

Here's A Nice, Scary Halloween Story For The Ad Industry

by Joe Marchese, October 29, 2014, 10:07 PM

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There are a lot of scary things in the ad industry that I could turn into a corny Halloween gimmick. Like that ad blockers are the most popular browser extensions by a mile, and [a million new ones are installed every week](#). Or that ad fraud is so prevalent in the industry that there's a good chance you're basically sending a cut of your ad dollars to organized criminals. Real organized criminals, not fake ones from a show you can binge-watch on Netflix. The horror!

But I've got a better one. Want to hear something *really* scary? There's [a new browser extension making the rounds](#) that clicks on every blocked ad on every page you visit, working on top of the existing (and wildly popular) Adblock Plus extension, and muddling relevant targeting and demographic data in the process. Currently in alpha testing, [AdNauseam](#) aims to screw with the ad industry in ways that just using an ad blocker doesn't.

"As online advertising is becoming more automatic, universal and unsanctioned, AdNauseam works to complete the cycle by automating all ad-clicks universally and blindly on behalf of the target audience," the plugin's [page on GitHub](#) explains. "AdNauseam quietly clicks every blocked ad, registering a visit on the ad networks databases. As the data gathered shows an omnivorous click-stream, user profiling, targeting and surveillance becomes futile." It becomes futile! Mwahahaha! (Cue stroking of fluffy white cat.)

All joking aside, this is a fascinating development in our industry. Why? Because it's going to make us think. Their reasoning, while obviously hostile to our industry, is extremely smart. Many people in the ad business have shrugged off ad blockers because a blocked ad does not register as an "impression," which means that the advertiser doesn't pay for it. But AdNauseam gives people a glimpse into how ad fraud really works, and by compartmentalizing it into something simpler -- intentionally fake ad clicks to an ad that no human ever saw, designed to siphon money from advertisers -- a complicated concept can become easier to understand.

The real ad fraud problem is infinitely nastier. With AdNauseam, the goal is to suck advertisers dry, as payback for the tracking and targeting that its creators find creepy, by letting users opt to turn their browsers into bots. The more widespread ad fraud is using layers of middlemen and shady ad networks to funnel money away from the multibillion-dollar ad industry and into organized crime. It's a tough process to explain, as the "bot hunters" at security firm [White Ops](#) will attest (though they do a pretty good job of explaining it themselves).

So, something like AdNauseam is actually a good explainer for those of us who have been trying to ensure that ads are viewed, not just viewable, and that humans saw them rather than bots. This is something our industry needs to understand so that dialogue about ad fraud goes beyond scare tactics and into real solutions.

And meanwhile: Happy Halloween.

Tags: advertising, online fraud

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