Position Paper
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Many have labored long and hard to develop P3P as a W3C protocol. Over the course of many years those responsible for its development have debated and addressed every conceivable aspect of the protocol. Due to their tenacious and inclusive efforts, P3P has rolled out as an official specification with relatively little controversy. Relatively.

What controversy there has been surrounds the technical issue of using compact headers to provide cookie notice. Internet Explorer 6 (IE6), and now Netscape 7 (NS7), manages first and third-party cookies by interpreting compact header information. The lingering controversy is a technical one — whether compact headers are the best P3P-based mechanism to provide detailed cookie notice. IEF takes no position on this question.

The above P3P user agents interpret the compact header information to determine the origin of the cookie (whether first or third party) and whether the click-stream data it accumulates will be merged with the user's personally identifiable information (PII). As we understand it this use of compact header information was an unexpected use of the P3P specification. IEF believes that the goal to provide notice about relevant cookie data uses is important and should continue to be a goal of user agents regardless of the P3P-based mechanism employed.

IE6 and NS7 have shown that P3P can be used to provide users more meaningful notice about very complex Web site information transactions. Meaningful notice enables real choice.

The technical debate about the use of compact headers will certainly be a point of discussion at the Future of P3P meeting in November. IEF believes that the debate should center on whether the goals detailed above are best achieved at a technical level by compact headers. Third-party cookie transactions, along with other embedded content transactions, are often invisible to the user. Only a diligent and determined user can sort through the transactions on each Web site to determine which sites have collected information about them. The goal of helping users sort out third-part cookie collection of information with P3P should be preserved in future user agent implementations.