

Online Data Collection Explodes Year Over Year In US

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Ad servers, networks and publisher sites collecting greatest share of data

In today's interactive advertising ecosystem, data has become a valuable form of currency. In fact, an April report from Adap.tv and DIGIDAY found a significant majority of marketers in North America used data to enhance their ad targeting efforts.

But advertisers aren't the only ones reaping benefits from online data and using it to inform campaign decisions.

Cloud-based data management platform Krux Digital sampled and analyzed data collection activity among the top 50 ad-supported content publishers (by comScore's ranking) and found that ad servers, networks and publishers accounted for the majority of US data collection volume thus far in 2012. That a high volume of data is coming from publishers and ad networks makes sense. Publishers commonly use ad servers to manage direct-sold ad inventory, which then allows those ad servers to cull user information from the publisher sites, and publishers also do their own data tracking to better understand site metrics such as visitor activity and interests, and efficacy of site content.

Ad networks, demand-side platforms (DSPs) and exchanges working with publishers often collect any number of data points, either on behalf of a specific advertiser or for their own benefit.

"The platform that serves up an ad on the publisher site can then cookie that user or update a cookie that might be present on the user's browser," said Ben Crain, head of marketing and corporate development at Krux Digital, in a July 2012 interview with eMarketer. "For example, they could record that I saw an ad for Ford and that I was on a travel site." Crain went on to explain that this data can then eventually be used outside of the publisher's site. For example, the information could be used to serve a retargeted ad elsewhere within the ad network or DSP's reach.

Some companies are also developing widgets to collect data on publisher sites for their own gain. Though social sharing widgets such as ShareThis or AddThis benefit publishers by allowing them to spread their content across the web, the data some of these widgets collect does not always stay within the confines of the publisher site.

"The tools are often deployed as a free service for publishers, but they also carry pretty clear data ownership rights," said Crain. "Certain providers can keep all the data they see across the sites where their widgets are placed and then use that data to power their own media networks."

Crain cited Facebook as one example of a site that owns such data. Given the mass reach of Facebook and the growing use of social sharing widgets, it's not surprising that data collection via widgets has ballooned almost 800% since 2011. In fact, Krux Digital found explosive year-over-year volume growth across most data collection channels, no doubt another sign of the growing opportunity and excitement associated with data collection and targeting.

Supply-side platforms (SSPs) also saw significant gains, likely because an increased number of publishers work with these technology providers in order to cater to advertisers looking to purchase real-time bidding inventory.

The influx of data collection across the web has strong implications for consumers, particularly on the ad tracking and privacy front—a growing area of concern for internet users. In a June survey conducted by Harris Interactive and TRUSTe, 90% of US adult internet users said they used browser controls for privacy purposes, including deleting cookies. That percentage is up from 84% in 2011.

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