

Stop Wi-Fi Tracking On the London Tube

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On July 8, 2019, default Wi-Fi tracking is coming to the London Underground. So, who's behind it, why is it happening, and should you be concerned? Here's everything you need to know.

What's the deal with the Wi-Fi tracking?

Transport for London (TfL) is responsible for the Wi-Fi tracking initiative. They'll use access points at 260 of the Tube's stations to track train riders through their mobile device's MAC addresses. The aim of the programme is to expand the TfL's dataset beyond where riders tap in and out, and whether riders were using an Oyster Card or contactless payments.

Wi-Fi tracking will allow TfL to chart rider behaviour, including the routes they take, and their overall use of the network. It should also provide better real-time information about crowding levels in stations. Eventually, data collected could also be used to optimise ad-placement around the Tube.

The implementation of Wi-Fi tracking follows a 2016 trial. During that test, TfL collected 509 million pieces of data from 5.6m mobile devices. Crucially, the 2016 pilot hashed MAC addresses, which depersonalised but did not fully anonymise data. The full-time Wi-Fi tracking programme will replace the hashing system with tokenisation, which will replace the MAC address with an identifier that cannot be tied to personal information.

Can you opt-out of the Wi-Fi tracking programme?

Using Wi-Fi tracking data could improve the rider experience. But despite depersonalisation measures, there are natural privacy concerns. It remains to be seen if TfL will install proper security measures to protect user data. That's especially worrisome because the only official way to opt-out of Wi-Fi tracking on the Tube is by disabling your Wi-Fi entirely.

But thankfully, there is another way to keep your personal data safe. With a VPN, you can encrypt your Wi-Fi connection on the Tube. And even if you do trust TfL's security measures, using RitaVPN is a no-brainer. That's because public networks expose all network traffic. So even if the TfL's Wi-Fi tracking cannot trace your activity back to you, others on the London Underground can.

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