

Internet giants wage war on pop-up ad blockers

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Google has launched an alternative to web advertising - called Google Contributor it charges users between 1 and 3 dollars a month to be spared ads, with the fee going to the affected websites

Imagine being able to surf the web and watch videos online without having to swat away pesky pop-up ads?

These days you can, thanks to small programs like Adblock Plus that are available free for download and that arm your browser to defend against

ads.

Flashing banner ads, "pre-roll" ads (short ads that play before a video), pop-up notices that cover the whole screen—few of them make it past ad blocking software.

In the beginning, the applications acted under the radar, and were known mainly only to young people or the really tech-savvy. But now they're catching on.

Adblock Plus has nearly five million active users in France, with a further two million in the United Kingdom and 1.5 million in Spain.

Worldwide, they have amassed about 144 million active users, up 69 per cent in a year, according to a September report from Adobe software developer and PageFair, a company that helps publishers see which ads are being blocked.

Depending on the website, the percentage of viewers equipped with ad-blocking software ranges from 10 to 60 per cent

Internet users may dream about ad-free surfing, but for advertisers and [web publishers](#), who rely on ads to fund content, ad-blocking applications are the stuff of nightmares.

"This is no small matter; it affects all publishers. Our members have lost an estimated 20 to 40 per cent of their advertising revenue," Laure de Lataillade, CEO of GESTE, an association of web publishers in gaming, media, music and other domains, told AFP.

The growing popularity of ad blockers comes as companies plough more and more money into internet advertising.

A quarter of the 545 billion dollars spent on global advertising this year went on digital ads.

To protect that investment, a group of publishers in France, including Google, Microsoft and Le Figaro newspaper, have threatened legal action against the developers of ad blocking software.

In Germany, too, publishers are alarmed at the success of the anti-ad workarounds. "There have already been some companies that have lodged a formal complaint," Oliver von Wersche, head of digital marketing at Gruner + Jahr, publishers of Stern news magazine and several other leading titles, told AFP.



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'Unauthorised access'

Websites, meanwhile, are experimenting with a range of strategies to placate ad-addled audiences.

French sports daily l'Equipe's website is using a carrot-and-stick approach.

Users with ad-blocking software who attempt to watch videos receive the message: "Unauthorised access. L'Equipe.fr is funded by advertising, which allows us to offer you free content."

Once they deactivate the software they can gain access to the video.

"We have to find a viable economic model. Either the user pays for a premium model or he accepts advertising," said Xavier Spender, deputy managing director of L'Equipe group.

Sean Blanchfield, CEO of PageFair, compared the campaign against ad blockers to the music industry's takedown of the file-sharing program Napster a decade ago.

"They should instead learn from the Napster story that the users will ultimately get what they want," said Blanchfield, whose company works with publishers to devise ads that "respect users' privacy".

For Helene Chartier, head of French web developers' union SRI, the big mistake was to let users believe the internet was free in the first place, considering "there was never a problem with ads on television or radio."

Industry professionals said the growing rejection of ads—and the shrinking space for them on mobile devices—should spur advertisers to come up with less intrusive messages.

In a sign of how seriously the problem is being taken in the industry, Google has launched an alternative to web advertising.

Called Google Contributor it charges users between 1 and 3 dollars a month to be spared [ads](#), with the fee going to the affected websites.

In levying the fee Google urges users to "support" their favourite websites.

The idea is currently being tested on around a dozen US websites, including The Onion, Science Daily and Mashable.

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