Web Authentication Anomaly on Apple Macs

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Anomaly

There is an anomaly in the use of most web browsers on Apple Macintoshes which means that it is possible to open a web page in the web authentication window. The session has then to be authenticated again if a new page requires it.

This behaviour occurs in Safari, the "official" Apple browser, and also in Opera and Firefox. Camino, the Mac-specific Firefox-based variant, behaves "correctly".

Description

When pretty much any application is run on a Mac, open document windows can be minimised to the Dock. (This is similar to minimising Windows apps to the Taskbar.) In this situation, the application will still be in the foreground and its menu displayed across the top of the screen.

When a user runs a browser and authenticates against the web filter, the small authenticator window will appear (as expected). A user is likely to minimise this window to the Dock, to keep it out of sight while browsing.

At this point, a user might select a new site to visit by selecting it from their bookmarked favourites. Instead of creating a new blank browser window, most browsers load the bookmarked page into the Docked/minimised window – which remains Docked/minimised. This loses the previous authentication, even though it might not be obvious until the user has to go through the authentication process again.

NB It is likely that this behaviour will also occur when the authenticator window is the only window – whether minimised or not – and the user clicks an http link in, say, an email.

Workaround

A new browser window should be opened before opening a bookmarked site. The new web page will then overwrite the newly opened page rather than the authentication page that can remain minimised.