

From malvertising to diet supplements:

How publishers fight bad ads in the programmatic era

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Add Integrity

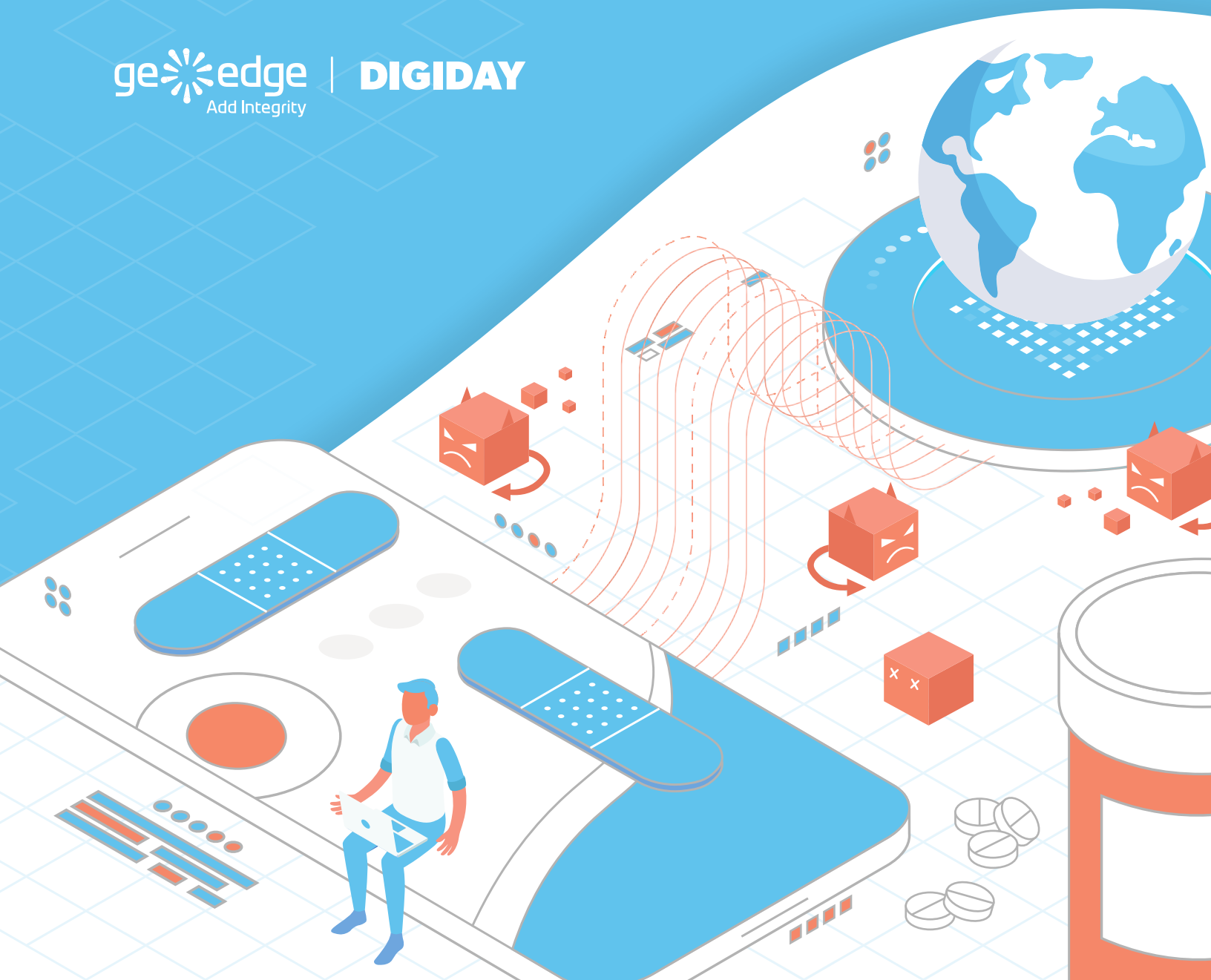


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Introduction

The negative impact of being seen next to or in association with offensive or inappropriate content online spans the entire ad ecosystem. While the news headlines often focus on what this means for brands and what social media sites are doing to tackle the problem, publishers are also experiencing a lack of control over the quality of advertising served by programmatic means. And users expect real-time responses to these problems.

