WebSentinel

FORENSIC AUDIT OF THE 100 MOST VISITED CONTENT WEBSITES

We take your privacy seriously.

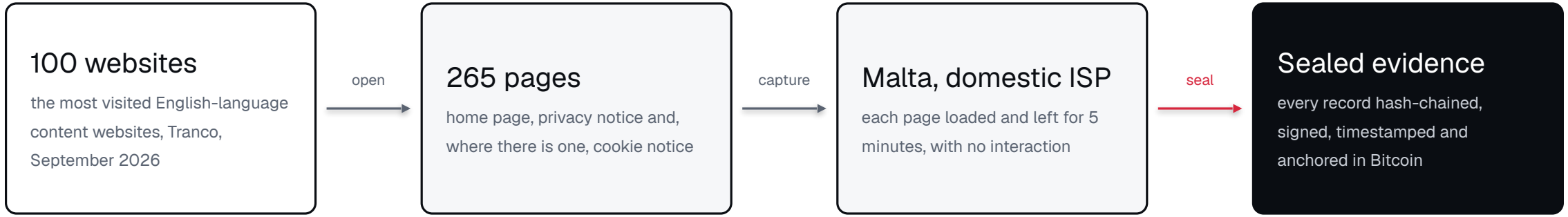
Findings from 265 pages of 100 websites, captured 1st to 3rd October 2026.

Alexander Hanff

FieldTalk - 17th November 2026

METHOD

How the audit was carried out



100
websites

265
pages

5 min
on every page

0
clicks on any banner

Captured 1st to 3rd October 2026 with WebSentinel in Google Chrome, on a clean profile.

ACROSS 265 PAGES OF 100 WEBSITES

518,770

events that impact privacy, without any consent

Each event is a separate access to a visitor's device.

SUMMARY

Headline figures

All 100

websites produced tier 1 events: interception, exfiltration or high-entropy fingerprinting

2,695

events on the median website

28,695

events rated high or critical

92.4%

of servers contacted are on networks registered outside the EEA

Events by tier

14,675

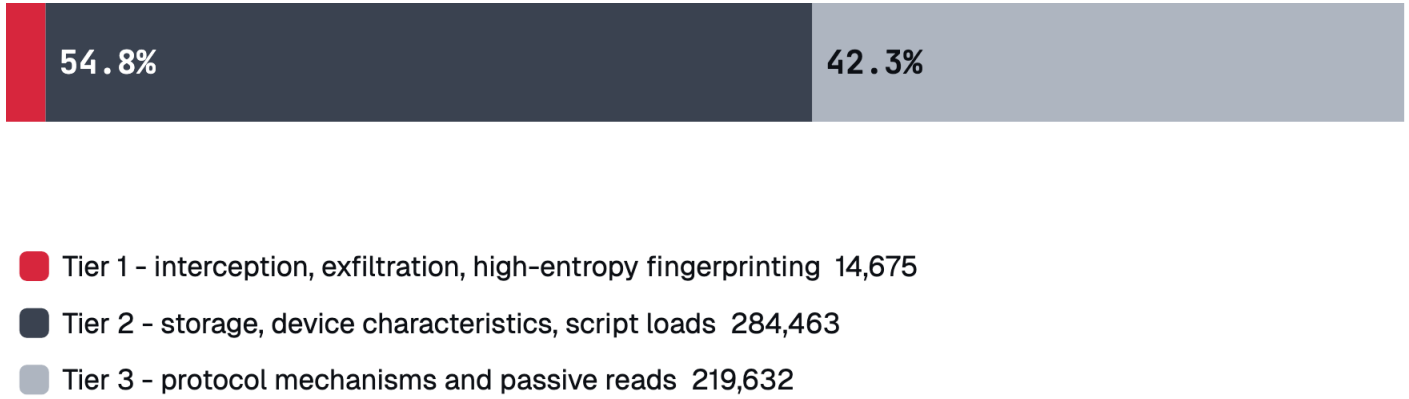
tier 1: interception, exfiltration and high-entropy fingerprinting, on all 100 websites

