

Cross-Industry Collaboration to Redefine Brand Suitability in Trusted News Environments

A Call to Action



Advertiser
Protection
Bureau

The 4A's Advertiser Protection Bureau (APB) recently initiated a project dedicated to analyzing news media, to uncover challenges and propose solutions to help advertisers invest with confidence in this space.

This effort sparked a dialogue around safety vs. suitability for brands advertising in news environments, which continually cover a range of topics spanning [politics](#), [LGBTQ+ issues](#), [entertainment](#), [lifestyle](#), [finance](#), [climate change](#), [natural disasters](#), [technology](#), and [health](#), to name a few. The initiative was a collaboration across industries: publishers, verification partners, major agency holding companies, and industry member organizations including the 4A's, Interactive Advertising Bureau (IAB) Tech Lab, Digital Content Next (DCN), and TRUSTX.

The subject of brand safety [appeared suddenly and forcefully in the foreground](#) in 2017, when agencies and advertisers pulled spend and re-evaluated contextual adjacencies to terrorism, obscenities, drugs, nudity, and sensitive social topics as brands moved aggressively to protect their reputations. Some agencies and marketers have become proactive in their approach, dedicating personnel with "brand safety" or "standards" in their job descriptions.

In 2018, the 4A's formed the APB to create an industry collective responsible for achieving "Advertising Assurance," to support environments where brands and consumers can coexist with trust. In 2019, the 4A's APB made huge strides in helping the industry define these areas of concern and establish the [Brand Safety Floor](#). In addition, the APB sparked dialogue about brand safety vs. brand suitability: that is, a brand's risk tolerance for contextual topics beyond the safety floor.

One major finding of this project is that **trusted news content is brand-safe**. This finding should reassure the industry that investing in trusted news media does not support individuals or organizations that espouse or promulgate hate speech and/or promote disrespectful and harmful treatment of sensitive social topics, such as abortion or extreme political positions.

Now more than ever, advertisers should be working with agencies and verification partners to identify their brand-suitability risk tolerance. This is especially important in advertising in news sources. The 4A's APB News Project has uncovered a great deal of encouraging work throughout the industry, including new semantic technology from news organizations and

publishers, as well as the expansion or acquisition of contextual analysis technology by verification partners.

Legacy brand-safety and suitability protocols still exist, but marketers should remain vigilant in helping to push the industry towards a consistent set of standards. With **57% of neutral or positive stories on major news sites incorrectly flagged as unsafe for advertising**, by one estimate—and with some specific topics rating as high as 73%—the APB argues that it’s more important than ever for all participants to solve these issues together.

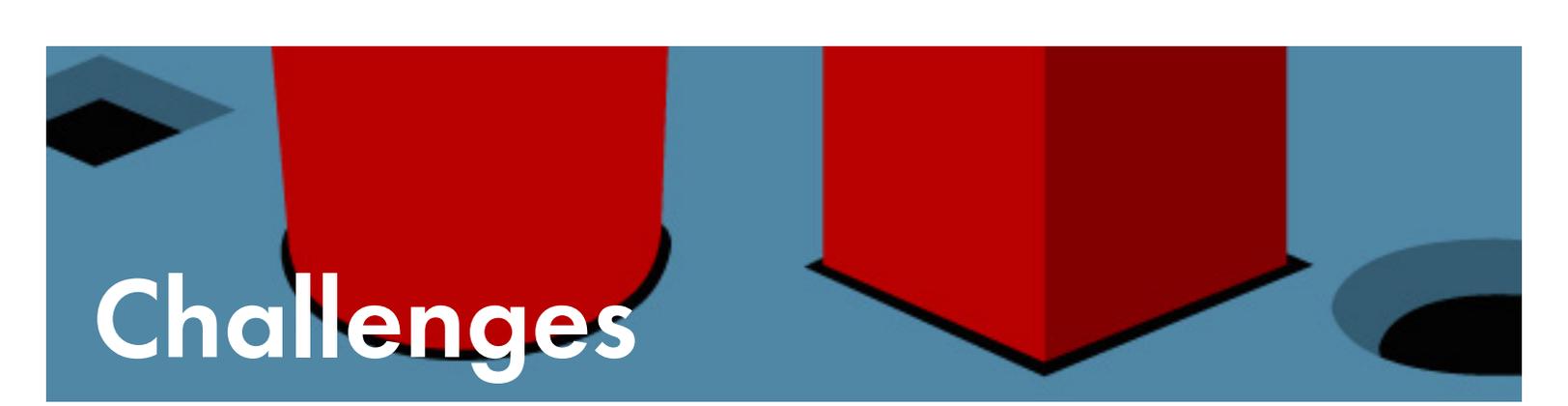
Additionally, the APB would like to further standardize brand-suitability automation mechanisms, as well as to increase education and training on available tools, to re-engage advertisers to reconsider their rationale for news avoidance. No less consequentially, by re-evaluating any blacklisting of news content and restrictive ad placements, brands and agencies could generate better marketplace dynamics for news environments.

