

INTERNET TRACKING:

IT'S NOT CREEPY ... IT'S 2018

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Without question, many Internet practices are controversial.

From the time of our first email accounts, our inboxes have been flooded with bogus requests from friends who've "lost their passport and desperately need money," or phony "Nigerian princes" who've discovered millions of dollars worth of unclaimed gold bullion that they benevolently want to send our way. All they need, of course, is our bank account number.

In light of what we now know about the web, such ridiculously amateur scams seem quaint. Yet there's always a new threat to consider — a threat that is certainly relevant for those students and their families being recruited by potential colleges and universities.

Increasingly, we now worry about privacy and our very identity, both of which can be stolen as easily as money from our checking accounts. The stunning ubiquity of social media means that peoples' lives —their photos, thoughts and shopping preferences — are increasingly public. Which is to say, *available*.

With so much of our lives posted so accessibly on a worldwide system, and living as we do in a world driven by markets, it was only a matter of time before buyers and sellers got involved. Now, internet marketing is also ubiquitous; our Facebook pages are laden with ads, as are our email accounts and, indeed, even pages we simply visit for news and weather information.

One of the marketing practices that stirs the most suspicion is internet tracking.

The World Wide Web is, by its very nature, the planet's richest gold mine of data. The more of ourselves that we put on the internet, whether through personal websites, page visit histories or what we type in emails, the more it seems that the ads popping up on pages we scroll through are aimed directly at us. It's all very Orwellian.

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But every tool has multiple possible uses, and tracking is certainly a tool. You could argue that daily commuters gather data about traffic patterns in their effort to identify the best route to work with minimal interference. Parenting requires constant monitoring to establish and reinforce patterns of behavior such as, say, picking up toys in a timely fashion or finishing a plate of peas at dinner. Although these are facetious examples, they make the point.

How we perceive and tolerate this seemingly invasive dynamic — and internet tracking is, at this point, an immutable fact of digital life — may have more to do with our understanding of its purpose than, say, with the *intent* behind its use. *Why* is a particular company, or a fundraiser, or even a liberal arts college, employing tracking? What is it that they want and, more importantly, what is it that we, the public want?

Retargeting, Picture Frames, and the *Dayton Daily News*

You know how it is when you scroll through Facebook. We come across an article, click on it and move on. Often we forget what we looked at only minutes before. I must have done this when I clicked on a story that appeared in the *Dayton Daily News*. (Which is odd, because I don't even live in Dayton or have any ties to the Ohio city.)

I normally wouldn't have even remembered doing so, but then a retargeted ad on Facebook popped up from the *Dayton Daily News*, offering me a digital subscription.

A lot of this sort of thing happens in my Facebook feed. For example, I've been inundated with retargeted ads for picture frames lately. Let me explain: I've been poring over antique picture frames on eBay recently, so I figured I may as well sign up for eBay — which I actually had already done, inasmuch as the online auction site falls under the domain of Yahoo, where I already had an email account.

I've even purchased something on eBay recently, so it was no surprise when eBay entered my feed, stage right:

But here's the genius of it: See the frame on the left? It's one I've repeatedly looked at. I even showed *exceptional* interest in it by emailing the seller. So this is eBay's friendly reminder that I do, in fact, feel inspired by this frame.



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Inspired? Take another look!

Same thing with B&H Photo. Via Google, I looked up backdrops, which landed me on the very page where this ad — it appears in my feed, front and center — appears. ►

Look what I've got now: a full description of the product, an image, its cost, and a button to "Buy Now." How do I feel about this online ad retargeting?

The answer is: "It depends."

In the case of Buffalo Wild Wings, for which I occasionally get ads, I don't find it helpful. I dined there once with my sister's family, and maybe I looked at a menu online. I'm not clear why I get their ads.

But when a sponsored post from Kentucky Natural Lands Trust pops up, then yes, I'm interested and even grateful. Same thing if I see other cool picture frames or a good deal on photography equipment. Clearly, this process is hit or miss.

