THE NEW RULES OF BRAND SAFETY

FINDING INCREASED SOPHISTICATION IN CONTEXT-BASED SOLUTIONS
“WITH WELL-TUNED CONTEXTUAL SEGMENTING,
THE MARKETER WILL BE GIVEN A SCALPEL,
RATHER THAN A CRUDE KNIFE.”

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LET’S START FROM TWO BASIC PREMISES:

FIRST
SAFETY IS A HUGE PRIORITY FOR A BRAND IN PLACING ITS MESSAGES.

SECOND
THERE IS NO BRAND SAFETY WITHOUT CONTEXT.

The challenge is easy enough to state: Brands want assurance their messages are delivered to people, received as expected and work as anticipated.

But while that’s simply put, it presents a tremendous challenge in an environment with billions of impressions served across millions of pages both programmatically and directly to myriad devices and screens seen by innumerable users.

How can an ad be in a “pure” environment in every possible sense, one that’s hospitable for the brand and comfortable for the consumer? What happens when a brand’s desire to reach desirable consumers is in tension with the content on a page?

Crucially, how can a contextual advertising partner not only monitor opportunities but also prevent harm and preserve the brand’s integrity? How can advertising become truly welcome?

THERE IS POSITIVE NEWS.

“Over the past several years, technology platforms and software have been introduced that allow brands to monitor where their digital ad investments are going, and to divert spending away from any scandalous or controversial content in real-time,” says Grapeshot CEO John Snyder1.

We’ll explore the newly sophisticated ways that safety for brands is being achieved on publishers’ pages, and the nuances of technology and understanding to build a foundation on which advertising can be transacted in overwhelmingly trusted environments.

1 https://www.grapeshot.com/dont-let-a-sports-scandal-deflate-your-brand-digiday-532016/
THE THREE LEGS OF BRAND SAFETY

THE DAYS OF MARKETERS PAYING FOR IMPRESSIONS THAT ARE SIMPLY SERVED ARE FAST WANNING. THEY HAVE THREE KEY REQUIREMENTS:

ADS MUST BE VIEWABLE
Global leaders in media buying with billions of dollars to spend are demanding viewability far beyond the current Media Ratings Council (MRC) industry standard (at least 50 percent in view for one second for most display ads).

While debates continue, IAB chief Randall Rothenberg declared the viewability debate solved. There is strong agreement on minimum standards, and multiple vendors have technologies accepted for implementation.

ADS MUST BE SEEN BY REAL PEOPLE
Verification that a specified percentage of an ad has appeared on screen for a required length of time isn’t enough.

Brands want to be sure that someone saw it. While markets are rife with attempts at fraud, marketers and publishers have become more sophisticated at quickly identifying and thwarting bots, and solutions are improving.

ADS MUST BE IN A CONTEXTUALLY APPROPRIATE ENVIRONMENT
“Brand Safety” is an oft-used phrase, yet the meaning is not clearly defined and deft implementation has gone wanting.

Now, by combining the best of what technology can offer combined with human intelligence a marketer’s message can better be placed in content that causes no damage and even supports wider initiatives.

It is in contextual monitoring combined with the best brand safety technologies that the greatest advancements have been achieved.

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4 http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702304026304579453253860786362
“THE BEST CONTEXTUAL PARTNERS WILL SERVE AS AN EARLY WARNING SYSTEM, ALERTING A BRAND AND TAKING ACTION TO THWART FURTHER TROUBLE.”

DEFINING BRAND SAFETY

The term “brand safety” is notionally understood. It represents an environment that is fundamentally not hostile, will not cause perceptions of uncomfortable association or, worse, spur unwelcome sharing or commenting.

The costs of an error in this arena can mount quickly, from the need to craft defensive counter-messaging to lost sales. Only after the fact does the degree of damage become clear.

THE SPORTS CONUNDRUM

With the Olympics and summer soccer upon us, advertising demand is peaking. Sports coverage is a premium environment for brands, inspiring passion among highly engaged followers. It’s one of the few environments that’s bound to be positively oriented and in which people consume their media with little or no delay. A recent campaign on one major sports network offered a thousand different creative executions, tailored to the audience members’ interests.

But the venue is not without risk. Numerous athletes and officials have been caught in scandals, sometimes associated with one of the deadly banned categories (see below). How can a brand that has devoted such resources also avoid unfortunate juxtapositions? The best contextual partners will delve in and help solve for as many elements and taxonomies as possible.

CASE STUDY
But what will cause damage fluctuates according to a range of factors, including:

- **TIMING.** Issues can arise, fast, and require rapid response. The best contextual partners will serve as an early warning system, alerting a brand that something may be amiss, and help take needed steps to block unfortunate placements.

