Discussion comments

Firefox privacy extensions

There are several add-ons for Firefox that protect you from various unwanted behaviour by websites. This document attempts to give some idea of what is available and what they do.

First Party Isolation

Unlike most extensions, this add-on has been built-in to Firefox since version 55. It may be, by default, disabled and will have to “installed” in the usual way.

The purpose is to separate every new site visited from every other one. So that there can be no cross-tracking between sites, no sharing of data or cookies between them. It is similar to looking at each site in a private or incognito window.

There are no preferences associated with it.

Details can be found at: https://www.ctrl.blog/entry/firefox-fpi which also contains an alternative way to turn the feature on.

DuckDuckGo Privacy Essentials

This one has a fixed set of scripts it will not allow to run.

It puts an icon on the upper right of the toolbar, which when clicked on shows some details of the site being looked at. After a certain amount of time and it has collected sufficient information, it will also show where the worst offenders are that may be tracking you.

Wherever possible it will force encryption on the site, and will block a lot of advertising.

Their propaganda site is at: https://duckduckgo.com/app

Privacy Badger

This add-on learns from what you do on-line. It apparently checks whether a script is leaking data to an external site, and will suppress that script if it find it does so. It is not clear to me how it does this, nor what leaking means, but it seems to accurately pick out bad scripts. However, I don’t see how it knows whether the site is keeping track of the IP address etc.

It places an icon in the toolbar, which, when clicked on, shows how it has treated third party access. There are three possible actions it can take. Either it will allow the access believing it does not track; or it can prevent cookies from being installed; or it can lock access to the site completely. The action can be changed by the user by moving the sliders appropriately for each site it lists.

Click on the icon and in the top right of the drop-down there is a cog that takes you to a dialog to set various options. One of these under the Manage Data tab allows you to sync and merge your data across all your devices.

The add-on comes from the EFF, which is normally a very reliable source of security and privacy products. It has an FAQ here: https://www.eff.org/privacybadger/faq

uBlock

This is a fairly complex add-on that blocks a number of scripts and other elements according to their place in various lists. Clicking on the icon it provides in the toolbar will show a drop-down window that has a number of parts. Hovering the mouse over them gives a tip as top what each part does. You can select each individual item of the web page and specify whether you want it blocked or not. Or turn on/off the add-on for that page in its entirety.

The dashboard gives access to the options you can set in order to tune it to the type of browsing you do.

The logger shows what the add-on is doing for each web request. Some information on what it all means is found at https://github.com/gorhill/uBlock/wiki/The-logger

uMatrix

This one is a very flexible add-on that covers a lot fo the same ground as uBlock. It is written by the same developer. Comments on the differences are here: https://news.ycombinator.com/item?id=17361827

The principal advantage of uMatrix would be that it tends to block items by default. However the downside is that it often blocks too much and sites stop working until enough elements have been turned back on. Clicking on the icon shows a matrix of all the parts of the webpage and which elements are associated with which sites. Clicking on the matrix boxes will toggle the access which will be allowed/blocked for that particular element.

A full description of what it does is at https://www.privateinternetaccess.com/blog/2018/10/umatrix-a-powerful-firefox-extension-to-enhance-security-and-privacy/

Adblock Plus

This one has fixed lists of advertising sites it can suppress, and can cause trouble on some places which rely on advertising revenue. You may wish to see the comment about how they can maintain it free by looking at the small print on their site here: https://adblockplus.org/

It will only block scripts and elements from sites it knows about, and concentrates only on advertisements.

Firefox Private browsing

Private browsing is not so much protection from tracking, as a means of not polluting your history when going to certain special places. For instance it can be used to keep all financial information away from your normal profile by always doing banking in a private window.

Another advantage would be to restrict what a public wifi access point sees when you use it.

Other Browsers

The discussion and investigation covered only Firefox. If you use some other browser, then it is worthwhile considering what add-ons and features are available to cover similar functionality to what has been outlined here.