A user comes to Allstate’s website, navigating the site without making a purchase.

Allstate’s data management platform (DMP) collects data on this user, building anonymous cookie profiles that aggregate users into defined groups, such as those interested in “car insurance”. The profile, however, does not identify the User as the individual interested in car insurance.

The DMP works with multiple demand side platforms (DSPs), each provided with the collection of anonymous “car insurance” cookie profiles. In turn, the DSPs, acting as agents for Allstate, seek to match Allstate-provided cookie profiles with similar profiles being offered for sale by publishers.

Buyers (DSPs) and sellers (SSPs) “meet” at a real-time auction to negotiate the sale of ad slots for inventory. Rather than bidding for ad slots on specified websites, DSPs bid on cookie profiles that correspond to users in their target segment (in this case “car insurance”). Within this system, there is minimal transparency into who is buying and selling what, because the bid is solely based on a match between the anonymous “car insurance” cookie profiles.

In a similar fashion to DSPs, supply side platforms (SSPs) act as selling agents on behalf of publishers, bundling and offering available ad slots. In this example, the SSP that “won” the DSP bid (on behalf of Allstate) offered ad slots for cookies profiles associated with “car insurance” interests, with one collection of ad slots owned by Breitbart.

The SSP distributes the advertisement to the winning client, sending the appropriate creative to the publisher's ad server. It is important to note that most of the time, the publisher site (or URL that the cookie profile matches to) isn't required to be disclosed to the buyer, or the ad exchange, limiting the control over who might win the ad negotiation. Some exchanges, however, have allowed for filters to identify the publisher URL that a cookie profile is going to be targeted on, allowing buyers to build block lists to avoid their advertisement appearing on "unapproved" websites.

In this case, breitbart.com receives and serves Allstate advertisements on their website (even though Breitbart is on Allstate’s block list).