

Google ads' placement on blacklisted and sanctioned sites raises brand safety concerns

Article

The news: Google search ads are being displayed on a wide array of non-Google websites, including some hosting pornography and pirated material, research from industry activist

Adalytics has uncovered. These sites include entities in countries under US sanctions, notably Iran and Russia.

- A significant number of the 80,000 sites Adalytics studied within the Google **Search Partner Network** (SPN) were found to be in violation of Google's terms and conditions, highlighting a gap in the search giant's policy enforcement.
- Media buyers, who likely assumed that their ads were primarily running on Google's search engine page, discovered that their campaigns were also displayed on various sites within the SPN. These included websites like **Breitbart.com**, which some advertisers had specifically blacklisted, as well as other controversial sites.

Adalytics sparked controversy this past summer by reporting that Google [violated its video advertising](#) standards 80% of the time, having placed ads on **YouTube** and third-party sites that don't meet its criteria for audibility, visibility, and non-intrusiveness since 2020.

In Google's defense: The company said its Programmable Search Engine (ProSE), a tool used by institutions to integrate customizable, ad-supported search experiences on their websites, is governed by stringent terms of service that particularly prohibit adult content. Google takes decisive action against any violations. ProSE is a 'miniscule' part of SPN, Google global ads vice president **Dan Taylor** indicates.

- SPN allows advertisers to expand their campaigns beyond the search engine to various non-Google websites, displaying ads on search result pages and site directories.
- In Google Ads, advertisers can choose to join the SPN or not.
- Google questions Adalytics' motives and research methods, suspecting an agenda to discredit digital ads for profit, and notes Adalytics' repeated refusal to engage in collaborative dialogue, raising doubts about its commitment to constructive discourse.

Why it matters: The Adalytics study **raises questions about the effectiveness of Google's brand safety measures** and the ability of advertisers to control their digital media placements.

- The automatic inclusion of advertisers in the SPN, often without their explicit consent, poses risks to brand reputation. This practice has led to ads being displayed in environments that are not only inappropriate but potentially illegal, raising relevant questions about compliance with international laws and regulations.

Our take: The extensive reach of the SPN suggests a need for more stringent vetting and monitoring processes within Google's advertising ecosystem.

- Google does quite a bit of oversight and is incentivized to do so—but the expanse of its network means there will inevitably be snafus that lead to brand safety concerns.
- The reaction of policymakers and legislators to Adalytics' findings highlights an increasing call, led by figures like US Senator **Mark Warner** and the European Parliament's **Paul Tang**, for stronger regulation in digital advertising.
- Google's automatic inclusion of advertisers in the SPN raises questions about balancing commercial interests with maintaining brand safety standards.
- Google's automatic SPN inclusion for advertisers highlights the challenge of balancing commercial interests with brand safety in the complex, evolving digital advertising landscape.
- The findings from Adalytics, despite Google's critique of its methodology, point to the crucial need for advertisers to have clearer visibility and control over their ad placements as brand reputation and legal compliance increasingly come under scrutiny.

Search Ad Revenues, by Company

US, 2023, billions

Google

\$58.14

Amazon

\$24.54

Microsoft

\$5.88

Apple

\$5.10

Yelp

\$1.28

Target

\$0.77

IAC

\$0.75

Note: includes advertising that appears on desktop and laptop computers as well as mobile phones, tablets, and other internet-connected devices; includes contextual text links, paid inclusion, paid listings (paid search) and SEO; net ad revenues after companies pay traffic acquisition costs (TAC) to partner sites

Source: Insider Intelligence | eMarketer, October 2023

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