

# How the pandemic affected digital media quality in Europe—and how advertisers can mitigate brand risk

Article

The past 15 months have been tricky to navigate for digital advertisers. As the pandemic drove people to consume more digital content than ever and social justice movements permeated the news cycle, it became increasingly difficult to prevent ads from appearing next to undesirable content.

We spoke with Paul Nasse, managing director for Northern Europe at Integral Ad Science, about the changing digital media landscape and how advertisers can best navigate the rocky road of brand risk.

**In your latest Media Quality Report, brand risk increased in Europe in H2 2020. Why was that?**

There's an undeniable link between elevated brand risk last year and the turbulence caused by the global pandemic and social movements. The digital media landscape reflected this disruption, driving risk and boosting brand sensitivity around content appearing beside ads.

For example, brand risk levels for UK video ads rose in 3.2% on desktop display and reaching 8.0% for mobile web video in H2 2020 [up slightly from 7.8% in H2 2019]. This correlated with housebound consumers streaming more video content and a spike in ad impression volumes. The biggest driver of brand risk worldwide was adult content, while six in 10 risky UK impressions were associated with illegal drugs, alcohol, or violence.

**Might this have an impact on where advertisers are apportioning spend?**

Despite the general increase in brand risk, each brand has a different threshold. With the pandemic, for example, the majority of consumers consider COVID-19 adjacency desirable for health and pharma businesses, as well as government and nonprofit organizations. It's important to employ a more nuanced approach to content assessment.

UK digital ad spend has grown significantly this year, and advertisers have increased in confidence, through the rise in digital channels and strength in ecommerce. These trends will likely accelerate as lockdowns ease.

**How difficult is it to guard against the risks associated with advertising next to questionable content?**

Navigating brand risk is getting better with technology. It's true that the lockdown fueled digital consumption and higher content production than ever, at both the user-generated and publisher level. This increased volume makes ad misplacement more likely. But thanks to the

emergence of sophisticated and purpose-built analytical technologies, advertisers now have tools to instantly gain precise ad targeting techniques on a large scale.

With more accurate insight and granular categorization of online content, buyers now have better transparency and control over where they want their ads to appear. This means that they are well-equipped to navigate fast-moving news cycles and steer clear of content that doesn't align with their values or goals, without missing opportunities to reach relevant audiences. While benefiting from the halo effect of positive content association, this also maximizes yield for publishers with premium inventory.

### **What else can brands do to mitigate these various risks, and how can tech vendors/digital media owners help?**

First, it is always important to have brand-safety and -suitability measures in place. From the media side, publishers have worked incredibly hard to align with buy-side setups and deliver the impressions that brands and agencies demand. Brands must start by identifying what is suitable for them, and then push spend toward inventory that matches their risk parameters, in addition to staying away from unsuitable content. Working with the right partners across the ecosystem helps achieve this.

Second, transparency is key. Media buyers want to know where their ads are placed, what it costs, and what's wasted. With the continued growth of programmatic, solutions that help advertisers track media spend to the exact dollar can help redirect spend toward premium inventory.

Third, the industry is working toward a cookieless world, and this evolution has given rise to contextual targeting. This allows audiences to be targeted precisely and at scale and ensures ads are placed next to relevant content.

### **Has traditional media been able to win back some ground as a result of these challenges for digital media?**

Some offline channels have enjoyed a resurgence, but lockdown orders only fueled consumer attention on digital, especially with the on-demand nature of streaming platforms. For example, studies have indicated that total UK online media spend increased by 5% last year, and connected TV has taken its place as one of the fastest growth areas for programmatic display.

Efforts to enhance trust across the digital ecosystem are ongoing. It's critical to also acknowledge the progress of entities like the Global Alliance for Responsible Media (GARM). As the figures indicate, digital has retained its foothold and will win further confidence as open understanding and collaboration increases.