In partnership with Digiday, we surveyed 100 publishers to discover how publishers are affected by the way ads are bought and delivered in the programmatic era, particularly malicious, offensive and poor quality advertising. The findings show that publishers are eliminating ad revenue, and that the process of dealing with offensive and poor quality ads is consuming too much of their time.

Here's what we found.



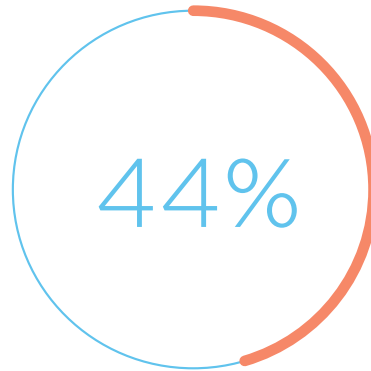
Bad ads slip through the net

The ability to control, view and be aware of the advertising being served on a website is vital in an era of fake news, malicious ads and online scammers. Platforms such as Facebook continuously release tools to ensure that advertisers get a transparent look at where their ads appear. The social media giant hit the headlines in July 2019 with its tool that will allow users to report fake adverts in a bid to crack down on scammers.

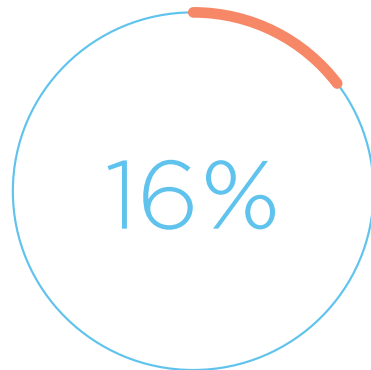
However, as the majority of digital advertising is bought and sold via programmatic, whether it's direct or indirect, this view on what ads appear, where and when becomes murky.

"In an ideal world, a publisher should know which ads they are serving at any given time," says Andrew Mason, media operations director, EMEA at Digitas UK. "Unfortunately, selling in an open marketplace is less transparent."

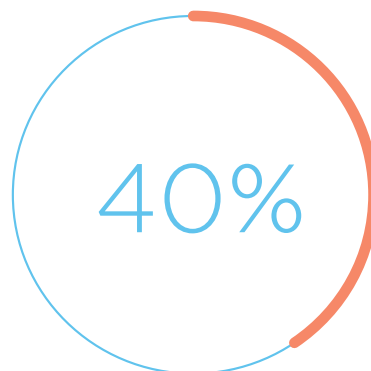
Our research shows that bad ads are slipping through.



44% of publishers can confidently say they have not inadvertently hosted bad ads on their sites



16% of publishers are not sure



40% of publishers have inadvertently hosted bad ads

“The good news is that it’s relatively easy to block a bad ad once you know it’s there,” says Jascha Kaykas-Wolff, chief marketing officer at Mozilla. “The bad news is all the problems you might have with even finding the bad ad.”

He says: “Fundamentally, discovery of bad ads is one of the biggest barriers. For example, if a malvertising campaign or a fraud operation decides to target Microsoft Windows users ages 65 and up in rural areas, a Mac user in San Francisco or Brooklyn isn’t going to see those ads. Publishers are likely to have an incomplete view of their bad ad problem.”

