

Re-Opening The Web

Asserting Democratic Control over the Browser/Search
Funding System

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Browsers, and the browser engines that power them, provide critical public infrastructure to over five billion people and yet no one pays for their browser. To cover the high cost of maintaining such highly complex systems, browser vendors and search engine providers have developed a system in which money is levied from search revenue and distributed to browsers. This arrangement benefits both: browsers don't have an obvious revenue model and web search engines are only relevant to the extent that the web is, which in turn requires a high quality, frictionless browsing experience.

Over the years, this ad hoc system has succeeded in providing funding to browsers but it suffers from a string of issues that produce detrimental effects on the web and the digital sphere in general: lack of transparency, poor funding of browser engines, defunding of other parts of the web, massive market concentration, plummeting search quality, harms to privacy, improved funding for misinformation, reduced revenue for quality journalism, and loss of opinion pluralism.

This report documents the existing system, analyses its negative externalities so as to determine requirements for alternatives, and proposes paths forward. The existing levy distributes billions of USD annually; the objective is not to eliminate it but to place it under the kind of governance that can make it operate in the public interest and in a manner that is resilient to ongoing AI-driven transformations of both browsers and search engines.

Introduction: The Current System

As of 2022, 63% of the world population, or roughly 5 billion people, used the Internet ([\[internet-users\]](#)). While some of these may not use a *browser* (the application used to navigate the web) regularly, all use a *browser engine* (the software component that both browsers and other apps use to render web content) regularly as those are widely used in applications in addition to forming the core of browsers.

Browsers and browser engines are provided to people free of charge, as public goods. Their continued provision is critical since without them the web collapses. They are also complex: for instance, in 2022 Chromium (the browser engine powering Google Chrome and other browsers) ran to about 35 million lines of code. The total annual cost of maintaining the three primary browser engines is estimated to be around \$2 billion USD ([\[where-](#)

browsers]). While this cost is significant, it is only a small fraction of the direct value (monetary or otherwise) produced by the web.

In order to assemble the funds required to operate, almost all browser vendors rely on variations on the same strategy: they exercise an ad hoc levy on search engine revenue. Variations on this levy include selling the search engine default (the initial and typical approach), royalties on search volume, or intra-company transfers (when the search engine and browser belong to the same company). Taken together, these strategies form the AHLD system, which is described further in the next section.

Despite its critical importance to web infrastructure, the AHLD system is opaque and poorly documented, and suffers from a number of undesirable shortcomings that have large-scale detrimental effects on the web. By formalizing this levy and deliberately architecting it to produce improved results, we can simultaneously put the funding of critical public digital infrastructure on much surer footing and address the AHLD system's issues.

- refs
- money
- rename AHLD?

The Existing Levy

- do talk about exceptions, like Brave
- Sankey graph for

GLOW — Global Levy for an Open Web

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References

[internet-users]

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[where-browsers]

Where Browsers Come From Brian Kardell. <https://bkardell.com/blog/WhereBrowsersComeFrom.html>