284,463

tier 2: storage on the device, device characteristics and script loads

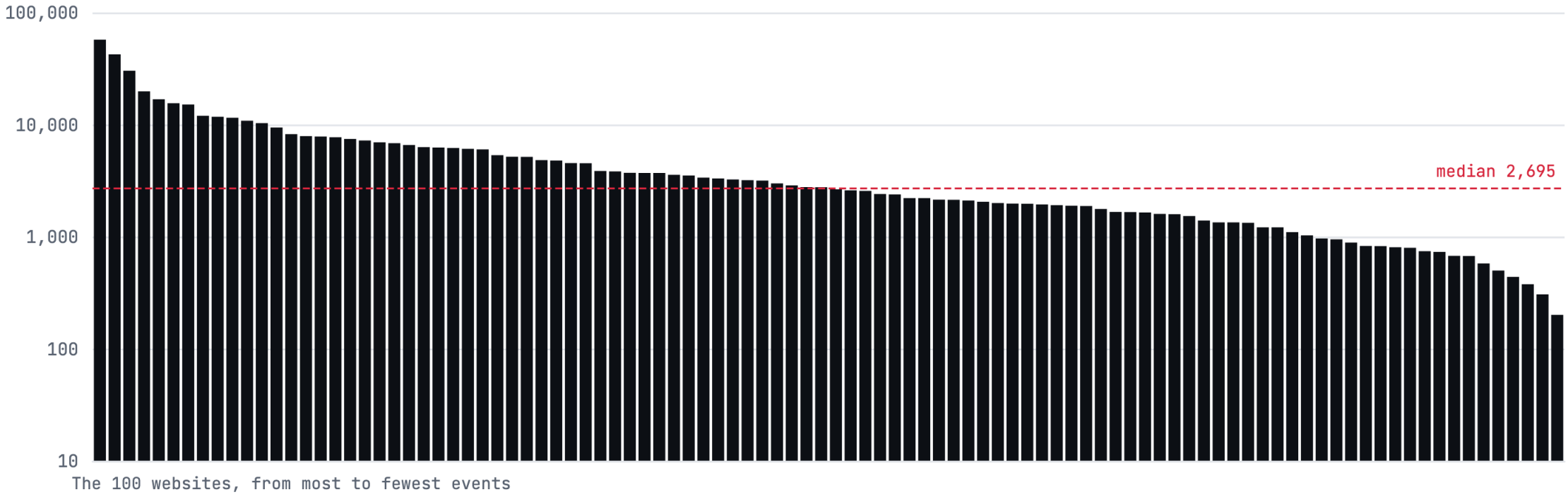
219,632

tier 3: protocol mechanisms and passive reads used for tracking



EVERY WEBSITE

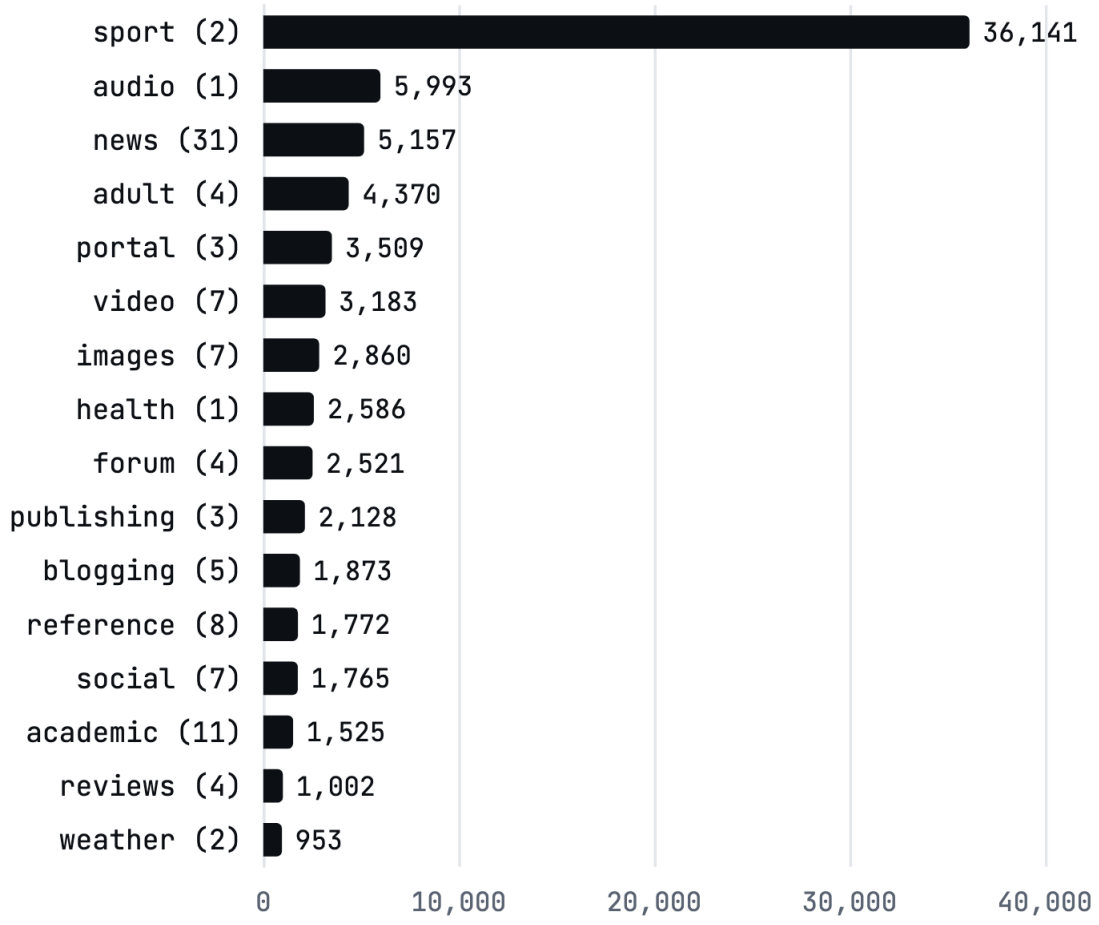
Events per website



Log scale, from most to fewest events. The highest are espn.com (57,194), go.com (42,253) and nytimes.com (30,158). The dashed line is the median.

