

Things Don't "Ad" Up

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Over the last few weeks I have addressed licensing and usability issues with GNU/Linux desktops. One of the points raised against my arguments had to do with the need for companies providing Free Software to make money, namely, the need for Trolltech to make money. It is with the greatest irony that I now find myself discussing one of the new features in KDE 3.5 (although not exclusive to KDE) intended squarely at preventing some from receiving their dues.

For my entire time in the GNU/Linux world, I've made it a habit not to run pre-beta code. I just do not get along well with it. I remember countless hours downloading KDE CVS code, and it usually got me nowhere. That's not unexpected, after all, if bleeding edge development releases worked perfectly, why would organizations ever bother to release "final" versions? I say this in passing to note that I am commenting on what I read about the upcoming KDE 3.5 from Jure Repinc's preview of a few new features, and not from my own first hand experience.

After seeing his preview of "AdBlocK," I did some more research to confirm that this was indeed included in the official code of Konqueror, which, to the best I could discern, is, in fact, the case. This is singularly disturbing. While Firefox has become known for its AdBlock plug-in, this feature has remained outside of the core, official distribution. Considering the ethical ramifications of advertising blocking software, this is how it should be.

Before discussing that further, I note that KDE is not alone in doing this, so I do not want to single them out. GNOME may very well be planning to include something similar. Moreover, companies like Symantec have offered Internet utility suites in recent years that block ads; in fact, at least some editions of Symantec Internet Security blocks ads by default. This is morally wrong.

Go back to the days of the original Napster for a moment, please. In those days, as now with other similar P2P services, such as KaZaa, the argument is made that since digital copying does not cost anything to the producer, it is not really stealing. I have a view on this issue, but that is beyond the scope of this article. Unlike music piracy (or sharing, if you prefer), blocking ads - the form of payment on many web sites - is not just depriving an entity of profit, but also actually causing it to lose money. While many outside of web publishing do not know this, content providers pay a specific amount per gigabyte of data transfers per month. On busy sites, this can add up to a substantial cost. Every visitor's downloads of text, images and so on, costs money to providers, such as Open for Business. We, as the publishers, then use that money to offset the cost of bandwidth.

Unlike pop-up and pop-under ads (not to mention malware), the standard ads that ad blockers seek to stop from appearing do not intrude on the user. If you do not like the way a site looks, it is as easy as clicking the back button in your browser to escape the tackiness and move on to something better. Nothing lost for the user, or the content producer.

Some have argued that it wastes their bandwidth to download ads they do not want. This is missing the point. In most cases, at least in the United States, the user has an unmetered plan, and therefore it costs nothing extra to download the ads. Moreover, even if it did cost more, it is the web surfer's decision to begin the transaction with the web site. Yes, you are paying for your Internet access, but that is just like paying for gas to drive to the store. It costs me money to drive to the store, but that does not mean I can grab some merchandise and walk out without paying for it "because it cost me money to be here."

It is ironic that some of the same people who will slam this author for critiquing KDE's dependence on Qt, by suggesting I am cruelly arguing against Trolltech people making a living, will almost certainly defend the use of tools that not only prevent content providers from making their living, but actually causes the content providers to spend money providing services to those people who fail to pay the "cost."

I recommended an amicable solution to the KDE/Qt problem: I did not suggest KDE do anything to illegally or immorally harm Trolltech, but rather suggested maybe the two should part ways. You can agree or disagree with whether that is a good idea, but either way, I am not advocating anything immoral. Finding alternatives is exactly the thing I also advise here. Those unwilling to pay the price of free content providers ought to seek alternatives: either non-commercial entities providing the information that is desired, or perhaps finding a subscription service to buy the information from.

Simply removing the ads - regardless of the tool used - is only robbing the content provider by taking something that costs money and refusing to pay the price. It is immoral, and I'm not so sure it shouldn't be illegal too.

Think about that before you enable ad-blocking software on any OS or in any browser. How would you feel if you were the one providing the content?

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