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## How Private is Incognito Mode When Searching the Internet?

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### Understanding User Misconceptions

Incognito mode, often referred to as private browsing, is commonly misunderstood. A survey by the University of Chicago found that many users overestimate its benefits. For instance, 27% of respondents incorrectly believed that incognito mode protects against viruses and malware. Another survey conducted in the UK in February 2023 revealed that 40% of users activated incognito mode to prevent advertisers from tracking them, despite the fact that it only blocks third-party cookies temporarily.

Research from the University of Chicago and Germany's Leibniz Universität showed that despite explicit warnings from browsers, users still harbor misconceptions about incognito mode. The study found that many people believe their data is completely hidden, which is not the case. This misconception is partly due to the broader conceptualization of privacy that users have, which does not align with the technical limitations of incognito mode.

Incognito mode only prevents your browsing history, cookies, passwords, and temporary files from being stored locally on your device. It does not hide your IP address or browsing activity from websites, search engines, or ISPs. For example, if you log into your Google account while in incognito mode, Google will still record your search history and interactions with its services.

### Legal Scrutiny and Data Collection Practices

A class-action lawsuit filed in 2020 against Google highlighted that the company **tracks and collects** data from users even in incognito mode. The lawsuit detailed how Google Analytics and Ad Manager direct browsers to send data to Google, unbeknownst to users and website developers. This means that even when you are browsing privately, Google can monitor your activities.

Google has recently committed to deleting or anonymizing data tracked in incognito mode, acknowledging the limited privacy it offers. Despite this, external entities like ISPs, search engines, and websites can still monitor your online actions. This commitment came after increasing scrutiny and legal challenges regarding the transparency of incognito mode's privacy features.

### Practical Uses and Limitations

A fun fact is that many developers use incognito mode to test website performance and loading times by forcing the browser to re-cache site data. This practical use contrasts sharply with the

common misconception that incognito mode provides comprehensive privacy. In addition to using incognito mode for testing purposes, these developers often recommend using a private browser such as [Hero.io](#) is an ideal option for enhanced privacy.

The University of Chicago survey underscored that 27% of respondents mistakenly believed incognito mode offers protection against viruses. This indicates a pressing need for better user education on the limitations of incognito mode. Additionally, the February 2023 UK survey found that 40% of users were activating incognito mode to block advertisers, unaware that this protection is only partial and temporary.

## The Necessity of Improved User Education

A study by UCL Discovery found that 16 out of 17 participants had used private browsing mode, yet many did not fully understand its limitations. The study highlighted the need for better user education on what private browsing can and cannot do. Given the widespread misconceptions, it is clear that simply naming it “private browsing” misleads users into overestimating its capabilities.

Moreover, users should be aware that incognito mode does not hide your IP address or your browsing activity from websites and ISPs. For example, logging into your Google account while in incognito mode still permits Google to record your search history and interactions with its services. The same applies to other websites and search engines that rely on IP-based tracking systems.

In response to these concerns, some technology companies have committed to more transparency and better privacy features. However, these measures are often insufficient to meet the broader privacy expectations of users. Therefore, relying solely on browser-based privacy features like incognito mode falls short in providing comprehensive online privacy.

The illustration of these findings reveals a critical gap between user expectations and the actual functions of incognito mode. Better educational initiatives can bridge this gap and provide users with a more accurate understanding of online privacy tools. Finally, the necessity for ongoing legal scrutiny and enhanced transparency from technology companies remains crucial to protecting user data effectively.

By contextualizing these specific data points and findings, it becomes clear that while incognito mode offers some level of local privacy, it is inadequate for achieving broader privacy goals. Realizing this distinction can help users make more informed decisions about their online safety practices.

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