Median events per website, by type of website

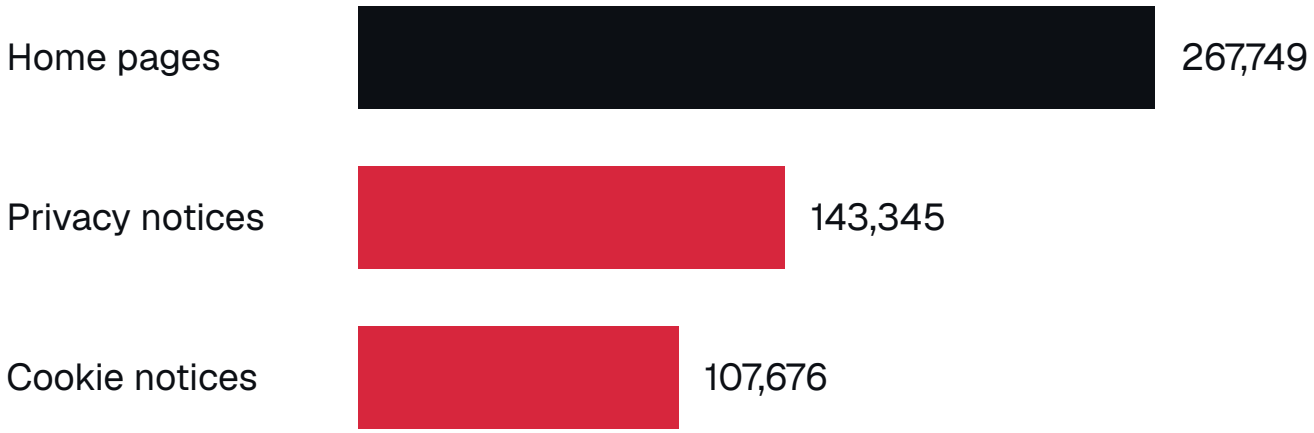
The number of websites of each type is in brackets.



Events by type of page

251,021

events on privacy and cookie notices, the pages that tell people how their data is used



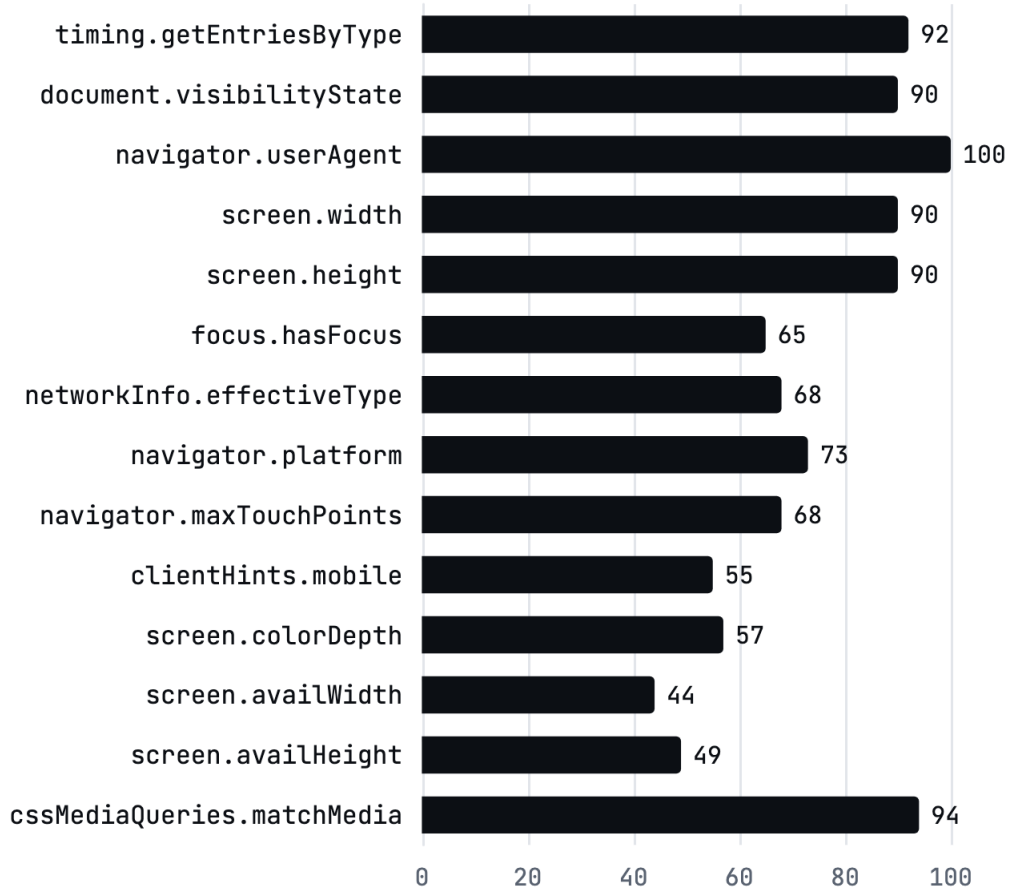
Fingerprinting

89,437

fingerprinting events, on all 100 websites

75

websites used high-entropy techniques: canvas, WebGL, WebGPU, WebRTC, audio, fonts, battery and sensors



