The Amount of Questionable Online Traffic Will Blow Your Mind

Posted by **Derek A. Lackey, Editor** / December 05, 2017

A few weeks ago, Lindsay Buescher, senior manager, analytics at Carat,read an article on Adweek.com about a company called FreeStreams.comthat was pumping up its traffic by enticing Web users into accidentally visiting via hidden links on sites that house pirated content. As it happened, one of her agencys clients, Red Bull, was a FreeStreams advertiser. Buescher was determined to find out what was going on. Her team discovered Red Bull video ads were running on FreeStreams through two different networks, including ValueClick, a publicly traded company. (ValueClick says it has since stopped working with FreeStreams.)

That wasnt something Buescher had run into much. She kept digging. After about three weeks, Carat was blacklisting 77 more sites for Red Bull beyond FreeStreams. Many of the sites didnt actually sell pre-roll ads, which was what the client was supposedly paying for. Some were merely gaming sites with interstitials. Some were sites that didnt even exist or were blocked by her company. Others ran video inventory continuously. Many were simply a case of fraud, she found.

In the end, Bueschers efforts resulted in not only a lot of legwork but also a $150,000 refund for the client. Thats hardly enough to set the industry on a different course, but to Buescher it said something. Red Bull is spending 90 percent of its online budget direct with publishers, she says. Imagine if they werent.

It might not matter either way. Thats because the online ad industry is facing aswelling crisis, one defined by fake traffic, bogus publishers and invisible Web visitors, a trend first investigated by Adweek in an online story, Meet the Most Suspect Publishers on the Web, published March 19 of this year. Once thought contained to ahandful of rogue playersthat had figured out how to exploit ad exchanges, bogus ad inventory, as it turns out, is rampant. In fact, according to numerous sources across the ecosystem, fake traffic is essentially systemic to online advertisingits part of how the business works. And a slew of top companies are involved in thiswhether wittingly or not. You see it with almost any partner you work with, as Alan Silverberg, media platforms director at Moxie Interactive, puts it. From AOL and Yahoo to Facebook, from pure-play partners and the network space to portals. We cant stop it, he says, referring to the preponderance of questionable traffic. Though for many publishers, it may be a question of whether they cant stop it, or wont. Adds Buescher: Its the whole business. We see this even with direct-to-publisher deals. Its really the media planners fault. But when you start seeing partners breaking contracts no one has time to monitor 3,500 sites when they are just cranking, cranking, cranking out plans.

Of course, there are plenty of those who think this is being blown out of proportion. Some in the online ad world see bots, fake traffic and the like as a manageable nuisance, hardly a crisis. But the ranks of the alarmed are growing by the day.

During a recent interview, online ad veteran Wenda Millard, president of Medialink, made the bold claim that a quarter of the online ad market is fraudulent. What we have found is the devaluation of digital media is causing us to lose about 25 percent of the roughly $30 billion that is being spent, she reported. Its stolen [ad revenue]. In defining fraud, Millard lumped together piracy, nonviewable ads, ads stacked on top of one another, inappropriate content and, of course, deliberate malicious behavior, in her analysis. In most peoples wildest dreams, they wouldnt imagine how much [questionable traffic] there is, she says. People should be very, very worried.

Lets start with individual publishers. A group of Web-traffic analysts that did not want to be named for fear of pointing a finger at potential clients has identified a dozen well-known sites that exhibit questionable traffic patterns, including Break, CollegeHumor, Complex, Crackle, Entrepreneur and Totalbeauty. One source of information the group examined was comScores cross-visiting reports, which revealed that each site on the list has a high percentage of visitors who also visit sites suspected of living on bot traffic.

For example, Break, CollegeHumor, Complex, Gamespot and Crackle all have a high cross-traffic index with sites like Mommyhotspot, featuring parenting content, as well as Missoandfriends and Dreammining, a gaming hub aimed at young girls, plus a variety of sites frequently blacklisted by ad buyers. According to Augustine Fou, founder of the Marketing Science Consulting Group, Dreammining raises many questions. Using Alexa data, Fou found Dreamminings top search term to be mining of selena, which exhibits zero traffic on Google, he points out. The site also has a high at-work audience that doesnt match its demo, while the second- and third-largest domains driving traffic to the site are possible click farms, he says.

Fou also looked at Mommyhotspot, which had unidentifiable domains driving traffic and barely any inbound links, per his analysis.

The overall pattern Fou and others examinedsites like Dreammining and Mommyhotspot sharing audience with Break and Crackledoes not in itself directly implicate these branded sites in anything scandalous, though it might strike some as unexpected that a group of guys websites share traffic with several young girls sites, let alone girls sites possibly employing click farms.

But a deeper examination is revealing...

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