The image shows a Facebook sponsored advertisement. At the top, it says "B&H Photo Video Pro Audio" with a "Sponsored" label and a "Like Page" button. The main text describes a "Savage Collapsible/Reversible Background (5 x 6', Indigo Nights)" and highlights its features: a steel spring for easy folding, reversibility, and touch-fasteners. Below the text is a product image showing two backdrop options (dark blue and light blue) with a "SAVAGE" logo and a 4.5-star rating from 33 reviews. The price "\$143.99" is displayed in the bottom right of the image. Below the image, the ad states "【Now \$143.99】 Top Seller in Collapsible" and repeats the product description. At the bottom, there is a "Buy Now" button and the website "BHPHOTOVIDEO.COM".

So, what about when you're looking at college websites?

Here, I would argue, the advantage to the user is more readily apparent. I may look at a story in the Dayton newspaper out of random interest, but if I'm a senior in high school, what are the odds I'll go to a university website out of pure boredom? More than likely, the interest is there — just as when I'm shopping for camera gear.

The bottom line, from my experience, is that when I'm really interested in something, retargeting works. For example, retargeted ads have informed me that Annie Leibovitz — my favorite portrait photographer — will soon teach a Master Class. I bet you've seen similar ads that appeal to your passions. Mine pop up on Facebook, and believe me, I'm sold.

So here, at last, is a new tack on the issue of retargeting in higher education: if a student *wants* to learn about colleges, how does he or she go about doing so? How can students make the best use of their time and energy as they search for the right fit?

We know, too, that the very process of searching for colleges, applying to colleges, and ultimately choosing a college, can be daunting — especially for first-generation students. The fact is, many simply give up. Helping our clients combat this reality is one of Capture Higher Ed's major objectives.

The Other Side of the Coin

In 2015, the online journal *Quartz* published an article whose title rang like something straight out of the tabloids: "Colleges are spying on prospective students by quietly tracking them across the internet." It's a

mouthful of a headline, to be sure, and also a patently one-sided one. As the author points out, tracking students and targeting them are practices that “toe an ethical line.”

One recent morning, I visited Target’s home page. I’d been on the site just the night before, looking for shadow boxes my girlfriend had mentioned. Of course, I knew beforehand that my online behavior — looking at shadow boxes — would be logged and stored. So it was no surprise that when I scrolled to the bottom of the page, I found my “recently viewed items” — not just the shadow boxes but things I’d looked at over the past month or two, like file cabinets and external DVD drives.

Amazon, of course, provides an even better example of how companies utilize this sort of user data. As *Quartz* points out, Amazon retains your order history. If you ask, your local library will likely do the same for you — although you may have to ask. I learned that my local library system purposefully does not keep track of retrievable records as a way to protect my privacy. I also keep my own order history of camera gear, photography equipment and color film so I can look back at my own spending behavior and material needs.

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Amazon also collects data on buyers’ geographic locations and the time they spend on particular web pages. The geographic peg likely helps keep shelves stocked in the right parts of the country (lots of camping gear in the intermountain West, for example) while also giving companies a sense of our interest level in certain products. For me, this proves useful when I’m scanning eBay for camera lenses, as the webpage features a “recently viewed” list. The system isn’t perfect by any means; just because I look at something doesn’t mean I’m interested.

But it’s helpful to access that list. The point here is that digital tools can help me see the forest for the trees. If I had to backtrack and identify all of the interesting products I saw as I canvassed the web, it would take a lot of time, and I might also have difficulty accurately retracing my steps.

Here, I will say that Amazon isn’t the most applicable comparison when it comes to Capture’s mission. Instead, let’s look at Netflix.

Logging into my Netflix account, here’s what I see: In the first row are “Top Picks,” based entirely on what I’ve watched previously. Another entire row is labeled (no kidding), “Because you watched *The Secret Life of Pets*.” Whatever the algorithm, the fact that documentaries on George Harrison or David Bowie show up are welcome to me. In the same way, colleges want to find students whose interests match what they have available — after all, Netflix can’t provide everything, so by necessity it must be selective.

Even still, no comparison is ultimately satisfying. Despite *Quartz*’s fears of colleges becoming businesses, the reality for small four-year colleges is that the struggle to find students is real. Faculty and staff jobs depend on the economics. Without help from new digital marketing tools like internet tracking, marketing automation and predictive modeling, it’s possible that many schools would sink — and there’s simply too much riding on the American education system, particularly higher education, to allow them to fail. Small colleges may not be like the “too big to fail” banks, but the investment they make in our culture and economy is not only measurable, it’s *beyond* measure.