

MEDIA/PUBLISHING

Publishers need to rethink paywall plans after Chrome update

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Cond Nast's Web sites, including Vogue's, are under behind paywalls. Image credit: Cond Nast

By SARAH RAMIREZ

Technology giant Google is working to position itself as a privacy advocate with its latest Chrome update, which is likely to impact publishers who have implemented metered paywalls.

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In the next update of Google's Chrome browser, Web sites will no longer be able detect which users are privately browsing through Incognito Mode. Some publishers have made their content inaccessible on private browsers, since readers are able to circumvent metered paywalls intended to boost subscriptions and revenues.

"Privacy has become a major issue for all consumer digital experiences," said John Anderson, president/CEO of [International Strategic Marketing, Inc.](#), Broomfield, CO. "The combination of major breaches of data along with the realization that software is tracking your location and behavior in real time has made many people nervous."

Publisher paywalls

At a developer conference earlier this year, Google first revealed plans to update the Google Chrome browser to provide greater transparency and give users more control over how cookies track users' online activity. The announcement indicated Google's push to distance itself from controversies about online privacy ([see story](#)).

"Google is changing Incognito due to market forces," said Dan Goldstein, president and owner of [Page 1 Solutions](#), Lakewood, CO. "Chrome is founded on principles of protecting user privacy, but I think that the competition to stand out as the most secure and private browser, platform, device, etc. is at the heart of the announcement."



You're using a browser set to private or incognito mode.

Some publishers prevent readers from accessing online content in private browsers, including Google Chrome.

With Chrome 76, expected to be available by July 30, Web sites will be prevented from identifying if users are browsing on Incognito.

"We want you to be able to access the Web privately, with the assurance that your choice to do so is private as well," Google said in a statement.

There are a variety of reasons that consumers may opt for private browsers, ranging from safety to convenience.

For instance, users may wish to conceal their online activity in situations of political oppression or domestic abuse. Similarly, this summer's Hong Kong protesters moved away from digital messaging platforms including WhatsApp and Telegram because of surveillance fears ([see story](#)).

Other consumers may wish to limit online targeting by advertisers or protect their privacy on shared devices.

However, users have also leveraged Incognito and other private browsers to avoid metered paywalls on media Web sites.

Some media outlets have hard paywalls or registration paywalls, including *Luxury Daily*, while metered options allow non-subscribers to access a limited number of free articles.

Publications with metered paywalls, such as *The New York Times*, have implemented FileSystem API, which requires readers to sign in to their accounts or switch from Incognito to normal browsers to read published pieces.

"Our News teams support sites with meter strategies and recognize the goal of reducing meter circumvention," Google concluded in its statement. "However, any approach based on private browsing detection undermines the principles of Incognito Mode.

"We remain open to exploring solutions that are consistent with user trust and private browsing principles," it said.

The new Chrome update will make the FileSystem API tactic obsolete. Instead, Google is encouraging brands to reduce the number of free articles or harden paywalls.

As digital news consumption grows amid falling advertising revenue, the media industry has turned to paywalls as one way to drive paid subscriptions.

This January, media group Cond Nast announced plans to expand its paywall strategy to its entire portfolio of U.S. brands.

After seeing success with metered paywalls for three of its titles, Cond Nast anticipates that readers will be willing to pay for the digital extensions of all of its brands, including *Vogue* and *Architectural Digest*. Some brands will have metered paywalls, while others will have certain content that is locked ([see story](#)).



Some AD content can only be accessed by paid subscribers. Image credit: Architectural Digest

Protecting privacy

Consumer privacy is a concern for leading technology companies, but some solutions are likely to hamper publishers and advertisers.

Apple is continuing its own pro-privacy crusade, as the forthcoming iOS13 will make it easier than ever for consumers to protect their personal information and prevent third parties from exploiting user data ([see story](#)).

Consumers are increasingly becoming aware of the value of their personal data, leading them to be more discerning about how they share their data with organizations and marketers.

Generation Z and millennial consumers are the most aware of ways companies can monetize their data, according to A.T. Kearney's "Insights on Personal Data Privacy, Usage and Monetization" report.

Among the information consumers believe is most valuable are their contact details, demographics and financial data. Thirty percent also cited their location data, while less than 20 percent felt most protective of health, social and activity information ([see story](#)).

"I am not sure what publishers will be able to do to avoid meter circumvention as a result of privacy protections like Incognito," Mr. Anderson said. "The proportion of sites that will only allow a visitor to read one or two stories prior to either registering or subscribing, as is the case with an increasing number of new sites, may lose registration data because someone can come back multiple times.

"However, without understanding the percentage of the audience with anonymity and the percentage of sites that have meters, it is difficult to determine the immediate impact," he said.

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