

# Your Computer Is WATCHING You

AND YOU'D BE SURPRISED TO KNOW WHAT IT HAS LEARNED

**SCOPE'S ESSAY KIT**  
What you need to write a perfect essay.



**A**s you read this issue of *Scope*, you might come across a word or two you don't know. You could go find a big, beautiful dictionary and turn the pages until you find the word. Or, like millions of people, you could simply go to the Web site Dictionary.com. That probably seems like the simpler, painless choice.

What you might not know is that each time you go to Dictionary.com, something is happening to your computer—in

secret. Silently, invisibly, more than 200 bits of "tracking technology" are being downloaded onto your computer. That's right. At this moment, on your family's old laptop, hundreds or even thousands of tiny programs are hiding on the hard drive. And every time you use the Internet, these tracking programs quietly gather information about you—the sites you visit, the movies and songs you download, even what personal health issues you might be researching.

Why does anyone care whether you prefer Eminem to Justin Bieber?

Because the more a company knows about you, the more effectively it can sell things to you. The information gathered from tracking technology is sold to companies. These companies create "targeted advertising"—ads sent to people who are most likely to want the product being advertised. This type of advertising has become a huge and profitable business.

### It's No Coincidence

Here's how it works.

Say you have a pimple. You Google "how to get rid of a big zit."

The tracking technology captures your search.

Two weeks later, when you log onto Facebook, an ad for pimple cream appears in the margin. It seems like a coincidence. But it isn't. Information gathered from your Web surfing told a company that you might want to buy their zit cream.

Dictionary.com is one of thousands of Web sites that put tracking programs on our computers. A recent study by the *Wall Street Journal* found that the 50 most popular Web sites downloaded an average of 64 pieces of tracking technology at a time onto the

computers of their visitors. These sites include Google, Facebook, and Amazon. Wikipedia is one of the few that does not download tracking software.

### Creepy or Convenient?

The results of the *Wall Street Journal* study were reported around the country, and many people were outraged. What upset them most was that the downloading was done in a secretive way. It seemed like a detail from a spy novel or a scene from the latest thriller: innocent citizens being tracked by computers, and faceless strangers discovering our most personal habits and concerns and then selling that information.

Creepy, yes?

Maybe. But it's also perfectly legal and nothing particularly new. The truth is that most of our computers are already filled with programs that gather information. The only difference is that today's tracking programs are more sophisticated. Sites like Dictionary.com, Facebook, and Google make our lives easier and more fun—for free. Isn't it fair that these companies get something in return?

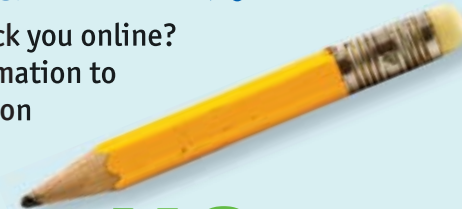
And maybe targeted advertising is a good thing. Wouldn't you prefer to see ads online for products you actually want or need?

As tracking technology continues to evolve, this debate grows more complicated. One thing is clear, though: Eventually that pimple will go away, and you'll forget all about it. But your computer will remember forever. ●

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## What Do You Think?

Should companies be allowed to track you online? Go back to the article and find information to support each side. Put the information on the lines below.



**YES**  
COMPANIES SHOULD BE ALLOWED TO TRACK PEOPLE ONLINE.

1 It's better to see personalized ads for products I'd actually want or need.

2 \_\_\_\_\_

3 \_\_\_\_\_

**NO**  
COMPANIES SHOULD NOT BE ALLOWED TO TRACK PEOPLE ONLINE.

1 \_\_\_\_\_

2 \_\_\_\_\_

3 \_\_\_\_\_

**EXAMINE POINTS ON BOTH SIDES OF THE ARGUMENT—AND YOUR OWN FEELINGS**—to decide what you think about this issue. Describe your opinion in one sentence. This can be a thesis statement in an essay on this topic.

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