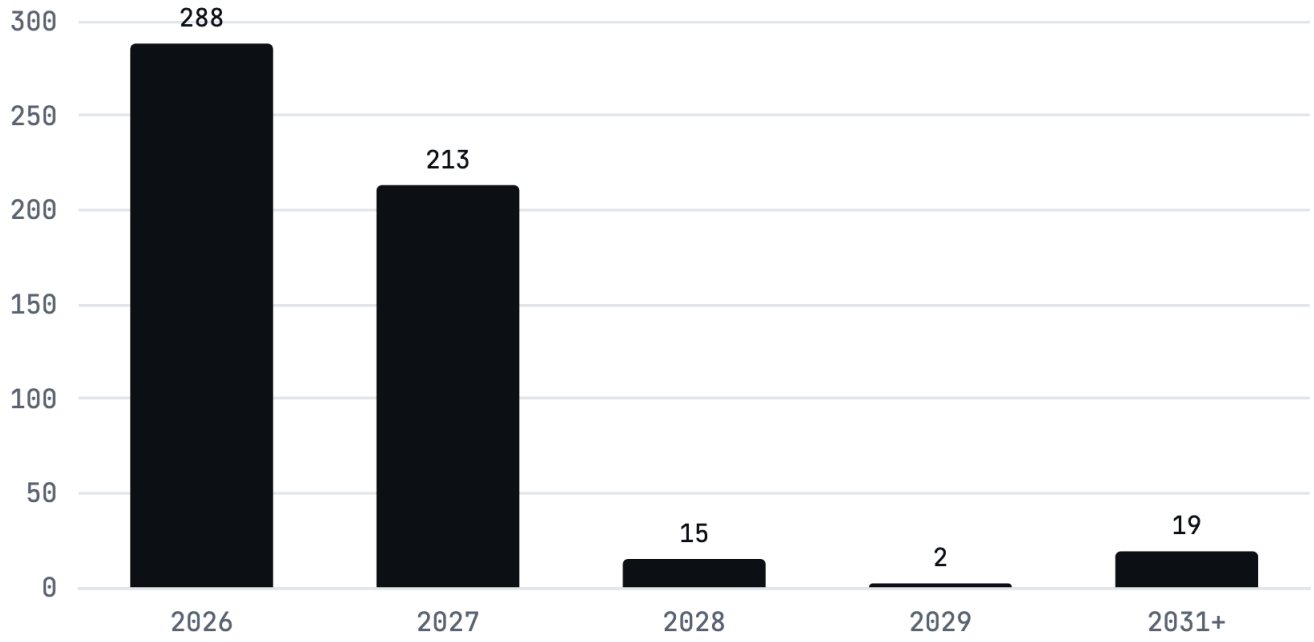
The most common techniques, by the number of websites using them.

Cookies set without any consent

1,492
distinct cookies on 96 websites

372
of them on third-party domains, across 60 websites

2094
the year in which the longest one is set to expire



Cookies set without any consent, by the year in which they are set to expire.

Sideloaded scripts

The website
puts one tag on the page

loads

Tag manager
chosen by the website

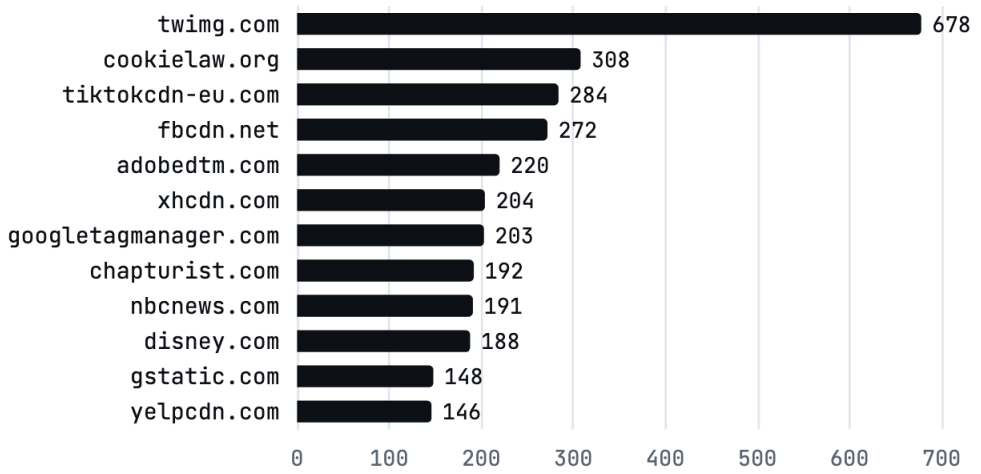
loads

Advertising library
chosen by the tag

loads

Bidders, pixels, fingerprinting
chosen by the library

7,456
further scripts loaded from other origins by the scripts on 98 websites



Sideloaded scripts, by the domain serving them.