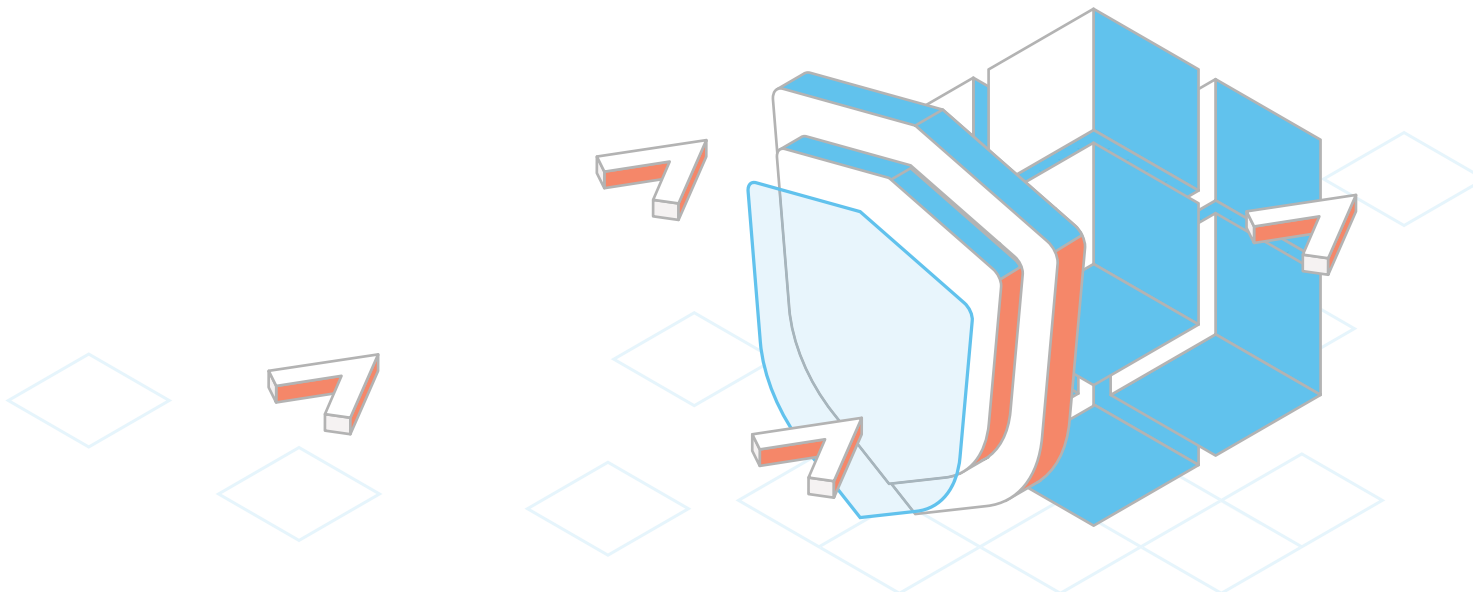
The seriousness of the issue for publishers varies. Offensive and inappropriate content is deemed the most detrimental type of ad for half (50 percent) of publishers, followed by ads that cause redirects or contains malvertising (15 percent). Offensive and inappropriate content has the ability to break a publisher, it’s no surprise it is leading the list. The necessity to deal with these threats is a major concern for publishers today.

Shannon Peerless, managing director at digital agency 10 Yetis, says: “You’d like to think that bad quality, offensive or inappropriate adverts reflect more poorly on the brand featuring in the

advert than the publisher, but the reality is that it also brings down the image of the host website or publication too and makes them look as though they haven’t done a good enough job filtering out all the bad.”

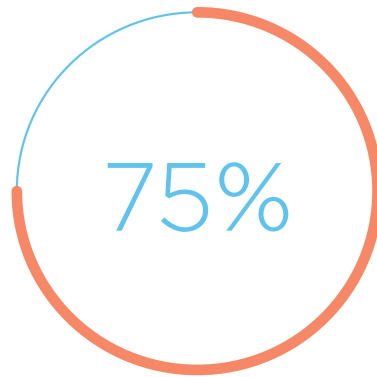
Malvertising, a combination of malware and advertising, in particular is a growing issue for every publisher and on every platform. In fact, mobile is the new frontier when it comes to malvertising attacks, ignited by the growing trend towards mobile advertising and due to the vulnerability of apps – there is a growing number of both mobile attacks and in-app attacks.

