

Over-fishing the sea of secondary attention



This cartoon by **Mike Keefe** cleverly represents an economic theory named the tragedy of the commons, which was first proposed in an 1833 essay by Victorian economist William Forster Lloyd entitled **Two lectures on the checks to population**. In his essay, Lloyd described the effects of unregulated grazing on public lands colloquially called “the commons” in the British Isles. The tragedy, according to Lloyd, is that farmers can’t self-regulate their grazing, resulting in overgrazing the land such that this public asset is depleted to the point where everyone loses. This is tragic because it seems preventable, if only... If only what?

The online publishing world is in a similarly tragic state today which I think can best be explained through the lens of Lloyd’s economic theory. Most of the web and indeed most of media from television to magazines is funded by advertising. The fundamental value proposition of all publisher-based advertising throughout all of history has been and still is the same: Publishers give their audience something they want (content), and in exchange their audience gives the publisher some of what I’ll call “secondary attention” by seeing ads. Since I am neologizing here, I’ll define secondary attention as the unintentional act of focusing on something other than that in which you are primarily or initially interested. This is really the goal of online advertising; you arrived on a website with the intention of reading an article about hiking trails in your area, and maybe you did find a new trail but advertising hopes you also came away buying a pair of hiking boots. Where advertising gets in trouble is when that pair of boots starts stalking you around the web.

I’ll further define the concept of collective secondary attention as a limited resource that emerges out of our individual secondary attentions, and is analogous to the grassy commons of the British Isles or to the fish in the sea. There is only a limited amount of attention that publishers can catch in the sea of collective secondary attention. Today, we are suffering because collectively publishers have overfished this sea, like the farmers who Lloyd originally contemplated in his essays, and as a result they have depleted the stock of collective secondary attention.

Imagine what would happen if some fishes responded to overfishing by evolving an ability to avoid fishnets, what then? **Recent scientific research has shown that some fishes are actually genetically evolving a capability to evade fishnets.** Fishes are inventing their own “ad blocking”!

Indeed if you **look at a recent poll** about why people use ad blockers, the top reasons people list for protecting their secondary attention with ad blockers are that they find ads too intrusive, frustrating, and obnoxious. Publishers overfished the sea of secondary attention resulting in the rise of adblocking.



Users list other reasons they use ad blockers, including the need for faster / cheaper browsing, reduced threat from malvertising, and privacy concerns. I lump these concerns also into the broad bucket of secondary attention, because all of these things demand a user’s attention, though not for the reasons originally intended.

The economic theory named the tragedy of the commons explains the state of online advertising today with respect to the blocked web. Adtoniq believes the only way out here is a strategy that rewards publishers who do not over-fishing with increased revenue, while penalizing those who do over-fish with decreased revenue.