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Web Tracking with Chinese Characteristics

Abstract

This study examines the prevalence of third-party surveillance mechanisms on the most popular Chinese websites in order to chart the relationship between commercial and government interests in the emerging web tracking market. Extensive commercial sponsored surveillance has been discovered, indicating that private corporations are collecting vast amounts of data about the web browsing habits of Chinese netizens. However, a purely technical analysis has not revealed the presence of wide-spread government attributable surveillance. By exploring government procurement records, two companies, WebTerren and Knownsec, have been found to be surveilling websites and contracting for the government - indicating that this work is being done on an outsourced basis. However, given that these two companies fail to reach the majority of sites tracked by the major commercial actors, there is a high probability that the government may be covertly leveraging commercial surveillance mechanisms for political purposes.