- **RELEVANCE.** Many contextual safeguards to date have been constructed by way of a pre-determined list of categories and defined via simple URL matching. True relevance, as we’ll explain below, comes from a more nuanced and granular analysis of what’s on a page.

- **WEIGHTING.** To understand relevance requires intricate understanding not just of the words on a page, but also their interrelations.

- **ADJUSTMENT.** Someday, technology may equip marketers to “set it and forget it.” Today, to execute and monitor implementation requires decisions that will evolve as further input is received.

- **FRESH DATA.** Systems built for a static, pre-planned marketing era underserve their clients. Many contextual operators pre-crawl a page, cache it and use that measure to determine potential brand safety. But in the real-world, fast-changing news environment with commenting, mashups and sharing, only a system that proactively crawls billions of pages and constantly updates can protect brand safety.

- **THE BRAND, ITSELF.** It makes sense that there’s some vagueness in understanding what the phrase “brand safety” means. Brands run the gamut from the most staid to quirky, risqué and even controversial. Some provoke, others comfort, and still others console. The industry encompasses a range of perspectives that can be accommodated in a wealth of vastly different content-rich environments.

There is pan-industry technology, but there must be brand-specific solutions. Ultimately it comes down to asking the right questions: What are the brand’s goals and priorities, and what is the timeframe under which the contextual partner is operating?
FROM REPORTING TO ACTION

Until recently, contextual marketing partners would find problems, take screen shots, and alert an agency. After multiple logistical steps, new parameters would be developed, adjustments made to a media plan, and, days or even weeks later, corrective action taken.

“How can you protect a brand if it takes you weeks?” asks Kevin McElroy, VP Sales, for Grapeshot. “It’s got to be about much more than checking boxes and people covering their rears to avoid responsibility.”

The premium contextual partner instead will have data that allows a rich survey of the wider landscape along with the technology and expertise to execute on specific needs and solutions in individual, page-level environments.

The partner will make every situation as safe as possible, and continually take action to decrease risks.

It must not only identify pages and alert the brand of potential problems, but also, in close to real time, take actions based on the brands’ specified parameters to keep messages from appearing in unsafe areas.

ACHIEVING A RISK BALANCE

To date many contextual brand safety mechanisms have been so blunt force, they’ve seemed like “on-off” switches.

The best contextual partners, by contrast, can finely tune and adjust with a range of controls. They will balance conflicting needs to both protect the brand and also achieve larger goals.
“THE BEST CONTEXTUAL PARTNER WILL ACT FAST AND ALSO CONTINUE TO SCAN, EVALUATE AND ADJUST.”
Protection from the most obviously toxic content is the easy part. There is a standard “dirty dozen” category list used by the industry, to track and exclude pages.

As a default, systems may assume that all the sensitive categories should be excluded. Some clients may prefer such a simplistic system, and appreciate a binary “yes or no” choice.

But the list lacks subtlety and nuance. The best results come from a highly consultative process that understands the particular client’s needs.

Sure, there may be certain “poison” words which, if they appear, will block that page. In most cases, however, blanket exclusions underserve the marketer and unnecessarily punish the publisher. Some of the “dirty dozen” may be fine for some advertisers.
EXPLORING TECHNOLOGIES

The types of “blunt force” systems we referred to earlier use URLs provided by a publisher, often through ad-tech partners. That allows an educated guess as to a page’s content.

The URL is at best a partial signal. Some publishers pass through only top-level domains\(^6\). Steps in the ad-tech chain can obscure original URLs. Nefarious publishers will fraudulently mask or spoof domains.

In reverse cases, a URL may seem edgy but be acceptable. Many brands, for example, are fine appearing on Playboy’s more reputable pages.

The surest way to understand the potential risk of a page is to inspect the page and receive safety signals based upon an understanding of the language therein.

“We had a big conversation around ‘Game of Thrones.’ Content about the show is premium inventory, but the show is full of violence and mutilation,” says Dr. Mark Hagger, Grapeshot’s Head of Software. “How to reconcile those two things? Ultimately, we have to ask, and be sure the advertiser has indicated that decision to us.”

The contextual partner should be able to, with very lightweight technology, quickly scan the content on a page and evaluate against not only proprietary lists of language but also terms and terminology derived from intensive consultation with brands.

Customers can avoid some words and target others. They can, with their contextual partners, build sophisticated associations, with multi-tiered logic that updates and learns for timelines and ever-increasing accuracy.

There may even be a tiered system for evaluating assurance of safety or risk, again allowing the client to decide at what tier it will allow its ads to run, and how to balance the level of risk vs. the need to reach an intended community.

\(^6\) In later papers, we’ll explore publisher roles and the need for transparency.
Some marketers may choose to block a page if there is not complete visibility into it.

Customers can choose to remove safeguards in order ease restrictiveness if scale or other objectives are sought.

This tiering is achieved by creating a framework allowing for rules packages that can be built and applied to both standard and custom segment definitions.

