

CNet News.com Sensationalism And Fearmongering, Part II

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Apparently CNet's News.com staff writers Declan McCullough and Anne Broache just can't resist the lure of sensationalism and fearmongering. After yesterday's blatantly inaccurate and highly inflammatory **Government Web sites are keeping an eye on you** (which undoubtedly generated lots of page views and thus advertising revenue for CNet), they followed up today with Part 2 entitled **Congress' hands caught in the cookie jar**.

The highlight of the story (complete with a *high impact* icon) is this: *"Although they have promised to abstain from using cookies to track visits to their Web sites, at least 23 U.S. senators do so. Overall, 66 members of Congress use the tracking devices."*

The story picks Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz) as its first example, citing that he *"has been a longtime advocate of strict privacy laws to restrict commercial Web sites' data collection practices"*, and then points out that *"visiting mccain.senate.gov implants a cookie on the visitor's PC that will not expire until 2035"*. (Hey, what can be more sensational than tying the story to a Senator who happens to be in the news for his efforts in combating unethical political behavior?).

And of course the experts have been unable to resist the urge to jump in so as to sound significant and outraged. Sonia Arrison, director of technology studies at the Pacific Research Institute, a nonprofit group in San Francisco exclaims that *"it's willful ignorance. They're complete hypocrites. How can they accuse companies of poor data management when they're not doing it on their own Web sites?"* And Jim Harper, director of information studies at the Cato Institute, a free-market think tank, adds *"the irony is rich"*.

There is just one big problem with this story. And that is that this is fearmongering at its best; scaring the public, and taking advantage of government officials who did nothing wrong but whom will inevitably have to make a show of fixing the problem.

Why is this just fearmongering and sensationalism? Consider this quote: *"In many cases, politicians seemed to be unaware of their use of Web tracking technology until being contacted this week."* Or this story subtitle, *"Dozens of U.S. senators are quietly tracking visits to their Web sites even though they have publicly pledged not to do so."*

Tracking Visits? Web tracking technology? Is this a display of utter ignorance or simply wanton disregard for the facts so long as it generates clickthroughs?

Cookies do not equal tracking. Yes, cookies could be used to track users, but the presence of a cookie does not mean that anything is being tracked. Politicians seemed to be unaware of their use of tracking, because, well, there is no tracking going on!

But, facts appear to be unimportant to Declan McCullagh and Anne Broache. Even though the ColdFusion team explained the facts to them repeatedly (both before and after the initial story ran), they have once again opted to capitalize on sensationalism, taking advantage of the public's fear and politician's sensitivity to the perception of impropriety.

But hey, to hell with facts, I am sure the clickthroughs make it all worthwhile.

(If, unlike Declan McCullagh and Anne Broache, you want the facts, see [my previous post](#)).