Microsoft proves the critics right: We're heading toward a Chrome-only Web

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One of the greatest fears when Microsoft announced that it was ditching its EdgeHTML rendering engine and switching to Chromium—the open source engine that powers Google's Chrome, along with a range of others such as Vivaldi, Brave, and Opera—is that Web developers would increasingly take the easy way out and limit their support and testing to Chrome. That would leave Mozilla's Firefox, Apple's Safari, and any other browsers, present or future, out of the fun.

This is, after all, substantially what we saw during Internet Explorer's heyday. Microsoft's browser grew to about 95 percent of the market, and wide swathes of the Web proudly announced that they were "best viewed in Internet Explorer," often to the point of not working at all in any other browser. IE's hegemony presented an enormous challenge for the upstart Firefox browser, which was built to support Web standards rather than Microsoft's particular spin on those standards. Though Internet Explorer was eventually displaced—by Chrome—this arguably would have gone much quicker if developers had been less fixated on Microsoft's browser.

Last week, Microsoft made a major update to the Web version of

its Skype client, bringing HD video calling, call recording, and other features already found on the other clients.

And as if to prove a point, the update works only in Edge and Chrome. Firefox, Safari, and even Opera are locked out. In the past, the Skype team has pointed to codec issues as the reason for inconsistent browser support. But that shouldn't be a concern these days, as both the H.264 and VP8 video codecs are supported in Edge, Chrome, and Firefox. Google Hangouts and Google Meet support plugin-free video calling in Firefox, for example, as have other online services. For a long time, Apple refused to support WebRTC—the underlying browser technology used for real-time voice and video chatting—in Safari. But even that feature gap doesn't exist any more, and Safari should now support everything required.

Further, users who have tried changing their user-agent—the identification string, sent by browsers, that tells Web servers what version of which browser they are—have reported that much of the app works in both Safari and Firefox, with reports that even voice and video calls work in Firefox. It's not clear that *everything* works, and WebRTC is arguably persnickety enough that Microsoft would have to explicitly test and perhaps tweak its code to work in Firefox or Safari. But ultimately, none of this appears to be a fundamental tech issue.

Rather, it's a *being bothered to do the work* issue. Microsoft has said that its decision to prioritize Edge and Chrome is based on "customer value." Or, to put it another way, there's not much point in taking the time and effort to support browsers that have a small audience. This creates a negative feedback loop for those browsers, discouraging their use and pushing developers toward a world in which Chrome is the only browser that developers think about and target.

There's perhaps also some irony in that the Skype app is built with a framework designed to foster cross-platform

development, between devices, desktop, and the Web. For those who can use the Web app, it looks extremely similar to the desktop apps, which also look very similar to the mobile apps. That’s because it’s built using ReactXP, Microsoft’s layer on top of Facebook’s React and React Native frameworks. These let you use Web technology to build applications not just for the Web but also the desktop and smartphone platforms. When targeting the Web, ReactXP supports Firefox, reinforcing once again that this isn’t really a technology question.

Microsoft isn’t the first company to treat the Web this way, and it won’t be the last. There was a time when the market was more evenly split, and no single browser vendor could exercise monopoly control over the way the Web was developed. This environment brought standardization to the foreground; standardization was the only way to make the variety tractable for developers. But as we slide back into a near-monopoly situation, this kind of thing is probably only going to become more common. Skype for Web is simply a high-profile demonstration of everything people worried about when Microsoft announced its switch.

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