes to restrict user access or because it wants to serve content as a function of the user identity. For these purposes, HTTP uses cookies. Cookies, defined in [RFC 6265], allow sites to keep track of users. Most major commercial Web sites use cookies today.

As shown in Figure 2.10, cookie technology has four components: (1) a cookie header line in the HTTP response message; (2) a cookie header line in the HTTP request message; (3) a cookie file kept on the user's end system and managed by the user's browser; and (4) a back-end database at the Web site. Using Figure 2.10, let's walk through an example of how cookies work. Suppose Susan, who always accesses the Web using Internet Explorer from her home PC, contacts Amazon.com for the first time. Let us suppose that in the past she has already visited the eBay site. When the request comes into the Amazon Web server, the server creates a unique identification number and creates an entry in its back-end database that is indexed by the identification number. The Amazon Web server then responds to Susan's browser, including in the HTTP response a `Set-cookie:` header, which contains the identification number. For example, the header line might be:

```
Set-cookie: 1678
```

When Susan's browser receives the HTTP response message, it sees the `Set-cookie:` header. The browser then appends a line to the special cookie file that it manages. This line includes the hostname of the server and the identification number in the `Set-cookie:` header. Note that the cookie file already has an entry for eBay, since Susan has visited that site in the past. As Susan continues to browse the Amazon site, each time she requests a Web page, her browser consults her cookie file, extracts her identification number for this site, and puts a cookie header line that

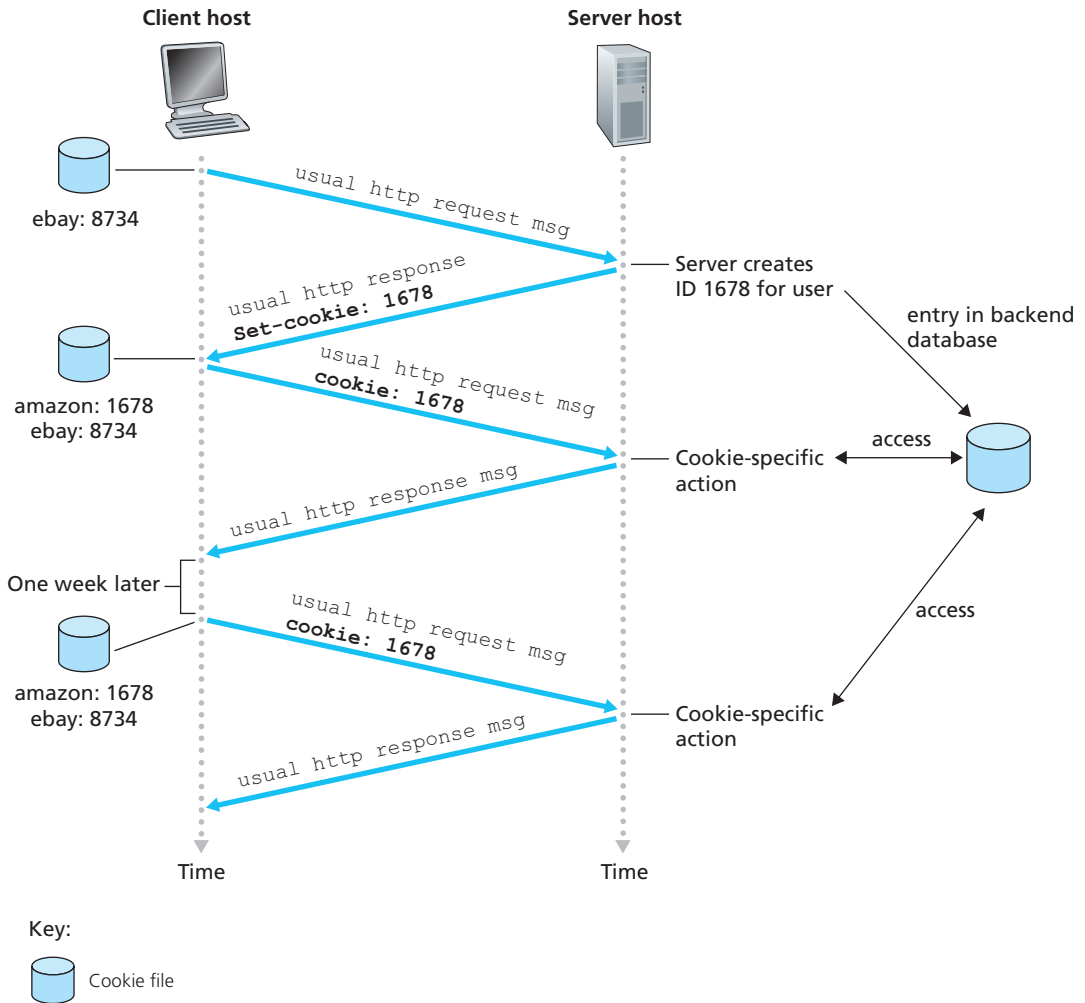


Figure 2.10 ♦ Keeping user state with cookies

includes the identification number in the HTTP request. Specifically, each of her HTTP requests to the Amazon server includes the header line:

```
Cookie: 1678
```

In this manner, the Amazon server is able to track Susan's activity at the Amazon site. Although the Amazon Web site does not necessarily know Susan's name, it knows exactly which pages user 1678 visited, in which order, and at what times!

Amazon uses cookies to provide its shopping cart service—Amazon can maintain a list of all of Susan’s intended purchases, so that she can pay for them collectively at the end of the session.

If Susan returns to Amazon’s site, say, one week later, her browser will continue to put the header line `Cookie: 1678` in the request messages. Amazon also recommends products to Susan based on Web pages she has visited at Amazon in the past. If Susan also registers herself with Amazon—providing full name, e-mail address, postal address, and credit card information—Amazon can then include this information in its database, thereby associating Susan’s name with her identification number (and all of the pages she has visited at the site in the past!). This is how Amazon and other e-commerce sites provide “one-click shopping”—when Susan chooses to purchase an item during a subsequent visit, she doesn’t need to re-enter her name, credit card number, or address.

From this discussion we see that cookies can be used to identify a user. The first time a user visits a site, the user can provide a user identification (possibly his or her name). During the subsequent sessions, the browser passes a cookie header to the server, thereby identifying the user to the server. Cookies can thus be used to create a user session layer on top of stateless HTTP. For example, when a user logs in to a Web-based e-mail application (such as Hotmail), the browser sends cookie information to the server, permitting the server to identify the user throughout the user’s session with the application.

Although cookies often simplify the Internet shopping experience for the user, they are controversial because they can also be considered as an invasion of privacy. As we just saw, using a combination of cookies and user-supplied account information, a Web site can learn a lot about a user and potentially sell this information to a third party. Cookie Central [Cookie Central 2016] includes extensive information on the cookie controversy.

2.2.5 Web Caching

A **Web cache**—also called a **proxy server**—is a network entity that satisfies HTTP requests on the behalf of an origin Web server. The Web cache has its own disk storage and keeps copies of recently requested objects in this storage. As shown in Figure 2.11, a user’s browser can be configured so that all of the user’s HTTP requests are first directed to the Web cache. Once a browser is configured, each browser request for an object is first directed to the Web cache. As an example, suppose a browser is requesting the object `http://www.someschool.edu/campus.gif`. Here is what happens:

1. The browser establishes a TCP connection to the Web cache and sends an HTTP request for the object to the Web cache.
2. The Web cache checks to see if it has a copy of the object stored locally. If it does, the Web cache returns the object within an HTTP response message to the client browser.