GREATER TRANSPARENCY AND ACCESS, ALLOWING PAGE-LEVEL SCANS, AND COMBINING THE BEST OF HUMAN INTELLIGENCE AND MACHINE CAPABILITIES WILL LEAD TO THE BEST RESULTS.
For any integration, the contextual partner should offer a brand safety flag for every impression to ensure that clients always receive some indicator, however small.

Targeting should be positive — not anti-targeting — to eliminate confusion by users. The pages that are \textit{safe} should be identified.

With well-tuned contextual parsing and segmenting, the marketer will be given a scalpel, rather than a crude knife.

\textbf{PRE- AND POST-BID BLOCKING}

Ideally, a contextual partner in a programmatic environment would scan every page, and, if unacceptable content were found, prevent bids from its marketing partner.

Unfortunately, visibility into the page sometimes occurs only after a bid has been accepted, and the decision has to be made whether to then block the ad from serving.

The publisher’s system may then try to collect the full amount, while the marketer would object to paying. The marketer may wish to substitute alternative creative to avoid potentially wasting the spot.

Marketers need to decide in concert with their contextual partners whether and how to block and swap ads in a post-bid environment. The most sophisticated contextual partners will have such capability.

\textbf{CASE STUDY}

\textbf{PRINCESS DIANA}

“I almost got fired because of a contextual brand safety incident immediately after the death of Princess Diana in August 1997. GM was running a piece of creative for a new car model which only standout feature was air-conditioning, and the creative copy featured some criminals keeping a dead body cool in the back of a car. This ad ran alongside a story about the car crash that killed Princess Diana.”

Gregory Armshaw, Graymatics ExchangeWire
A WORD ON LANGUAGE PROCESSING

There is discussion in the contextual community about the technology to use for processing language on a page.

Some advocate natural language processing (NLP) techniques combined with semantic intelligence to continually learn and improve. Theoretically, this is the stronger of available approaches.

However, the best theoretical solution is not always the most pragmatic. Semantic analysis, meant to mirror human thought processes, can over time prove very effective, but it can also come at considerable cost to implement as well as in use of resources.

A separate technique known as “Probabilistic Information Retrieval” can be used very effectively and efficiently for recognizing language on a page.

Probabilistic IR is rooted in logic that goes well beyond word position and frequency, to allow weighting of words and phrases according to factors including (but not limited to):
- distribution of the words across the entire body of the document
- distribution of the words within a portion of the document
- how users read or interact with a portion of the document.

Weights can and will change according to users’ behavior! That relevant feedback loop has proven effective in wide and varied use cases7 while costing considerably fewer resources than other methods.

The best vendors will ensure that every time a new page is indexed into the system, all the weights will change for relevant terms across the system. It will constantly change and adapt word weights even when a word has the same permanent position and frequency in a given document that doesn’t change.

CONCLUSION: CONTEXT RULES

Combinations of factors determine brand safety — not just words, but also spacing, frequency, phrasing, and analysis that requires the best of technology and human beings working in concert.

The risks can come unexpectedly in both programmatic and non-programmatic environments. Scandals, danger, risks to a brand don’t occur when it’s convenient. Content appears and changes at a pace too fast for everything to be planned ahead of time.

IDEALLY, IN THE SAFEST POSSIBLE SETUP, A PAGE WILL:

Be from a safe URL (at the root, section and page levels, with editorial input)

Have been inspected (technologically)

Have no signals for unsafe content

Contain a positive safe signal (which is possible when a contextual identifier has been passed through and previously placed on the page).

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As we said, there are risks. The page may have unsafe images, video or graphics with no textual reference. Fraudsters may intentionally mask or spoof URLs, requiring a second tier factor for identification.

Content within apps that does not have a web page component accessible to an inspection can be very difficult. Unless a separate safety SDK (software development kit) is implemented in the app or on the platform, only the lower levels of safety can be assured.

Over time, these issues will be solved. There are always new wrinkles, new language formulations, and updated modern syntax.

Meanwhile, the technology is better than ever, as is our understanding. It’s faster, easier to use, gives more transparency and assurance and will continue to improve.

FORBES’ CARS TO AVOID

Every year, Forbes publishes a feature story and slideshow of “New Cars to Avoid.” A prominent make from one major American car maker was on the list in 2015. They wanted their ads to reach Forbes’ attractive demographic but avoid any page that included a hint of the noxious list — whether on Forbes or any other site picking up or covering it.

“They wanted zero association with anything that talked about it,” says Grapeshot’s Kevin McElroy. Grapeshot constructed a program to contextually scan and block ads on any page on Forbes or elsewhere that mentioned the list or anything associated with associated topics while still allowing the car maker’s ads to get in contextually appropriate settings.

NEXT UP: THE CASE FOR PUBLISHERS