



PERSUASION

How a privacy advocate plans to corrupt online advertisers' data

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Advertisers are **watching you**.

Where there used to be a limited number of TV channels or publications that people looked at, the Web has explosively expanded the media world. Consumers’ attention is divided. The answer, for marketers having a harder time getting the message out, is to make ads more targeted. That means consumer data is a **valuable commodity**.

It also means that there has been a backlash, with privacy advocates **raising concerns** about how the use of personal information is being policed. The industry has tried to reassure people by offering them more information on how they are tracked online, and how they can opt out.

Those who are creeped out by seeing the same ad for boots everywhere they go online, just because they browsed for boots, have installed ad-blocking technology in their Web browsers. Last year, one gaming website did an analysis and found that almost **half of readers** were blocking ads. And **research** has shown that news stories about government surveillance – such as the Edward Snowden revelations – have made people more concerned about their online privacy.

Some are going a step further, arguing that the best response is to corrupt the data. A new browser extension called **AdNauseam** will launch next week at the Digital Labor conference at the New School in New York. The idea: Advertisers want our data? Let’s give them bad data. The program works in the background of a Web browser, clicking on ads indiscriminately and boggling the information that ad networks collect.

Mushon Zer-Aviv, a designer and academic and one of the creators of AdNauseam, spoke to The Globe and Mail from his home in Israel.

Why did you decide to make this?

The background for this project is the frustration that we have with the privacy issues surrounding ad networks, and the way they collect and sell profiles based on our browsing habits. Practically every ad is watching us, whether we interact with it or not. It has become a surveillance market. ... You can say plenty about these long legal documents, where you have to click “I agree.” We don’t even have that with ad networks. We haven’t agreed to anything.

How will it work?

It is using a tactic called “data obfuscation.” Helen Nissenbaum, a New York University professor and one of the leading scholars on digital privacy, has written about obfuscation as a strategy, and AdNauseam is following this approach. Rather than trying to find a way to avoid our data being tracked, let’s make this data disappear within a huge pile of noise. If we click every ad that we come across, our profiles become really, really hard to decipher. We’re giving the trackers more than they’ve ever wanted. Flooding them with data, to the level of making the data unusable. ... In 2006, Helen and Daniel [Howe, co-creators of AdNauseam] created **TrackMeNot**, another browser extension that keeps searching in the background, so your actual search queries [on Google, etc.] are obfuscated by many random queries. This is a new project along that line.

This sounds similar to the pervasive problem of “click fraud” in advertising: Malicious software is installed on people’s computers and uses “bots” to pretend to look at or click on ads that no human has actually seen. Then, the creators make money by selling ads on sites that are getting gangbusters traffic. The traffic, though, is fake. The industry is very concerned about this.

There is a correlation with botnets. What we’re doing is not click fraud. We are not trying to gain anything out of this financially. This is something we’re losing money on. I really think there is no way to monetize it. This is kind of a counterbusiness plan. We see it as an activist project. There’s no law on the Internet that says you should only click an ad if you are genuinely interested in buying the product.

Everyone hates ads. But at the same time, so much of what we see online is free because publishers make money selling ads. Many in the ad industry argue that this is a fair exchange.

If they rented me an apartment, would I have no say about the terms? How many rooms do I have, what is the height of the ceiling, do I have a running faucet? This is a ridiculous claim. This is a completely one-directional relationship. They’ve decided that this is the model that makes sense to them. They’ve decided what is the price we’re going to pay. And they’ve decided that they are not going to take our concerns seriously. Because they can.

Surveys have shown that many consumers are okay with advertisers collecting some information about them, as long as they receive something of value in return: ads that are relevant to them, for example, or better deals, or even payment. Are people not worried enough?

It’s a tough question.

It’s really hard to understand the age of data that we’re stepping into. Even the very technological among us find it hard to imagine the scope and the depth of the data being collected on us, and the implications.

As much as the Web and the technology industry in general prides itself on being very creative, and daring, and so-called “disruptive,” what we’re seeing is a system that would bar any type of creativity.

Because if you cannot contextualize your privacy expectations, and if you have to act within the assumption that everything you do will be scrutinized, you won’t try anything. That puts you at risk.

This is what [Google executive chairman] Eric Schmidt has said: If you don’t want to make something public, don’t do it in the first place. [In 2009, Mr. Schmidt said in a CNBC **interview**: “If you have something that you don’t want anyone to know, maybe you shouldn’t be doing it in the first place.”] This sentiment is so dangerous.

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