CNAME cloaking



21

subdomains were DNS aliases of another company's service

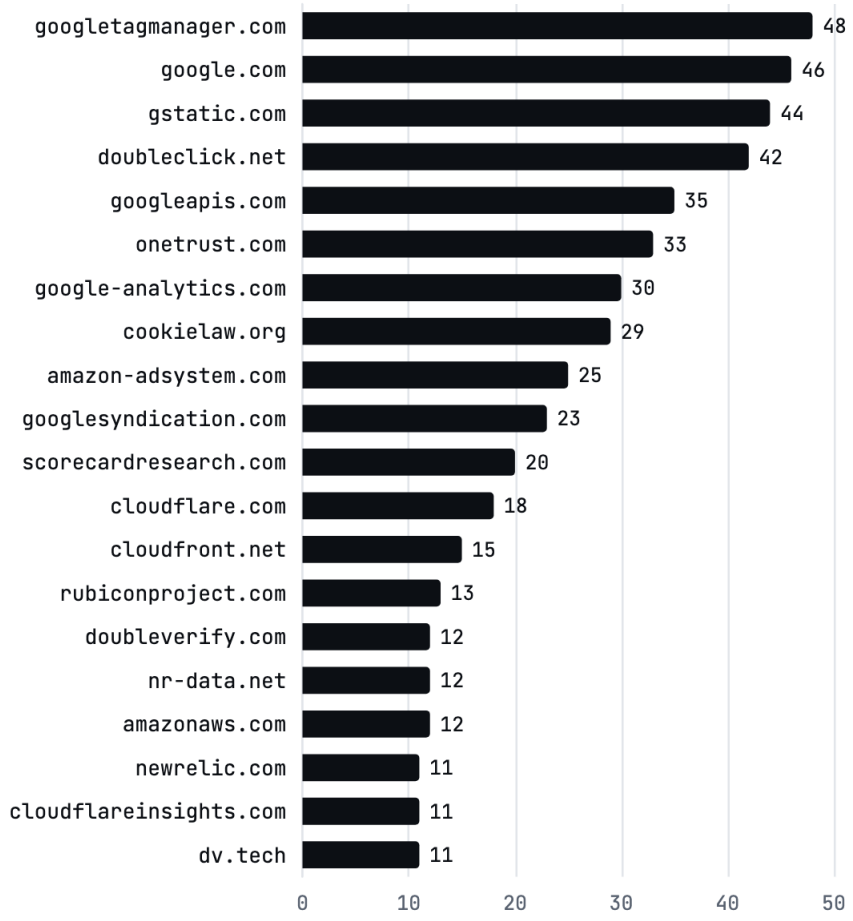
18

websites had at least one CNAME cloak

The browser treats the request as the website's own and sends the website's cookies with it. Recorded on nbcnews.com.

Third-party domains, by number of websites

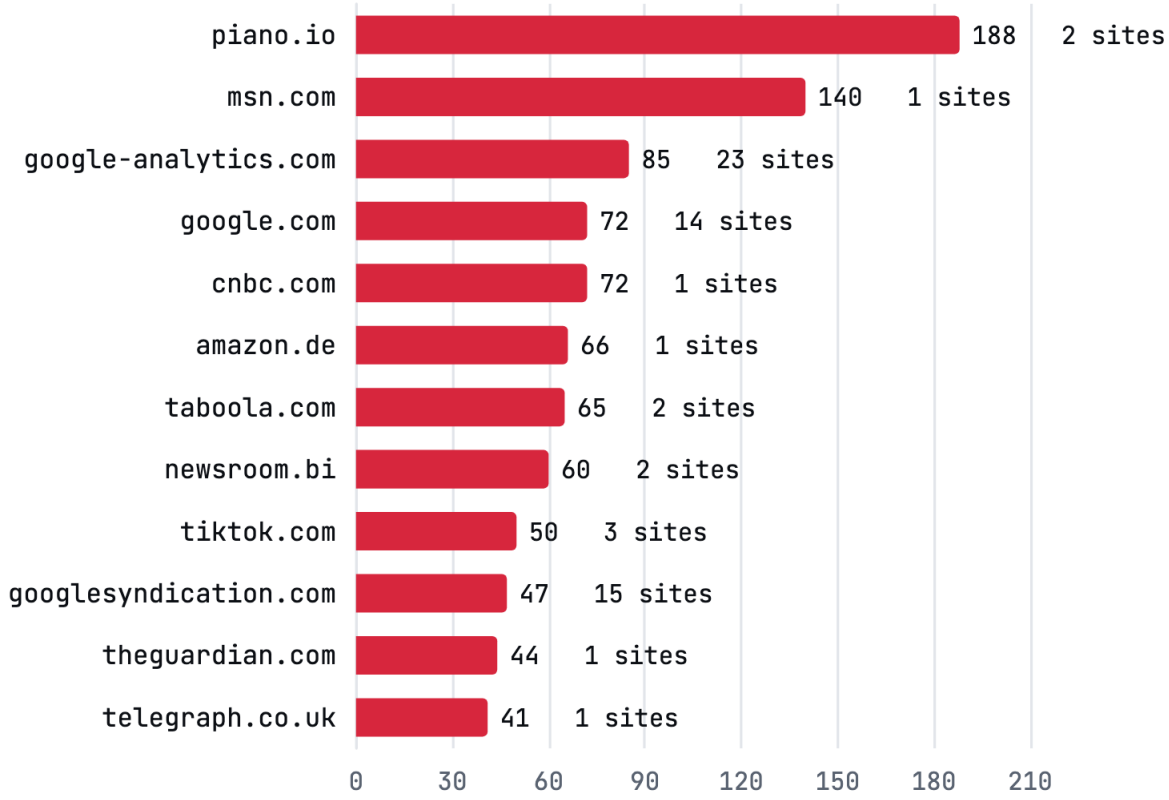
Under Fashion ID (C-40/17), the website operator is a joint controller for the third-party code on its pages.



Third-party domains, by the number of websites on which they caused privacy relevant events.

Beacons, by receiving domain

Beacons, tracking pixels and keep-alive requests send data read from the device to a server.



Receiving domains, by beacons and the number of websites sending them.

