

## **Splogs + Scraping + AdSense = Fraud**

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The other day, an [article](#) appeared in Search Engine Journal suggesting webmasters monetize their sites using Google AdSense. While the article neglected to mention an alternative webmaster advertising program offered by Yahoo Search Marketing, the idea of using one's website as a commercial medium (if possible or practical) makes good sense and can provide a minor side-income. Such minor side-incomes are often the first ingredients in making the gravy craved by all small business owners.

Since the advent of Google's AdWords grassroots distribution program, AdSense, several webmasters have built businesses out of taking content off of other people's websites and using that content to build pages designed specifically to attract ad-clicks. As the average commission earned by sites running AdSense generated advertising is approximately \$20/month, webmasters working this type of scheme need to create hundreds, if not thousands of pages to make a living. In order to create those pages and attract ad-clicking visitors, content must be created, begged, borrowed, or most commonly, simply stolen. Known as [Splogs](#), these sites only exist to game Google in one way or another, mostly for money but also for increased search rankings or as a means of manipulating search spiders.

Splogs most often get their content by scraping, the process of sending an electronic copying bot to take everything it sees, recreating it on an unlimited number of instant documents. By running advertising generated through the AdSense program, the owners of the splogs make money when visitors click on the ads. In other words, literally millions of instant sites have sprung up over the past twelve months, most of which are free-hosted Blogs, containing content scraped out from the original sites.

Before continuing, I would like to make it clear that there are several publications that request permission to reprint content. That's ok. Chances are, this article is being read in one of those publications. Online business runs on such agreements.

Splogs are bad business and the practice is finally getting the notice it deserves. Several search heavyweights have weighed in on Splogs over the past two weeks and a flame-war (the virtual equivalent of fisticuffs) broke out between members of two well-known SEO/SEM forums. As a result, the practice of producing AdSense revenues from stolen content on spammy sites got a little bit harder, starting today.

[Matt Cutts](#), Google's [spam fighter and quality assurance czar](#), has taken an obvious and positive interest in Splogs. In the SEO/SEM community, Cutts' name is as widely known as Page, Brin, and even Gates' names are. Cutts is "the man" when it comes to explaining the state of Google's various indexes and how they work. He is referred to as the Chief Spam Fighter at Google. In a posting to his [Gagets, Google, and SEO](#) blog earlier today, Cutts invites Google users to report Splogs displaying AdSense driven advertising.

### ***"You see a low-quality site that is running AdSense***

*If you run across a site that you consider spammy and it has AdSense on it, click on the "Ads by Goooooogle" link and click "Send Google your thoughts on the ads you just saw". Enter the words **spamreport** and **jagger1** in the comments field."*

The name, "Jagger1" is the reference name given the Google algorithm update that is currently causing the present shuffling of Google's search results. (Please see today's Major Players section for more information on the Jagger Update.)

Splog fraud is a big problem for Google and a growing concern for the other major search advertising providers such as Yahoo Search Marketing, and MSN. It is also a problem for others working on the Internet. The way content is taken from one site and replicated to dozens of others can cause no end to technical and financial issues for honest webmasters. Content, incidentally, is not always limited to what the viewer sees on the screen. Stolen content often includes source-code and as anyone familiar with code can tell you, there's a lot of domain and document specific information embedded in source-code.

Over at [Search Engine Journal](#), a funny posting shows how one poorly executed scrape made an honest webmaster afraid of being branded a click-fraud artist by Google. After scraping the site, the splog-artist apparently forgot to remove the AdSense code from the stolen content. That's how the honest webmaster found out he had been stolen from. He was moved to contact Google before his AdSense account status was affected. If the webmaster hadn't been paying attention, he might have been badly branded by Google, burned by someone else's scam.

That's not the only way that scappers could adversely affect honest webmasters however. The content webmasters create, or have created for them, is the attraction that prompts visitors to their sites. Attracting lots of site visitors is a pretty important step to making money from AdSense or the Yahoo Publishing Network. If someone is stealing that content, they are also stealing potential visitors. For the webmaster, that content represents investment. For the content creator, it represents product. Either way, the scraping of content is theft.

The stolen product is then used to create what is essentially duplicate content on another site. Duplication of content can have an adverse effect on the search engine placement of all documents containing the similar items. Imagine losing your placements because someone else took the material you laboured over. Fortunately, Google's historic record of documents is fairly good at weeding through which source first displayed specific content.

Search engines have several other reasons to be concerned about splogs. As many of them are created using the free-blog software offered and hosted by most of the major search engines, the proliferation of so many splogs consumes a lot of resources. They also gum up search results with sites not actually relevant to search engine users. Lastly, they devalue the legitimate uses of blogs as communications and marketing tools, which might lead future blog readers or users away from the growing blogosphere. Citizen's publishing is seen as a major revenue source for both Google and Yahoo. Having invested so much time, energy and money into the establishment of blogs, the major search engines would be loath to let their investments go the way of the dodos without a fight.

Now that the web development community is talking about the issue in earnest, some forms of protections might evolve. As it stands currently, there is little a webmaster can do to protect his or her content from being stolen for profit. You can use [Copyscape](#) to see if your material has been nabbed but after doing that, there is little one can do except write angry letters to the thief and a lawyer.

Google is inviting users and webmasters to report splogs running AdSense whenever they are seen. In a just universe, not only would the AdSense accounts of those scappers be closed, their bank accounts would be emptied after Google sues them for fraud.

