

A National Forum on Web Privacy and Web Analytics

Abstract

The Montana State University (MSU) Library seeks \$100,000 funding from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) through its National Forum Grant program under the National Digital Platform project category to hold a meeting around the topics of web privacy and web analytics involving librarians, library administrators, systems developers, product designers, user experience designers, lawyers, technologists, and privacy researchers. A gathering of these stakeholders is needed in order to build consensus and develop an actionable agenda for implementing values-driven web analytics across a nation-wide spectrum of libraries: public, academic, community college, tribal, school, and special.

Measuring visits and visitors to a website through third-party analytics tracking is common practice by website owners. Google Analytics—a leading third-party analytics tracker—is widely implemented on library websites and well represented in the library literature, yet the related factor of web privacy is underrepresented in our discourse and practice around web analytics. Google Analytics and its related services such as AdSense and Tag Manager present a potential threat to user privacy and to the library profession's long-held value of intellectual freedom. Websites that implement Google Analytics and other Google tracking services are participating in the extensive network of third-party trackers that are capable of sharing user data across sites. In many cases, the user has not given fully informed consent for this data sharing, nor does the website owner fully understand the capabilities and consequences of web analytics and other third-party trackers.

We propose hosting a *National Forum on Web Privacy and Web Analytics* to address the challenges of user privacy on the web. The National Forum Grant will support the creation of a community-driven strategic direction to be developed over a one-year period, from May 2018 to April 2019. The activities of the Forum will be framed around three supporting goals: 1. Activating and focusing our professional discourse around privacy and analytics; 2. Improving our field's understanding of third-party web tracking and web analytics; and 3. Developing practical approaches and policy guidelines for implementing privacy-focused analytics within the contemporary landscape of the web. The realization of these goals will ultimately produce three key outputs that will offer immediate practical and scholarly advances for privacy and analytics in libraries: (1) a scholarly white paper that synthesizes forum activities and articulates the direction for a national privacy-focused values-based agenda for web analytics, (2) a practice-based action handbook that provides background, resources, and best practices to guide libraries in responsibly implementing web analytics, and (3) conference presentations and peer-reviewed publications that will further disseminate forum activities and generate engagement and buy-in around forum topics.

In short, a community-fueled effort focused around the Forum and its follow-up activities will enable our profession to take important strides toward a better analytics practice that protects our users' privacy from unwanted third-party tracking and targeting. In convening experts from across disciplines and professions, we can break down silos, learn new perspectives, focus our privacy discussions around analytics and third-party tracking, and produce a roadmap for enhancing our analytics practice in support of privacy.