International transfers

92.4%

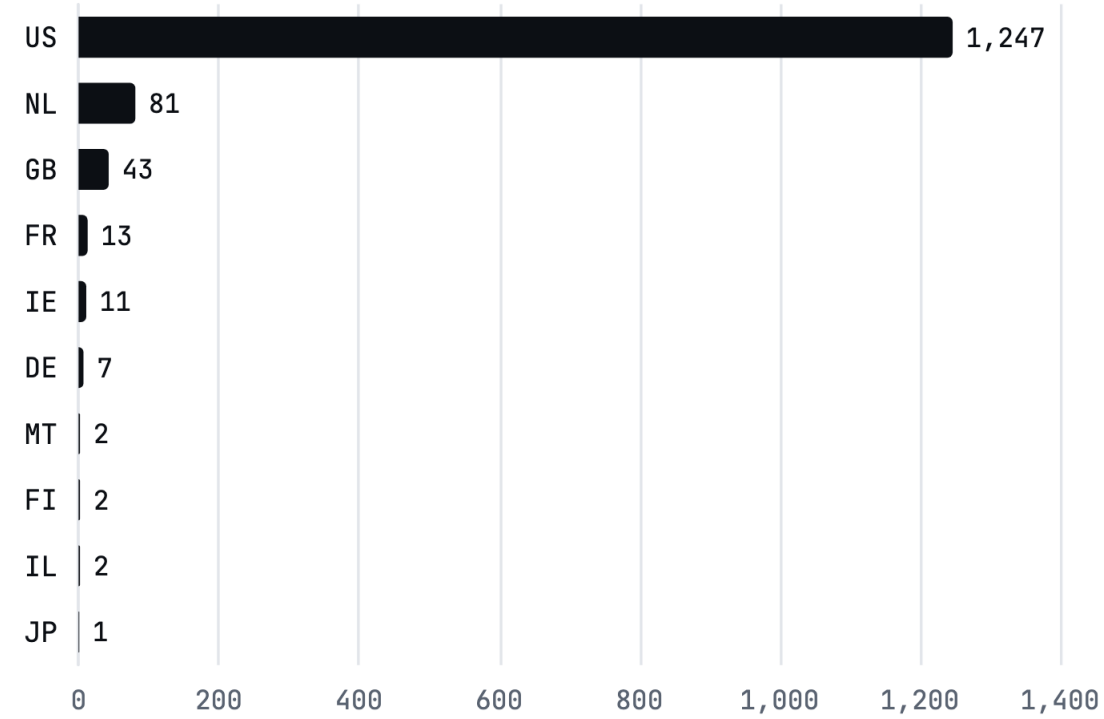
of the 1,400 servers contacted are on networks registered outside the EEA, almost all in the United States

1,034

of the 1,400 servers belong to third parties

0

of the 1,400 servers were in China



Servers contacted without any consent, by registry country of the receiving network.

Built-in AI interfaces

37

websites delivered code written to use the browser's built-in AI interfaces

36

of them through Google Publisher Tag, Google's advertising library

```
// Google Publisher Tag, as delivered
LanguageModel.create({})
Summarizer.create({
  type: "key-points",
  format: "plain-text",
  length: "medium"
})
// then records the time taken and the outcome
```

Privacy and cookie notices

28 min

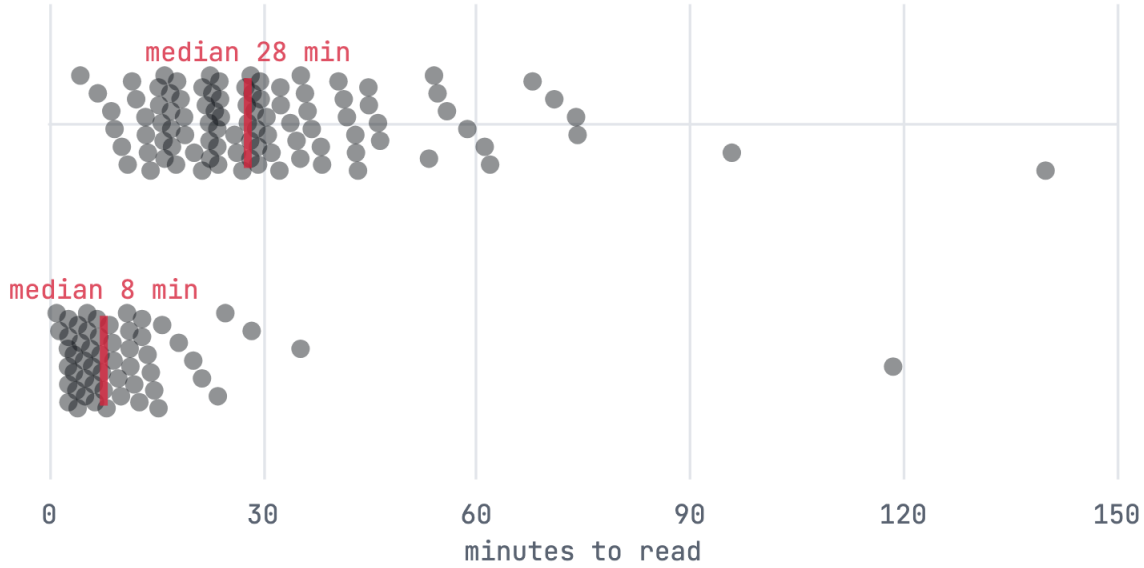
median time to read a privacy notice, at 6,641 words

20.6

median reading age in years; every notice measured is difficult or very difficult to read

5

websites whose notices say cookies are used only with consent but still set cookies without any consent



Time to read each notice, in minutes at 238 words a minute: privacy notices above, cookie notices below. The red line is the median.

TO READ THE NOTICES OF A WEBSITE AND OF EVERY THIRD PARTY ON ITS PAGES

2 h 39 min

for the median website (39,821 words)

€40

the value of that time, for each visitor

16 h 11 min

for techcrunch.com, with 40 third parties

McDonald and Cranor (2008), replicated: 250 words a minute as in their 2008 model; time valued at 2x the EU mean hourly wage at work, 0.25x at home (Eurostat 2022, €17.69). Minimums.

What the notices say, and what they leave out

0

websites whose notices fully match what their pages did, of the 95 whose notice text was captured

47

third parties with no privacy notice at all, receiving data from 30 of the websites

42

of the 320 notices retrieved do not say when they were last changed

€11.7 bn

the value of the 776 million hours people in the EU would need to read the notices of the 14 largest platforms and their third parties

Only two notices pass an automated screen - every cookie named, fingerprinting disclosed where it was used - and both fail when read: facebook.com mentions fingerprints only as a biometric sign-in, and arxiv.org does not name Adobe or GitHub, whose servers its pages contacted. The EU figure uses the monthly active recipients the platforms publish under the Digital Services Act, with one reading per person as in McDonald and Cranor (2008).