Other concerns from publishers include ads that are not Google compliant, ones that cause latency, advertising out-of-stock products, irrelevant ads and those placed next to unsafe conversations, for example comments.



The quality gap

A quality experience online, where the ads are of high quality, unintrusive and safe for the user, and where publishers are creating new revenue streams and monetizable content and brands can reach engaged audiences, is the ultimate goal. But the challenge is that word: quality. For 23 percent of publishers, there is little to no gap between the average quality of their organization's ads and the desired level of quality. But for the majority of publishers (75 percent) there is a gap between average ad quality and desired quality.



75% of publishers say there is a gap between average ad quality and desired quality



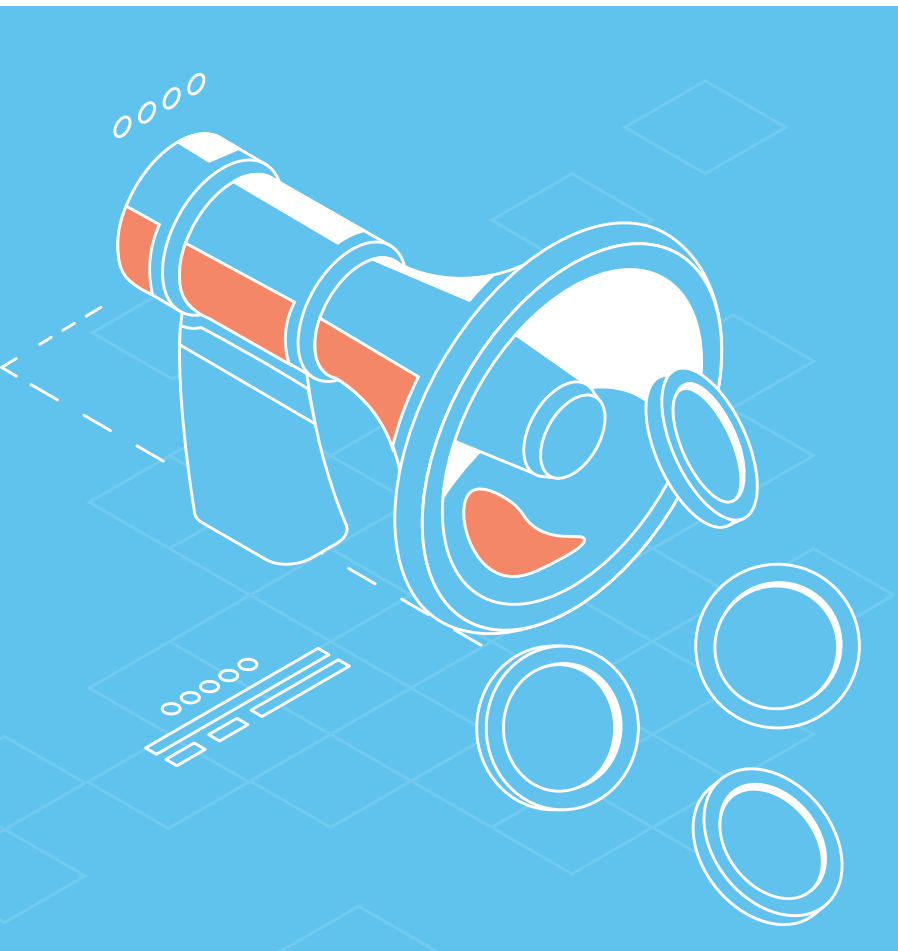
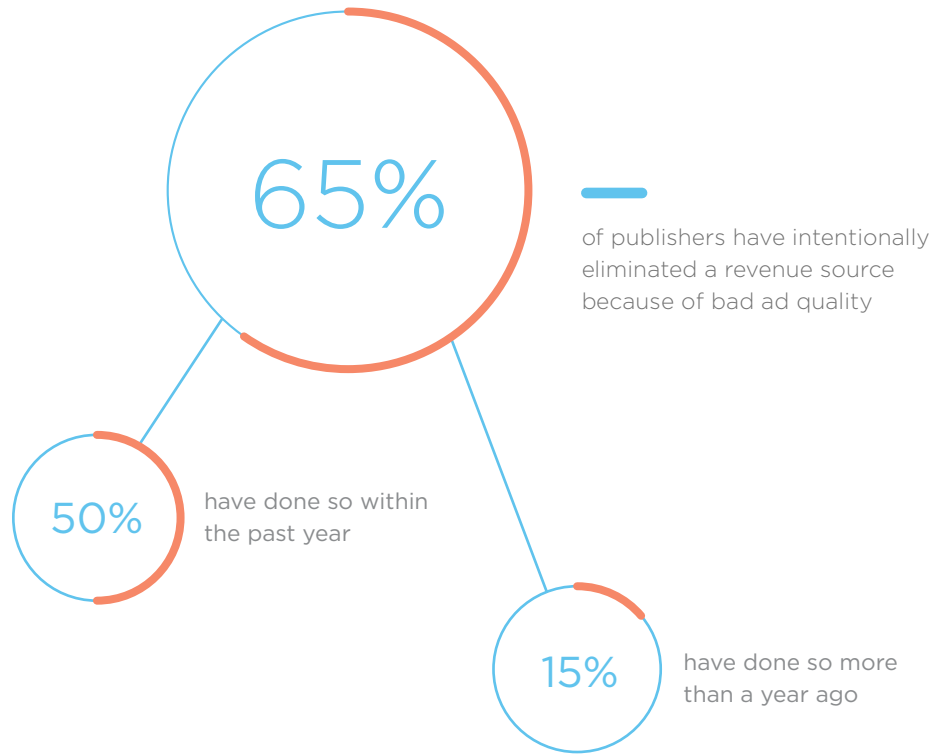
The disparity between SEO rankings and ad quality is one of the biggest challenges for publishers to resolve, according to James Carter, CEO at Digitalbox, which owns the sites Entertainment Daily and The Daily Mash.

