You searched “How can I sing like Ariana Grande?”
Don’t forget the sneakers in your shopping cart!

You live in Chicago. Bundle up tomorrow. It’s going to be cold.

What Does Your COMPUTER Know About You?

Lila Carroll loves watching YouTube videos about her favorite Broadway show, The Lion King. But she didn’t know what to think when ads to buy tickets to the show started popping up on nearly every website she visited.

“It was creepy, like someone was watching me online,” the 11-year-old says.

Lila wasn’t imagining things. Companies were following what she was doing online.

Getting to Know You
Websites and apps like Google, YouTube, and Instagram are constantly gathering data about you. But that isn’t supposed to happen. There are laws to protect kids under 13 from being tracked online. The problem is that companies often don’t know how old users are. Certain websites are supposed to verify users’ ages. But not all of them do.

As a result, companies could be tracking your every move as you search, watch videos, and play games online.

“Based on your behaviors, companies are able to figure out what things on the internet you will be most interested in,” says Kalinda Raina, an expert on online privacy.

Sometimes, this can be a good
thing. For example, YouTube recommends videos based on what you’ve watched. This might help you discover something you like.

But websites are mainly collecting data about you for another purpose: to make money. They sell your information to advertisers. Advertisers use it to figure out what you’re likely to buy. Then they place ads for those items on the websites you visit often.

This practice is called ad targeting (see “How Targeted Ads Work”). And it’s big business. Google made $116 billion from advertising last year alone.

Invasion of Privacy

Many experts say ad targeting is a major invasion of privacy. That’s especially true because most people don’t realize their online activity is being tracked. Every website should have a privacy policy to explain what data it’s gathering about users. But that information is often confusing and hard to find.

Does that mean you should be worried about ad targeting? Many internet companies say no. These companies know they could be fined for tracking kids online without their parents’ permission. So you won’t see targeted ads when you’re logged into Google Classroom, for example.

But the laws work only if the website knows your age. What if you’re on a website that hasn’t verified how old you are? The site may track your activity as if you were an adult. It could possibly show you ads that might not be appropriate for kids.

You’re Not Alone

There are ways to limit what companies learn about you (see “You Have the Power”). Raina explains that it also helps to think of the internet as a public place, where you’re never truly alone.

So think twice about what you search for and the sites you visit. Someone may be watching.

—by Jennifer Li Shotz

You Have the Power

Here are a few things you can do to control what companies learn about you online.

- Keep it to yourself. Never share personal information online—like your name, birth date, location, or school.

- Resist the click! Colorful ads and pop-up games may look fun, but when you click on them, you’re just giving companies more information about you.

- Think before you search. Ask yourself: Do I want a company I may have never heard of to know what I’m looking at online?

What do you think? Is it wrong for companies to track you online? Are there other ways you might prevent them from doing it?