Dark patterns in the consent banners

115 of 165

consent banners used at least one dark pattern (69.7%)

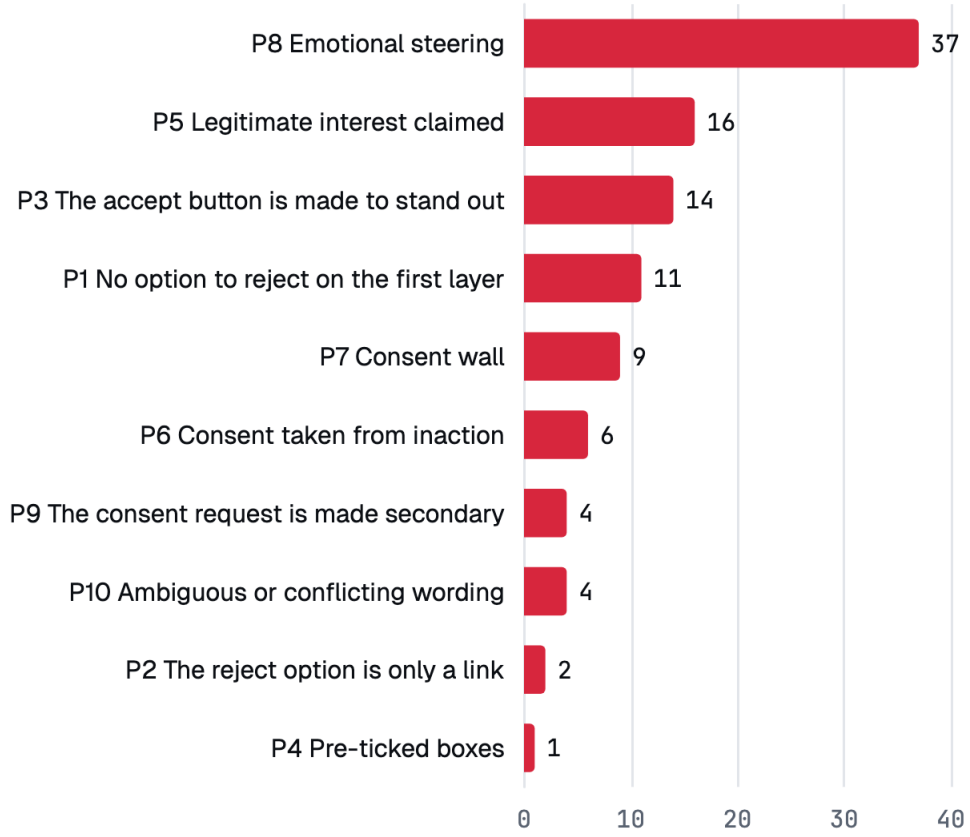
59 of 81

websites with a consent banner used them (72.8%)

37

websites steered visitors with emotional wording: a "safer" or "better" experience, "we care about your privacy"

Every banner assessed twice, independently, from the capture engine's screenshots against the EDPB Cookie Banner Taskforce report and Guidelines 03/2022.



Websites whose consent banner used each pattern.

Evidence integrity



265
sessions

3,088
records

265 / 265
chains verified complete

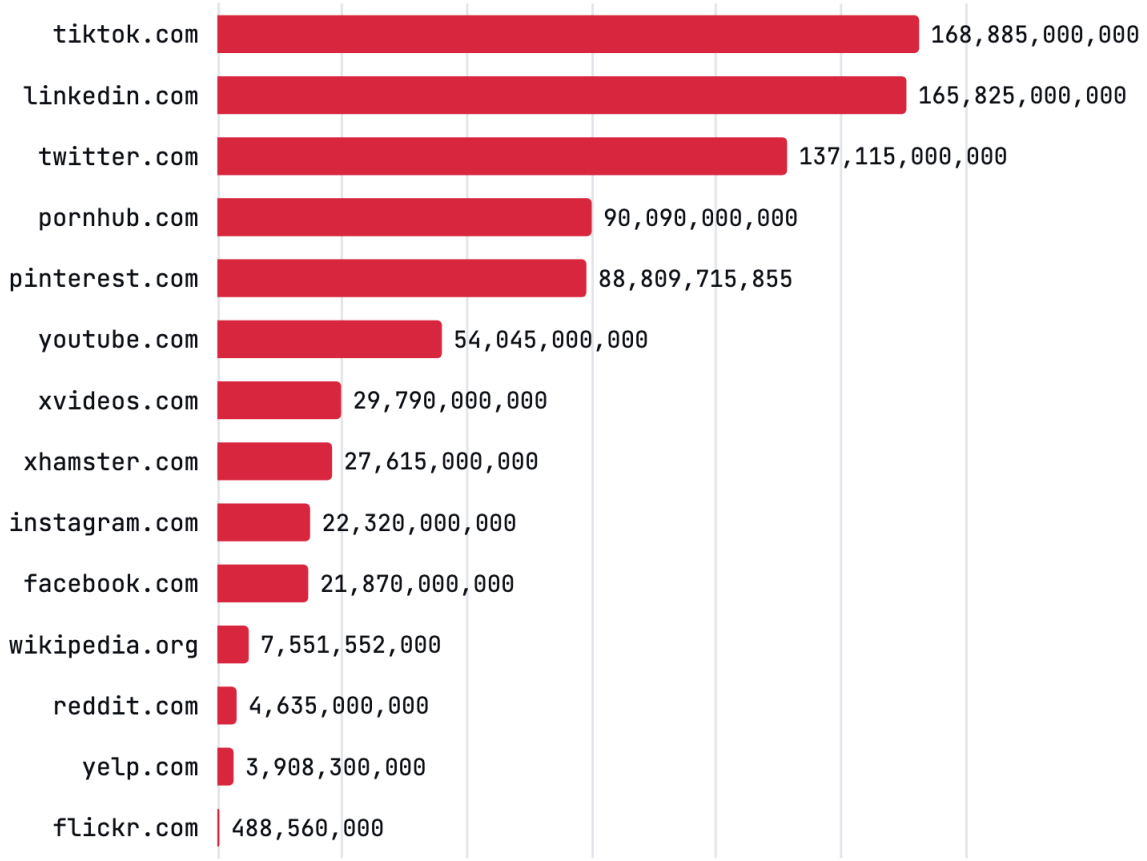
1 byte
changed breaks the hash, the chain and the signature

