State of browser privacy evolution

Latest news Jul 27, 2023

Google’s Web Environment Integrity API spec and explainer was recently publicized (2023-07-21). It has garnered negative comment including at this Request for Mozilla Position on an Emerging Web Specification and much press.

This API is presented to assist a destination site in determining whether a browser client represents a real user or a bot.

The explainer contrasts the implementation to the Cloudflare/Apple Privacy Pass work that is now being discussed in an IETF working group. The double blind implementation in Privacy Pass allegedly prevents feedback about errors theoretically making a future exploit of an attester's implementation harder to manage.

One reaction to the proposal, quoted at The Register:

Ondej Pokorný, a freelance technology consultant, offered similar sentiment, via Mastodon. “The problem with many of these new APIs from the whole 'Privacy Sandbox' and other proposals intended to replace 'legitimate' third-party use-cases is that it’s turning the browser from a User-Agent into double agent working also in the interest of advertisers and other corporate players, often not aligned with user interests,” he argued.

Some reflection on how Google’s ... reCAPTCHA has a dark side points to corporate players vs user interests in this space.

Past news items

For background on standard bodies and their concerns regarding unsanctioned tracking, see [W3C TAG 2015] and [RFC-7258].

We care because authentication protocols strongly resemble the privacy threat called "navigational tracking" including "bounce tracing" and "link decoration." Other privacy and anti-tracking efforts also affect various elements of the higher ed technical infrastructure. This page identifies the term used generally, the threat to users, the mitigations being considered by the browsers, and the impact those have on federated identity systems.

FedCM is one of several additions to browser technology that is designed to allow users to tell browsers that certain cross-site communication – whether through cookies or bounces – is "sanctioned" by the end user. FedCM doesn’t block any protocols; FedCM is a way for a user to signal trust to a browser that is otherwise protecting the user’s privacy.

This is our focus

As browsers continue to threaten the cross-site methods used in authentication protocols to fight navigational tracking, we see that R&E community investment in testing as a way to have a strong influence in the evolution of these changes. The two issues currently unaddressed by FedCM (were we to use it as a signal to allow SAML protocol transactions) are

1. IdP picking from a list – and the massive scale they need to support for our in our community, – and
2. the hops that are implemented in many authentication flows involving hub federations, federated proxies, and proxies bridging non-compliant IdPs into the federation.

Overview

FedCM

FedCM is one of three APIs that appear to have broad support among the three browser engine teams. Broad support means that it’s likely all three will eventually support the standard, not that it is implemented. FedCM was released in Chrome in November 2022, and is also implemented in Edge and Opera (built on the Chrome engine). Firefox has a FedCM project tracker in bugzilla indicating active work. Apple stated in the Webkit developer making list that they are generally supportive.
The specification from the W3C FedCM community group is under active development. That community group is working on proposing a W3C working group, which has greater authority; at this point, it is in negotiation where the spec will continue development.

Documentation from browser developers can be found for Chrome and Mozilla. See State of FedCM and SAML for more in depth discussion.

Privacy initiatives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How does it work</th>
<th>Mitigations</th>
<th>Impact</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Navigational tracking</strong></td>
<td>Bounce tracking transfers a user via redirect (or POST) from one site to another, exchanging information in the process. A common pattern is to have “decorated links” that have embedded identifiers for the user.</td>
<td>Safari: Intelligent Tracking Prevention – W3C Privacy CG draft, additional protections when private browsing in Safari 17 – announcement at WWDC23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Third party cookies</strong></td>
<td>“Third party cookies” are those sent or set in a browser when the top level document (the URL in the browser bar) makes image or iframe calls to other sites.</td>
<td>- Storage Access API or Shared Storage API allows a site to ask a user to allow third party cookies for that site's use - documentation from Mozilla. Implemented in Firefox, with caveats in Chrome. Edge, Safari. - FedCM: a new way for an authentication token to be exchanged – see above. - Cookies Having Independent Partitioned State (CHIPS, also known as Partitioned cookies) allows an iframe to set cookies that the iframe can retrieve across a specific top level site, but no other site – documentation from Mozilla and Chrome.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cross site request cookies (2021)</strong></td>
<td>Cookies received by a site when a user is directed to that site via a link from another site.</td>
<td>In a proposal shared in the W3C WebAppSec WG regarding &quot;Standardizing Security Semantics of Cross-Site Cookies&quot;, the authors note a pattern they call &quot;Top-Level Cross-Site POST Requests.&quot; The document recommends “Given the existing widespread usage and lack of clear alternatives, we recommend following the current state of the web and not blocking cross-site cookies in this scenario.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>IP address obfuscation</strong></td>
<td>Apple's Private Relay for iCloud+ customers is a &quot;lite&quot; relay network used only with Safari and TCP Port 80 (aka http) traffic. All DNS requests are encrypted and go through Apple. Google has since October 2023 declared intent to obfuscate IP addresses of Chrome users. GoogleOne subscribers have access to Google VPN. Mozilla offers a VPN.</td>
<td>Network relays and proxies can obscure the IP address of the users device or a network's WAN IP address(es) to protect endusers from being associated with a specific origin.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Robust identification</strong></td>
<td>CAPTCHA solving is hard on mobile, challenging for accessibility reasons. Some CDNs essentially fingerprint browsers to distinguish &quot;real&quot; from &quot;bot&quot; surfing.</td>
<td>Privacy Pass was introduced by Cloudflare (06/08/2022) and Apple (as Private Access Tokens). Work has been transferred to the IETF PrivacyPass working group. There are PrivacyPass plugins for Firefox and Chrome; believe its built into Safari. Web Environment Integrity API was announced by Google (2023-05-08) with a spec and explainer published (2023-07-21) and discussion (apparently) in the W3C Anti-Fraud Community Group.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Secondary sources and articles

- **Chrome's "Privacy Sandbox", phasing out some third party cookies and including Shared Storage, starts general availability in Q3 2023**
  - “Starting in early 2024, Google plans to migrate 1% of Chrome users to Privacy Sandbox and disable third-party cookies for them”

- **Web Environment Integrity**

- **Privacy Pass**
  - Thibault Meunier, Cloudflare [https://www.usenix.org/conference/pepr23/presentation/meunier](https://www.usenix.org/conference/pepr23/presentation/meunier) Tuesday, September 12, 2023 - 11:50 am–12:10 pm

We also have a collection of **Slides, blogs, and videos** from the community.

Useful references


