

Saving the World with Opera 9

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We are all excited about broadband. Because we can get whatever we have wanted faster than previously possible, at least online.

There is a different aspect to broadband. While everyone's net speeds increase, one forgets that there is additional investment that goes into creating and maintaining this bandwidth. While creating bandwidth is a one-time affair of laying cables, maintaining it means using electricity to keep all the routers, switches, and servers humming.

Bandwidth is properly utilized only when it is being used for a desired purpose. Say you are downloading an application, a 100 MB one. You are aware of what is happening, and after the download you are happy to use the application. In this case, the bandwidth is being used for intended purposes and hence fulfills its *raison d'être*.

Now suppose after downloading the 100 MB file you realize that the actual application or whatever interests you is only 1 MB, and you were not aware of this before. In this case, bandwidth is not fulfilling its purpose. All the wheels that were turning to keep the net pumping have been for vain. What a waste of energy!

So what is the point and where does Opera come in?

While the example above is a rare case, a similar phenomenon occurs routinely, and we have grown blind to this. Other popular browsers like Firefox and IE have been conspiring to keep us in the dark. I am sure we all remember the time the graphics-laden tomshardware.com used to take to load over a 56kbps connection. With broadband this time is drastically cut, and we have ignored the fact that the amount of data has remained the same (or increased).

Firefox and IE just show you a progress bar to denote the page loading. Opera on the other hand throws a plethora of data at you. (For the rest to be comprehensible you need to be running Opera. Download it, it's only 4 MB, and it is the first step to saving the world). Visit tomshardware.com using Opera and watch the status bar come to life. You get info about the number of images on the site, and the number of images loaded, you get the total data that has been transferred, and the speed at which it is being transferred, and finally you get the URL from where the data is being transferred. You will be forced to rethink the entire page loading process once you are on Opera. The site will weigh in at about 250 KB, it will load about 30 images, and will connect to 5–6 sites (and download stuff from them) during the page

loading process. And the text that is relevant to us would be in the constricted column in the middle, that would take about 20 KB. Visit many tech sites and you will have a better understanding of what I am taking about. Some sites are such that they download 100 KB of data onto your PC and still do not show anything on the screen! Hell, what was the 100 KB all about? Ever been to ebay.in? I cringe everytime I have to login. That little box that contains just the fields to enter the username and password weighs in at 250 KB. Why?

The point I am trying to make is this. Unlike the 100 MB file you downloaded, these sites do not push equal stuff into your PC – atleast not at one time. A routine visit to ebay/toms, at 250KB per page (more if graphics are included) and 10 pages per visit is about 2.4 MB. And how many sites and pages do you visit every day? Like Spam, these unwelcome bits of data (which shall be referred to as SPAD) also are clogging the pipelines.

How can Opera 9 help us?

1. Disable loading of images. If the page make no sense without images, load selective images or all of them.
2. Some sites use flash ads that circumvent the image blocking. For that use the block content option in opera. This facility will block data from that point on.
3. Pop ups are already blocked, aren't they?
4. Disable Javascript. Gmail's script takes 150 KB. Without the script you get your messages in under 20 KB. Need to tweak settings? Enable javascript and reload page.
5. Use Esc key liberally. This stops the page from loading. Keep an eye on the status bar and if even after pushing in 100 KB there is nothing on the screen, press Esc. The page is too bloated. If this is a site you routinely visit then let it load once and cut it down to size using Opera's blocking tools. If you came to this page via google, go back to google and check some other site.
6. If bittorrent is your thing, Opera 9 incorporates a client.
7. Get an alternative view of the page. Opera allows a page to be displayed as the author intended it or as you wish. Resetting a page to your taste offers a different perspective.
8. Watch the URL. Hover over a link to see where the link takes you. Many links are misleading.

I prefer opera because of its extreme tweakability. Disabling images, javascript and blocking content takes a couple of clicks each, unlike in the other browsers. There are way too many customisations, that NFS players will feel at home (or challenged too).

There is one more step you can take to save the world, and that is to use a hosts file that blocks all known ad sites. Tomshardware loads stuff from ad.tomshardware.com among others. These images can be blocked from within Opera. But sites like fastclick.net which is not a site anyone visits, but is forced to download data from because the visited site links to it, can be blocked by modifying the hosts file.

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One such highly popular hosts file can be found here :
<http://www.mvps.org/winhelp2002/hosts.htm>. This list is exhaustive, but it needs to be updated. Keep an eye on the links that Opera shows when a page is loaded, find anything remotely irrelevant add it to the hosts file.

So how is all this saving the world? After doing all this you would have cut the data transfer by about 90% (I can attest to this figure.). Less data transfer for unwanted stuff means more bandwidth available for required stuff. People who are paying for every MB (like me) will see a drastic change in their bills and faster page loading (besides protecting their PC from malware). Also electricity required to keep all the equipment working is saved. Less electricity, means less fuel consumed. And all the wars in this world are being fought and will be fought over fuel. You have just saved the world (with a little help from Opera).

Share your thoughts on spad, or ideas on how to stop spad.

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