Events a month on the homepages of EU platforms

822,948,127,855

events a month on these homepages alone, without any consent, at one visit a month for each EU monthly active recipient based on regulatory disclosures

EU monthly active recipients published under Article 24(2) of the Digital Services Act; 45 million where a designated platform's own figure was not available.



Minimum events a month, by platform.

What about environmental impact?

1,271,444 kWh

a year, to load third-party content without any consent on these homepages; 6,357,219 kWh in 5 years

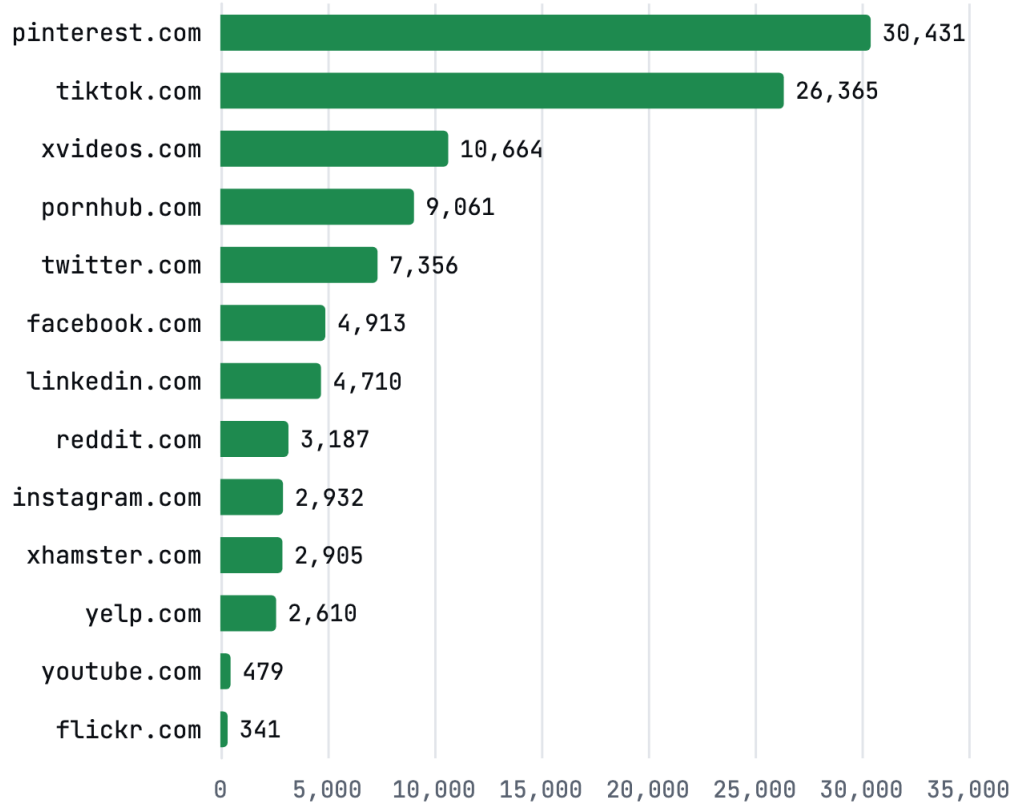
353 homes

powered for a year, at the EU average of 3.6 MWh of electricity per home

318 t CO2e

a year, the entire annual footprint of 35 people in the EU

Client side only. The energy used by data centres is not included.



kWh a month, by platform.

The law

ePrivacy Directive

Article 5(3): storage on and access to the device. Article 5(1): confidentiality of communications.

GDPR

Articles 5, 6, 7 and 9; 12 to 14; 25; 26 (joint controllers); Chapter V (transfers).

Criminal law

Directive 2013/40/EU, Articles 3 to 6; Budapest Convention, Articles 2 to 5.

California

Penal Code section 631 (interception) and section 502 (computer access).

Consumer protection

FTC Act section 5; Unfair Commercial Practices Directive, Article 6.

Guidance

Article 29 Working Party WP194 and WP224; EDPB Guidelines 2/2023 and 05/2020.

Recommendations

Supervisory authorities

1. Count every event
2. Enforce Article 5(3) beyond cookies
3. Hold operators to account for the code they load
4. Refer criminal conduct to the criminal authorities

Legislators

1. Enforce the rules that already exist
2. Require browsers to let users block fingerprinting interfaces
3. Require consent for access to on-device AI
4. Fund regulators to audit at scale

Website operators

1. Load nothing before consent that is not strictly necessary
2. Keep an inventory of every script
3. Remove CNAME aliases to third parties
4. Make the notices match what the website does

WebSentinel

We take your privacy seriously.

The full report, the method and the per-site results.

websentinel.eu

Alexander Hanff - FieldTalk