Firefox is stepping up its blocking game

Enlarge / The bold color choices in the blocking dialog on Firefox 70 Beta make it clear that Mozilla wants users to really *look* at it.
Jim Salter

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Mozilla turned the blocking of third-party tracking cookies on by default this week with the release of Firefox 69. Although the feature has been available since October's Firefox 63, this week's build is the first to enable the feature by default, even for existing users who are just upgrading.

Tracker blocking

Mozilla says that it's not trying to block actual ads, only trackers. For the most part, it has succeeded; in our testing, we frequently saw 30 or more tracking elements blocked on sites whose ads still display. The balance Mozilla is aiming for here is an increase in privacy for users, along with faster page load times—but without harming small websites and content creators who rely on revenue generated by ads from the same third-party networks whose trackers are being blocked.

- Clicking the shield icon in the address bar of Firefox 69 gets you a list of cookies—both blocked and allowed.
  Jim Salter

- Firefox 70 Beta (shown here in Dark Mode) breaks the blockable items down in more granular categories than 69 does.
  Jim Salter
- The “fingerprinters” category is new to FireFox 70 and takes direct aim at trackers that attempt to build a trackable fingerprint of your computer itself.
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- The blocking report is new to Firefox 70 (currently in beta) and shows aggregate statistics of all the nasty things it has blocked recently.
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Mozilla is clearly not done with its user-shielding efforts. Clicking the shield icon in the address bar in Firefox 69 just gives you a flat list of cookies, both allowed and blocked. Firefox 70 Beta takes things a step further by breaking them into categories, including Cross-Site Tracking Cookies, Fingerprinters, Tracking Content (which effectively means “ads” and is still allowed by default), Social Media Trackers, and Cryptominers. The beta will drop a notification down from the address bar the first time the user encounters a Social Media Tracker, inviting exploration into the settings.

Firefox 70 Beta also adds a new “blocking report,” which allows the user to see aggregate statistics of all the content blocked in the past week.

Autoplay blocking

Firefox has automatically blocked the autoplay of videos with audio content since April. Firefox 69 adds the optional ability to block autoplay of all videos, with or without audio content. Turning this setting on can dramatically improve page load times and decrease battery usage (and the amount of data consumed) when browsing sites with tons of embedded videos.

Enlarge / Firefox 69 automatically blocks autoplay of audio by default—but you can go into the settings and prevent autoplay of all video if you like.
Jim Salter
Firefox 69 also asks for user permission before allowing any Flash content to run. This will hopefully help light a fire under any remaining Web developers who haven't gotten the message about Flash's 2020 death certificate.

Increased battery life for Mac users

Firefox users with Macbooks have long been frustrated with the browser's battery consumption. Firefox 70 reverses the trend, with Firefox developer Henrik Skupin claiming power consumption dropping to a third or less of what it was. This is a Mac-specific fix, made possible by a platform switch from Firefox's native rendering engine to MacOS' CoreAnimation

engine. The necessary code is available in current Nightly builds or the most current Developer edition.

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