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# Making the Internet's Onion More Appetizing

Facebook and other big companies are moving onto TOR

Photographer: Alamy

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TOR has gained notoriety as the Internet's dodgiest neighborhood, where freedom fighters plot revolution and scoundrels sell drugs, swap child porn, or buy harvested organs. Now the hidden corner of the Internet is starting to gentrify as mainstream companies such as Facebook, Deutsche Telekom, and browser pioneer Mozilla seek to do business there.

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TOR, an abbreviation for the Onion Router, was set up by the U.S. Naval Research Laboratory more than a decade ago to let U.S. operatives communicate securely and give people in authoritarian countries anonymity online. In recent years it's become popular with crooks, too. The network was home to Silk Road, the notorious online drug bazaar whose founder on Feb. 4 was convicted of U.S. charges of money laundering, computer hacking, and conspiracy to traffic narcotics.



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As the number of people using TOR quadrupled in the past four years, to about 2 million a day, companies began to see the network as an important place to reach consumers. TOR blocks advertisers, cookies, and other third parties from tracing users' IP addresses by randomly moving the data through a network of more than 6,000 computers. Facebook in October unveiled a website in the .onion domain—a special Web address that can be accessed only via the TOR browser. “TOR’s uncensored network feels more like the old Internet,” says Jamie Bartlett, head of social media analysis at U.K. policy researcher Demos.

“The possibility for brand damage is certainly real.”

—*Elias Manousos, RiskIQ*

Getting on TOR is relatively straightforward—a user simply has to download the TOR browser software. Mozilla wants to incorporate TOR into its Firefox browser. Publications such as the *Washington Post* and the *Guardian* have drop boxes on TOR where whistle-blowers can submit tips anonymously. New York City lawyer Tor Ekeland (no relation), who specializes in Internet and computer cases, says he uses

TOR to ensure client information and correspondence is confidential. “One of the top targets of a national security agency in any country is a law firm, because we have tons of confidential information on business deals,” Ekeland says.

The corporate interest in TOR could eventually overload the network, which is equipped to handle 10 million users a day. Mozilla says its engineers are evaluating changes to Firefox to make TOR faster and easier to use. Andrew Lewman, executive director of the TOR Project, a nonprofit in Cambridge, Mass., that oversees the network, says his group is working with Mozilla to boost TOR’s capacity, possibly by making every computer running Firefox part of TOR’s network.

While Firefox and other browsers already have privacy features, such as the “Incognito” option on Google’s Chrome, those settings typically do little more than delete passwords and cookies while continuing to give advertisers access to user data. Facebook and Mozilla declined to comment on their TOR plans beyond their published statements. Google didn’t respond to requests for comment.

A presence on TOR will help corporations bolster their credentials among people interested in keeping the government from monitoring their Internet use, according to George Danezis, a professor of security and privacy engineering at University College London. Once they’re more confident the network can handle greater commercial traffic, more companies will open sites there, he says. “A lot of companies want to show they were targets of the government, not the collaborators,” Danezis says.

Companies mulling a move to TOR should weigh the reputational risk, says Elias Manousos, chief executive officer of software security firm RiskIQ. “The possibility for brand damage is certainly real,” Manousos says.

As mainstream companies open sites on TOR, they’ll help clean up its image, says Rik Ferguson, vice president for security research at software company Trend Micro. He says commercial applications will “serve to legitimize TOR in the popular consciousness, demonstrating that there are plenty of noncriminal uses for such a service.”

—*With Cornelius Rahn*

***The bottom line:*** *As more companies use TOR, the anonymous corner of the Internet risks being overwhelmed by increased traffic.*

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