

Google Squashed a Chrome Extension that Flooded Ad Networks With Disinformation

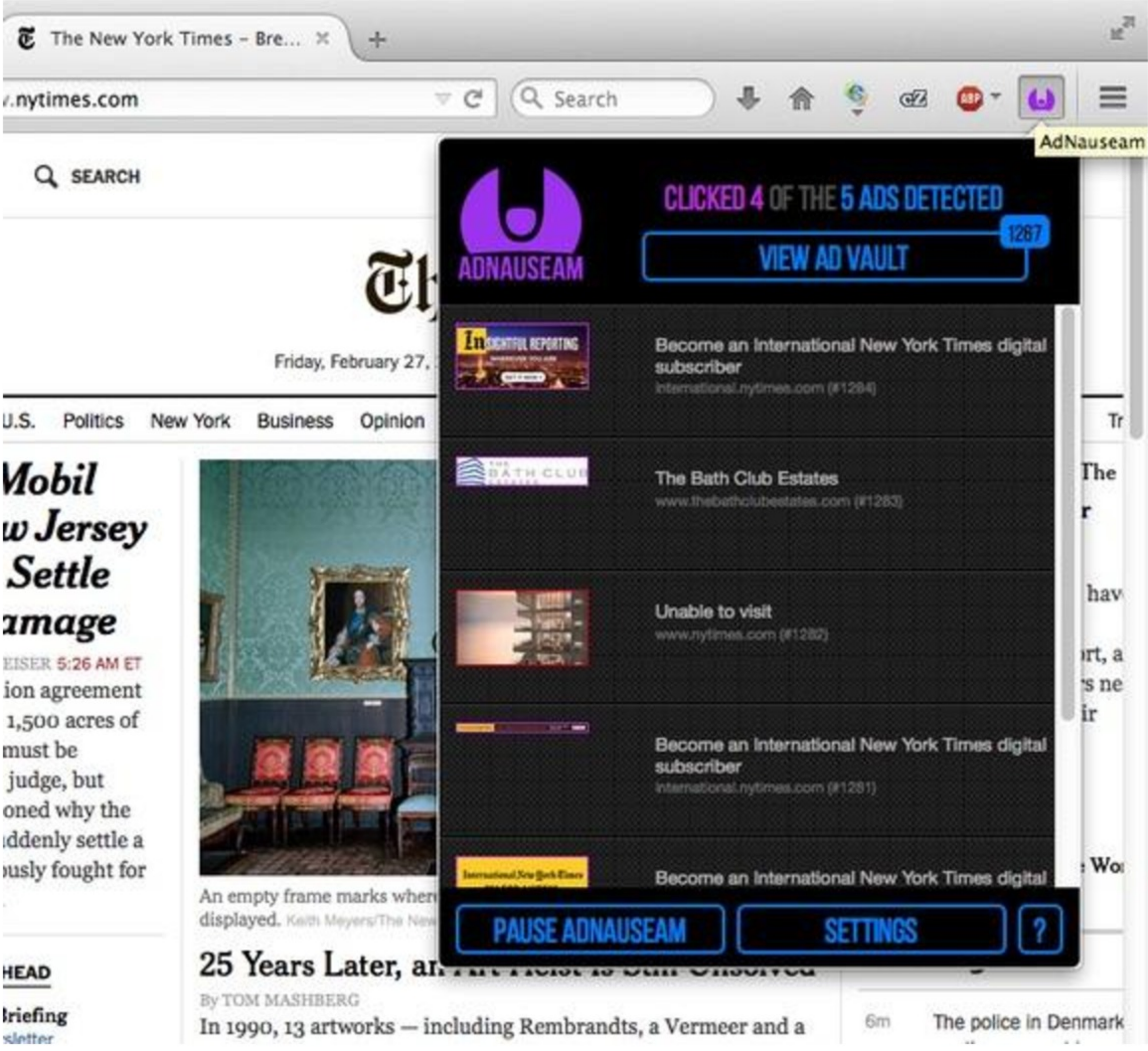
 CORIN FAIFE
Jan 13 2017, 8:00pm



For two years the AdNauseam extension helped desktop Chrome users obscure their ad profile—until Google disabled it last week.

What happens when one of the giants of the modern internet decides that your product affects its business model? The debate came to the fore again last week when Google removed AdNauseam, an anti-tracking browser extension, from the Chrome Web Store.

AdNauseam is built on the principles that Helen Nissenbaum, professor of Media, Culture and Communication and Computer Science at NYU and a co-creator of the extension, detailed in her book *Obfuscation*: in addition to hiding ads from the user, it also clicks every ad link in the background, creating a fog of fake data which confuses attempts to build a profile of the user's habits. Released in 2014, the extension was fully operational until the end of 2016, but according to AdNauseam has been unavailable for download from the Chrome Web Store since the start of 2017, with previously installed copies automatically deactivated in the Chrome browser.



AdNauseam (picture here in Firefox) sends ad networks junk data by randomly "clicking" ads. Image: Screenshot/AdNauseam

With Chrome accounting for 54 percent share of the desktop browser market as of late 2016, Google controls the channel through which the majority of global desktop internet users access the web, which is why its stance on users' right to opt out of tracking has such large implications. In a Skype call, Nissenbaum said:

"What many people don't understand is that companies like Google and Apple—who are really gatekeepers to an enormous amount of cultural and political activity—may be reasonably benevolent at the moment... but because of how our system of regulation is set up, they still have complete freedom about who they decide to let on or kick off their respective platforms."

In the desktop market, it should be noted that internet users do have a greater ability to move outside of the Google/Apple stack—browsers like Firefox or Brave also ad blocking and anti-tracking functionality—although where smartphones are concerned, it's harder to download software outside of the official app stores.

As far as ad blockers go, tension with Google isn't new: in early 2013 the company removed several ad blocking apps from the Play Store for Android (Adblock Plus returned two years later in the form of a dedicated web browser). But where Chrome for the desktop is concerned, hugely popular extensions like AdBlock, Adblock Plus, and uBlock Origin (which AdNauseam is based upon) remain readily available, raising questions over why AdNauseam's tactics have left it specifically targeted for removal—a point which Google has been less than clear about. An email from the Web Store, forwarded by Nissenbaum to Motherboard, gives a stock response:

Your item did not comply with the following section of our policy: An extension should have a single purpose that is clear to users. Do not create an extension that requires users to accept bundles of unrelated functionality, such as an email notifier and a news headline aggregator.

Google did not reply to Motherboard's request for comment on the removal of AdNauseam.

The real issue, many would argue, is a conflict of interest: Google wants to be responsive to the requests of its users by giving them the functionality they want—here, a web browser with the ability to install a variety of extensions—, up until the point that these functions begin to impact its profit margin. And since developers don't have any specific right to have these products hosted on Google's platform, once the decision to block an app or extension is made it can be difficult to appeal.

"Today it's your art/privacy tool, tomorrow it's your photo collection, or maybe your password manager," said AdNauseam's designer Mushon Zer-Aviv in an email. "Google should be frank about its policy, that browsing the web through Chrome is browsing the web under Google's corporate interest censorship."

With Google yet to offer a response, the exact reason for AdNauseam's removal can't be confirmed. At present though, Chrome users can still run the AdNauseam extension by manually installing a zip file in developer mode, or switch to another browser instead. It remains to be seen whether Google will reverse the decision and reinstate it to the Web Store, but in the meantime, as the developers point out, it still works great in Firefox.

M

Image: [Evan Lome/Shutterstock](#)