He says: "In a world where 'trust' should be moving up the value chain it is interesting that Google's SEO rankings don't appear to be affected by ad quality, but just ad density. A site could offer the highest quality editorial experience for its users through great journalism and site structure but then send users down a spiral of doom through some misleading diet supplement ad, while the content could still rank number one in Google search results."

The revenue gap

In an attempt to maintain quality, protect their brand integrity and provide a safe user experience, most publishers are losing money. This loss, referred to as the revenue gap, stems from publishers' attempts to avoid quality problems by eliminating partners.

Sixty-five percent of publishers have intentionally eliminated a revenue source because of bad ad quality – 50 percent have done so within the past year and 15 percent more than a year ago. Over a third (35 percent) of publishers have not had to take such action. Cutting that revenue is in the hands of the publisher. Mason at Digitas UK says: "Publishers that are serving bad ads are not intending to control them, as this is a key income source. It's mainly related to bad content that leads to cheaper ads, which then leads to bad ads. It's key to note, premium publishers don't serve bad ads."



When asked how often their organization eliminates revenue sources because of bad ad quality, almost half (49 percent) of publishers say they do this a moderate amount, 44 percent say rarely and eight percent frequently eliminate revenue sources because of bad ad quality. Carter at Digitalbox believes there is a balance to be made to ensure ad quality. He says: "As a general rule a reduction of inventory volume and a raising of prices, does push higher quality ad fill through the system. It is about finding the right balance."

It's imperative for publishers to be building revenue from quality advertisers and to use the time spent on eliminating bad revenue on closing the gap between average quality and desired quality.

