USC Annenberg Lab Ad Transparency Report

Fifth Edition

June 12th 2013

This is the fifth in the ongoing series of Annenberg Innovation Lab's Ad transparency report. Same as the previous editions, this version draws from dataset taken from one month of observation of the top 500 URLs with the most Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA) takedowns as supplied by Google's Transparency Report. Together with the previous four editions, this report demonstrates both stability and change among advertisers serving non-DMCA compliant websites.

For the month of May the top ten advertising networks on illicit file sharing sites are as follows:

1. Propellerads
2. ExoClick
3. Admxr
4. Wigetmedia
5. Adcash
6. Sumotorrent
7. Adtransfer
8. Zedo (Newcomer)
9. Adexprt (Newcomer)
10. Infolinks

From this month's findings, Propellerads once again retained the number one position with Exoclick holding steady at number two. Wigetmedia remains on the list as number three, as well as Admxr who moved up to the fourth place from eighth in the previous month. Adtransfer, which first appeared in the February edition, came back in May and is holding the seventh position in ranking. In this month's report, Zedo and Adexprt are newcomers, which haven't previously appeared on the report. Adcash, AdMxr and Infolinks have maintained their positions in the ranking.

The one really striking new development in the Ad Piracy world is the decision by Bit Torrent to sell ads on its uTorrent Platform. According to Bit Torrent, the uTorrent client is serving over five billion ads every month. While most of these ads are for Poker software or other non-branded

companies, if major brands start using the platform, uTorrent would certainly move to the top of our survey of brand advertising on Pirate sites.

Brands

While display advertisements provide important funding for content producers and DMCA compliant distributors they can also subsidize illicit file sharing websites. Compounding this problem is the opaque nature of on-demand bidding and ad placement which means brands that *do not* support illicit file-sharing can come to have adverts placed on non-DMCA compliant websites.

In an effort to capture the extent of this process a team at the Innovation Lab coded a sample of screenshots in order to identify major brands whose ads have appeared on file-sharing sites, with advertisements linked to the following brands appearing on the sampled URLs. This is only a sample and is not meant to indicate which brands appear most often on infringing sites.

Ad Council	LG
Allstate	Life Lock
Amazon	Loft
AT&T	Lysol
Best Western	Microsoft
Blackberry	Nextag
Capital One	Nobu Hotel-Caesars Palace
Clear	Southwest Airlines
Deer Park	Spanx
Evony	Strayer University
Flash Player HD	Travelocity
Gameforce	Turbo Tax
Goodyear	USAGC
GoTo Meeting	Verizon
GovMint.com	Video Performer
Gumdrop Pacifier	Visa
Host Palace	Western Union
Host Palace Internet Service	Yahoo Sports
ILivid	ZipCar
Keller	7-11

Besides these major brands numerous small businesses and services also appeared within the sample.

These results were obtained using a cookie-free browser. We stress that they should not be taken as representative of all brands which appear on file-sharing sites. Users may see different

products or services depending on a number of factors including previous browsing history and opt-ins to data exchanges or tracking services.

Methodology

Ad networks identified in this report were isolated by scraping and examining samples of HTML and Javascript code taken from URLs identified by the Google Transparency Report. Drawing from a sample of sub-URLs within each site the raw code of each page was examined and compared against a database of known advertiser tags to determine which networks were involved in a specific site. Visual corroboration was provided by capturing screenshots displaying the advertisements in question, these screenshots also formed the basis for the aforementioned brand identification process.

In some instances the presence of ad code does not always mean that the network is actively serving advertisements to the URL in question. In an attempt to address this situation and to ensure that our methodology discriminates between advertising tags and similarly structured analytic tools, the Innovation Lab has been and continues to be willing to engage in dialogue with members of the advertising community in order to ensure the ongoing fairness of the report. This serves as a corroboration to the code analysis which ensures that the networks identified are actively serving adverts to the URL in question.

Going Forward
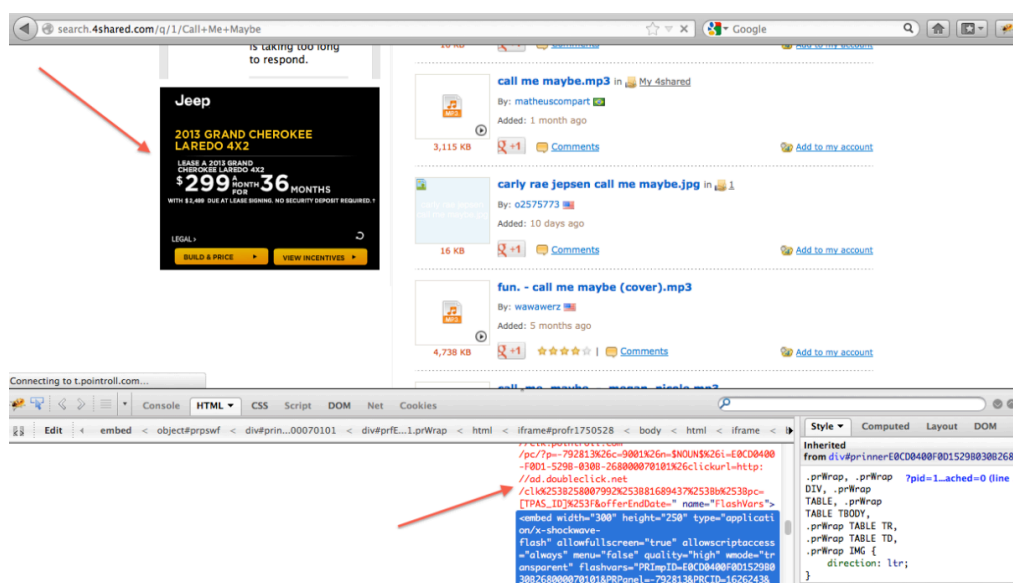
Given the complex nature of online advertisements and the fluid nature of the marketplace the Innovation Lab aims to continue publication of these reports for the foreseeable future. It is our

hope that this information will serve three distinct purposes. Given that many advertising networks have a ban on illicit file-sharing written into their terms of use this report should serve as a mechanism to highlight possible violations among clients. For those seeking to purchase advertisements the Ad Report is also a helpful guide to determine which networks serve sites that align with a client's needs. Finally for the general public the report serves as an educational opportunity, demonstrating the complexity of the online advertising business and as a tool for understanding the role which ads place in content creation and dissemination. In order to strive towards these goals the lab welcomes any and all dialogue with advertisers, networks or members of the public who are seeking clarification or more information about the report or other projects hosted within the organization.

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