

## Data Trackers, Advertising, and Digital Data Identities



Image adapted from "[Cookie monster on the track!](#)" by [jessica mullen](#) is licensed under [CC BY 2.0](#).

One of the hardest ideas to grasp when it comes to surveillance and privacy is the extent to which we are already (always) being tracked. Platforms and services have become so integrated into our everyday connecting and communicating that we do not really think about what they collect from us, let alone how unusual our “agreements” with them are (case in point, I am writing this newsletter in Google Docs). The convenience feels worth it, although the trade-off is far from transparent. Every semester when I ask students how concerned they are about their online privacy, I always receive a version of the following responses: “I have nothing to hide” or “Who cares if platforms know where I go online?” or “What’s wrong with a free service making money from my information in exchange?” What they usually find alarming as the semester goes on is the *extent and scale* of the surveillance (how far and how much data is being collected). The tracking they are subjected to on a daily basis is unseen and really difficult to grasp. While challenging, we can help students “get there.” What follows is a collection to help instructors and students explore third party tracking in the classroom: an academic source for theorizing the issue, a popular source for introducing the topic to students, and then an activity for them to try out in the class.

### Academic Article

Beck, Estee N. "The Invisible Digital Identity: Assemblages in Digital Networks." *Computers and Composition*, vol. 35, Mar. 2015, pp. 125–40.

Beck's continuously relevant (if not prescient) article asks digital rhetoricians to consider the digital ecologies we entangle with when we integrate internet technologies into our everyday lives, notably the digital tracking technologies (i.e. tracking cookies) that generate the "invisible digital identity" companies rely on for targeted advertising, their major source of revenue (126). While constructed on their behalf, users have far less control over what goes into their invisible digital identity than they realize. And to this point, Beck ultimately argues that "Understanding how cookie development and tracking operates is crucial to knowing how a part of our online environments works, especially when we surf and write online" (130).

### Popular Media

Vox. "How Ads Follow You Around on the Internet." *YouTube*, uploaded by Vox, 3 February 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HFyaW50GFOs>.

The scale of the tracking technologies generating Beck's invisible digital identities is the hardest part of internet surveillance to understand (If humans could scale things up on their own, there wouldn't be a need for these technologies). The scope of internet surveillance is exponentially more than students (and teachers for that matter) can imagine. Which brings us to Vox's explainer video which gets its thorough walkthrough of third party tracking cookies directly from the person who created them in the first place. The 7-minute video does a good job explaining what the different types of cookies are and why the internet as we know it needs some of them. It also explores how essential cookies are to the business models of platforms like Facebook which use cookies in ways far beyond its creator's original intentions.

### Assignment/Activity

[Ghostery Tracking Assignment by Morgan Banville](#)

And this all works towards an excellent assignment adapted from Colleen Reilley by the DRPC's very own Morgan Banville which requires students to use Ghostery to explore the trackers providing the data for their invisible digital identity. This assignment requires students to install a browser plugin and to conduct some strategic internet browsing in order to observe in real-time all of the tracking activity that goes on behind the scenes of what is otherwise a rather straightforward browsing session. Students then take the data they generate with Ghostery and write a critical surveillance analysis of their online activity.

### Upcoming for the DRPC

Look for our panel, "Teaching and Learning about Privacy and Surveillance: Doing Hope Through the Digital Rhetorical Privacy Collective" featuring Advisory Board members Morgan Banville, Charles Woods, and Gavin

Johnson at the upcoming CCCC 2023 conference in Chicago.