Summary 9:
Internet Advertising

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Stephen Wicker and Kolbeinn Karlsson outline how internet advertising is delivered to people online, how ad blocking technology works, and what the legal and ethical challenges to its use are. It's established that using ad blockers is not considered a legal breach of the implied in fact contract. Three ethical frameworks are used to judge the ethicality of ad blocking, where the utilitarian and virtue ethics deem it ethical and contractualism less so. Wicker and Karlsson suggest that the infrastructure used to deliver online content can be repurposed to fully resolve the ethical questions of ad blocking.

When browsing sites on the internet, a person might visit a webpage that offers free content. However, the publisher can only do so because they get revenue by placing advertisements alongside the content. To deliver these advertisements, the web browser loads the HTML and sends a HTTP request for advertisements from certain URLs.One method used by ad blockers is URL blacklisting in which the browser is prevented from sending HTTP requests to advertising related URLs. Another method of blocking advertisements created by the Electronic Frontier Foundation prevents tracking and identification of a user, thus blocking ads from being delivered. Prior to discussing the ethicality of ad blocking, the question of its legality is brought up.

Opponents to ad blocking argue that doing so breaches an implied in fact contract. The contract states that it is necessary to show: an unambiguous offer, unambiguous acceptance, mutual intent to be bound, and consideration. This standard is not met as consumers of online content are rarely told precisely what is going to be loaded into his or her Web browser, and what is expected in return. As such, the offer is ambiguous. Secondly, there isnt proof of unambiguous acceptance, as made clear by the popularity of ad blockers which indicate that most consumers do not want to see the ads. With the question of the legality of ad blocking resolved, Wicker and Karlsson discuss the ethical implications of blocking ads.

One ethical framework used to judge ad blocking is the utilitarian approach which defines ethicality based on what creates the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people. Because the largest group of people are the ad blocker users, and because these individual do not mind the decreased quality

of free content, blocking ads makes the greatest number of people happy. From this perspective, ad blocking technology is ethical. Another ethical approach is contractualism, which takes into consideration the well-being of all parties involved. Ad blocking technology deprives publishers of advertising revenue, resulting in a scenario where not all parties are content. A solution based on Contractualism entails creating an agreement which satisfies the needs of all relevant groups.

Lastly, virtue ethics defines something as ethical when its desirable, good or morally worthwhile in life and as the values should we pursue for ourselves and others. Advertising is, at its best, something that shows little concern for knowledge, freedom, and autonomy of consumers. At worst, advertising technology actively subverts the values that make life desirable and good. As such, by the standard of virtue ethics, advertising is unethical; ad blocking represents the attempt to mitigate it.

Wicker and Karlsson suggest that to engender ethicality into advertising systems, Internet consumers should be given the opportunity to opt into advertising. By letting users make an informed and unforced decision to receive advertising, there is the opportunity to makes advertisements more effective by allowing people to tailor the ads the want to receive. The delivery mechanism of advertisements could support such a change leaving both the advertiser and Internet users content about the interactions taking place online. Such a solu-

tion would be wise given that while ad blocking is not illegal or fully unethical, it still has the opportunity to become more ethical, thereby ensuring that the needs of everyone are more or less looked after.