How to limit user tracking on internet

Extracts from

From: [Master ADVANCED Digital Tools for Research](#) (author:

*Christine Gardiol), **available on most AMAZON marketplaces***

Search engines, browsers, and most apps with which you interact **track** and save what you do online (what you click, who and where you are, your online activity…). These data are saved in the famous **cookies**. Knowing you, Tech copmanies can personalize your online experience, offering you what they perceive you need, *"results tailored for you based on your activity"*, to quote Google[1]. They can also sell your data to **generate customized ads**, which bring these companies huge profits. It is for this reason that many refer to our **data as being monetized.**

What can we do, as users, to limit the tracking of our personal data and thus to fare the internet more privately?

For users, the most visible measure is the possibility now offered to users to opt out of being tracked. Since approximately 2021, by law[2], users must be informed about **cookies** usage, which they can accept or reject. Rejecting cookies is a first step toward claiming your digital rights and some of your online decision power. Make sure to check the US National Cybersecurity Alliance which early 2025, had a detailed list about staying safe online and managing privacy settings[3] and, the European Commission policies on *Online privacy and safety*[4], some of the most stringent privacy regulations.

Besides making sure to reject cookies, you can also choose options such as to **browse privately or in incognito mode**, if these are available. Websearch *incognito mode.*

You can choose a privacy-focused browser and/or search engine, which my book "Master ADVANCED Digital Tools for Research" presents in details. Some names are

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1   Google Search Help. *Personalization & Google Search results*. support.google.com. [Personalization & Google Search results - Google Search Help](#). [Viewed 26 October 2024].

2   For more on cookies, check the cookielaw.org website at: https://www.cookielaw.org/the-cookie-law/ [Viewed 24 April 2024]

3   National Cybersecurity Alliance (2024). *Manage Your Privacy Settings.* staysafeonline.org. 26 May 2024. Available at: https://staysafeonline.org/resources/manage-your-privacy-settings/ [Viewed 19 February 2025]

4   European Commission (2024). *Online privacy and safety*. digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu. 11 September 2024. Available at: https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/online-privacy [Viewed 4 October 2024]

DuckDuckGo, StartPage, Brave Search, MetaGer, Searx, Mojeek, Ecosia, Swisscows, Gibiru, among many now available on the market.

You should also verify the **settings of your search engine and browser**, for all that have to do with **personalized results, privacy, safety, search customization, cookies, autocomplete suggestions, your location, your IP, your search and navigation history, ads,** etc. These parameters are usually found in *Settings* menus (sometimes also called *Options, Search history, Privacy* or *Parameters*). They exist with many apps and software, even if some offer limited options. The keyword is **privacy**. If you cannot find these menus, do a websearch with *privacy* and the command *site:..* followed by the search engine you are interested in (without https and www), for example: *"privacy" site:bing.com* or *"privacy" site:google.com*. Remember nevertheless, that using **privacy-based settings** or **incognito browsing** protects users from tracking but only at the device level. Quoting Lutkevitch[5] *"Search history and other information accumulated during search is not saved and is deleted after the search session. However, internet service providers, employers and the domain owners of the websites visited are able to track digital information left behind during a search."*

The difficulty of staying private and the lack of transparency of our online tools are our reality today, early 2025, even if there are small progresses. Actually, since early 2020s, Google Search is providing a pop-up window that brings some details on the reasons why the results they retrieved for you showed up (for ex, their relevance with your search terms). Make sure to click on the three vertical dots icon, on the left of Google hits. It is not perfect but a good move. It also tells you if it is a sponsored or an ad result.

Acting on the cookies message and on your settings are technical ways you can regain some control of your online experience. Smart searching using search commands and options is another. Incorporating these besides carefully chosen keywords is one way you better control your data and information. You increase your chances of finding the information YOU want, rather than receiving the one the system deems you should get. In addition, as the search intentions are yours, you can evaluate the retrieved results. It is unfortunate search commands are so **underutilized**. More details in the next chapter on powerful search commands available with most engines.

In a nutshell, here are **our four recommendations regarding privacy** and staying more anonymous on internet.

1. Limit engines and browsers from tracking, saving, and using your personal data. Act on their settings, digging into their respective *Settings* **menu**, which most of them offer (some other keywords for this menu are: configuration, preferences, parameters.) This menu encompasses different privacy aspects; they have to do with personalized results, site permission, saving or not cookies as well as your search and navigation history, accepting or refusing ads, your

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5   Lutkevich, B. (2022). *Definition search engine.* techtarget.com. Last updated November 2022. Available at: [What is a search engine? | Definition from TechTarget](#) [Viewed 29 March 2023].

location information, and any data that identify you. The keywords here are **privacy, personal,** and **personalization.** And be tenacious. They sometimes make it difficult to understand.

2. Use as much as you can, search engines and browsers that ensure a good level of privacy (more on this shortly).

3. Learn smart search methods, search commands and options. Something very simple which works with many search engines, is to enclose your keyword/s in **double quote**. This forces the engine to (better) respect your search terms, rather than to interpret them using your data. Alternatively, use Verbatim mode, even if few systems offer this handy option (Google Search has it).

4. To minimize the risk of falling victim to poor and distorted information, **diversify** your sources, information, search engines, tools and methods. You can for example run the same search string in different order, on different engines and at different times. Your moto is to be **critical** and **skeptical** when wandering the web and using its data. Even if this takes time and requires agility, organization, determination, and training, these are keys to stay in control of what you do online.

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