A manual response

Many publishers choose to handle the malvertising vetting process manually, despite the evolution and availability of high quality automated security solutions. Identifying and blocking bad ads is time consuming for publishers. Over half of publishers (53 percent) devote one to five hours a week on making sure ads are of the proper quality, 17 percent spend five to 10 hours a week and eight percent spend ten to 20 hours.

But a more alarming stat is that 14 percent of publishers devote 20 hours or more a week making sure ads are of the proper quality. That's time that could be spent on one of the many other challenges that publishers face, including selling with data, diversifying revenue, privacy and Apple's ITP, among others.



“Manually vetting ad quality on a site with insufficiently protected users is time-consuming and might not find some of the worst offenders, who use targeting to avoid detection,” says Kaykas-Wolff at Mozilla.

Kaykas-Wolff advises publishers think about the data their sharing. He says: “As long as legit advertisers can reach your audience elsewhere because of data leakage, you’re still going to be stuck selling ad inventory that bad advertisers can afford.”

The vetting process often demands publishers’ direct and constant attention, as 65 percent of publishers manually block advertisers when ensuring proper ad quality, while half (51 percent) rely on Google’s detection capabilities or use other third-party technology solutions. When asked about the steps their organization takes to ensure proper ad quality, half of publishers say they act based on

user complaints. But by the time a user has already proactively taken action against bad ads, the damage to the publisher’s reputation is done.

“Time restraints are a major roadblock in trying to stamp out bad ads quickly and effectively,” says Peerless at 10 Yetis. “Human involvement in the advertising process is already reducing because of AI and the need to turn things around quickly. It’s not always feasible to manually check quality and that is definitely a barrier.”

While the manual approach provides publishers with control over their inventory, a less reactive strategy is required to avoid damage to reputation. Publishers need a proactive approach when it comes to quality assurance, this will enable publishers to work with any partner without quality concerns, while maintaining their brand and reputation.

Taking responsibility on quality



Dealing with programmatic ad quality requires a real-time approach ensuring your brand integrity and your users. The greatest challenge for publishers stems from the near unlimited resources that ad quality requires in addition to the inability to tackle all low ad quality through traditional tools. But proactively fighting bad ads it's not something publisher can ignore.

"The way the web is built makes it very hard to spot evil," says Adam Arnold, chief marketing officer at BBH. "There are many places for it to hide, many ways for it to shape-shift and evade censure. Within this, most publishers have been satisfied with post-moderation. Acting only after the wild horses have bolted. The alternative is very difficult for them. It relies on challenging, experimental code and AI - because their sites and networks are too big to be preemptively policed by human eyes."

Arnold adds: "That said, none of this is an excuse for publishers. Their business models depend upon advertisers paying for real estate in their neighbourhoods. It is most certainly

their responsibility to remove the graffiti and collect the trash."

Traditionally, ad quality was an ad-ops concern, yet given its huge impact on publishers' bottom line, including brand image, user loyalty, overall performance and revenue, this is now a management decision as it impacts the entire business performance.

Carter, CEO at Digitalbox says: "We know there is a large market of scammers who present illegitimate creatives and they are much more likely to be flowing from organizations offering less stable services. If a publisher wants to build a loyal following it has a responsibility to protect its audience base from being abused."

Assuring ad quality in the programmatic era requires greater efforts from publishers, who are aware of the problem and work hard to solve it after an incident occurs. But adopting a more proactive ad security solution is ultimately a business decision.

How GeoEdge can help

GeoEdge's mission is to protect the integrity of the digital advertising ecosystem and to preserve a quality experience for users. GeoEdge's advanced security solutions ensure high ad quality and verify that sites offer a clean, safe and engaging user experience, so publishers can focus on their business success.

Publishers around the world rely on GeoEdge to stop malicious and low-quality ads from reaching their audience. GeoEdge allows publishers to maximize their ad revenue without quality concerns, protect their brand reputation and increase their user loyalty. GeoEdge guards digital businesses against unwanted, malicious, offensive and inappropriate ads - without sacrificing revenue.

To learn more, visit: www.geoedge.com

