

An imaginary internet promotional paradigm?

WHEN I OPENED MY EARTHLINK browser this morning, it told me I could remove my wrinkles for only five bucks and tried to sell me a Kia. I went to Dictionary.com and a video banner for the new Pirates of the Caribbean film had to load and play while another ad showed a fat belly animate to flat before I was allowed look up “exasperated.” I went to RottenTomatoes.com praying the new Pirates movie was failing at the box office as just recompense for the film’s marketing staff wasting my time only to be greeted by panel adverts for Pepperdine University and Maxwell House Coffee.

I guess I should blame the old Burma Shave ads which once dotted the roadways of America early in the last century for starting it all. Their use of open county roads to sell their product to the random public was clever and gave travelers something amusing to look at amid the endless rows of corn stalks. But Burma Shave’s novel idea soon led other advertisers to create massive billboard blight. Consistent with history’s wont to repeat itself, a blight now similarly obscures the internet landscape in the form of banner and pop-up ads, with Flash animation and digital video adding motion and load time to these intrusive distractions. Meanwhile, according to a 2009 study by Microsoft, 97% of all email has devolved into spam.

Pop-up blockers and spam filters do little to control the tsunami of advertising fodder crashing upon and clogging now vital electronic communication pathways. At any rate, I’m not on a quest to reduce my wrinkles, don’t need a Kia, the new Pirates movie was already on my Netflix list weeks ago, my belly is 53 years old and as flat as it is going to be, it is safe to assume I will never attend Pepperdine, and I buy my coffee at Costco. In short, all that bandwidth and my time were completely wasted, as was the money spent by each of these advertisers. The only thing these ads accomplished was making the pages I viewed annoyingly slow to load or to freeze up, forcing me to reload. Amped up, wired, and wireless, advertisers are going full-bore on the net, gobbling up more than just the lion’s share of available bandwidth. They are apparently being sold as the internet business—the *only* way to make all that free content out there pay. A homemade wacky viral YouTube used to only get the maker some “human interest” press coverage. Now it can theoretically yield a tidy income via click-through kick-backs, thanks to the advertisers.

Internet advertising revenues hit \$7.3 billion for the first quarter of 2011, so it’s boom time for these advertising brokers. This much is clear. But I am curious about the other side of the equation, the one that shows any actual sales resulting from all this advertising. To me, these ads seem as likely to be effective as stuffing them in bottles and throwing them into the sea. And where is this advertising glut ultimately leading? Observe the fate of MySpace. When I joined that community back in 2004, I’d just completed my first novel and was in search of a place to promote it with a writer’s blog. Their free interface was simple to use and an easy way to communicate with like-minded people. Any advertising done on MySpace back then was of the grass-roots kind: independent authors, garage bands, gallery painters, actors, and craftspeople. Little did I know I would soon become an active member in a lively community of writers, artists, and just plain interesting folks, with many of whom I remain close friends to this day. Early MySpace was my favorite social site bar none, but nostalgically so.

In 2008 Facebook overtook MySpace, in part because MySpace began a push toward heavy mainstream commercialism and Facebook was, at that point, ad-free. This confluence of events has

turned MySpace’s once thriving grass-roots community into the virtual ghost town it is today. All the new pop-ups, Flash banners, and mainstream media tie-ins or “synergy,” as the suits call it (it is currently owned by Rupert Murdoch’s News Corp) have smothered the garage bands, independent artists, writers, and the general public there. It currently seems to only serve as a way for one branch of News Corp to advertise to another, and with all their ads to each other, it now takes centuries for my own page to load. And the only friend requests I receive on MySpace these days are from overly buxom young women, FOX studio-controlled movie fan pages, and a-list FOX celebs with something to sell. It is hard to put a value on this site anymore, but it seems most in the business community agree MySpace is worth less than Mr. Murdoch paid for it.

Facebook has remained moderately advertising-free, but their net worth has Goldman Sachs valuing them at \$50 billion. But based on what? Speculation has it that they are making money by selling information—its members’ information, your and my information—to whomever is willing to pay, which is most likely (you guessed it) advertisers who are feeding your interests, statistics, location, shopping habits, etc., into those “smart” search engines so you can receive personally targeted ads, spam, and promos. Funny thing about target-advertising based on internet usage: most things I look up on line are done so while researching odd topics for my speculative fiction novels. And, I spent this past year helping meet my elderly father’s needs and care via the net. Does this mean I’ll soon be peppered with ads for adult diapers, Dentu Creme, alien abduction therapists, AARP, cheerleading camps, opera recordings, tofu products, clean-lab supply companies, and pom-pom manufacturers? And does any of this seem “smart” to you?



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