We’re at a crossroads where we need to educate the advertising ecosystem to use suitability controls versus safety controls in the news,” said Yale Cohen, EVP, Global Activation Standards, Publicis Media. “With 90% of people responding favorably or neutrally when ad adjacencies appear next to serious content like COVID-19, the APB’s Call to Action in Brand Suitability comes at a critical time – supporting new advertising vehicles/streams for publishers that can help share information for the good of consumers, while also elevating responsible controls for agencies and marketers to make informed decisions in the news space.”

The conversation with news publishers must now shift from brand safety to brand suitability. The 4A’s APB has assembled leading publishers, agencies, and technology partners to help redefine what brand suitability means.

Journalism is critical to democracy. When news is professionally sourced and reported, it’s an important contributor to business and government affairs and consumer decisions. Similarly, this paper will inform the advertising community in an unbiased manner to contribute to the greater good of the industry.

To foster better understanding of advertising in the news category, the APB has addressed the following challenges with guidance.



Challenges

Challenge #1: Reputable news content, while brand-safe, is not always brand-suitable.

Response

The APB released guidance on **brand safety and suitability** in 2019. Content that includes hate speech, supports terrorism, or graphically depicts death or suicide does not have a place on any platform or content provider online under any circumstances; however, the content of news covering such sensitive subjects should be re-classified based on each brand's risk tolerance.

We encourage all brands to engage with their agencies and verification partners to customize their brand-suitability guidelines and protocols:

- **High risk tolerance:** glamorization/gratuitous depiction or insensitive/irresponsible treatment of illegal or illicit activities.
- **Medium risk tolerance:** dramatic depiction of illegal or illicit activities presented in the context of entertainment.
- **Low risk tolerance:** educational, informative, or scientific treatment of illegal or illicit activities. Includes news features related to the category (e.g., drugs and alcohol, war and conflict, terrorism).

Challenge #2: Brand-suitability standards and protocols vary widely across technologies.

Response

Verification partners have made significant improvements in contextual analysis capabilities, through both acquisitions and the development of in-house solutions.

Semantic science capabilities, powered by machine learning, provide a deeper analysis of the meaning of complex news articles to ensure contextual alignment is appropriate for a brand's equity and target audience profile. This new semantic analysis is in addition to other contextual tools from tech partners.

While verification companies as well as publishers have made huge improvements in this space, there is still room for growth and adoption. The 4A's APB recently conducted an analysis of more than 300 pages of news content, supported by two publishers and three verification providers.

This analysis demonstrated that a high level of disagreement remains between publishers and verification providers when it comes to the definition of brand-suitable content. When prompted to categorize content as "suitable" or "unsuitable," publishers and verification providers disagreed on one-third of the cases. In fact, when multiple verification providers were given the same prompt, they disagreed more than half the time.

This analysis is not surprising, given the great variation among technologies and methodologies. Further analysis is needed to ensure that brand-specific levels of suitability (e.g., risk tolerance) are taken into account when comparing across publishers and verification services.

“State-of-the-art inventory-verification tools are vital to driving investment in safe, high-performing news environments, while enabling marketers to avoid content that is misaligned with their brand values,” said Joe Barone, GroupM’s Managing Partner–Brand Safety, Americas.

Challenge #3: Solely relying on or using outdated targeted blacklists and whitelists remains a prevailing method of brand protection, despite the availability of largely suitable and equally effective alternatives.

Response

Given the ever-present threat to a brand’s image of appearing alongside unsuitable content, it’s no surprise marketers and agencies would strive to implement the strongest available brand protections, including blacklists, keyword lists for blocking, whitelists, and programmatic protections like pre-bid and post-bid solutions.

Brands using tools like blacklisting and keyword-blocking curtailed their investment in premium news destinations, *The Wall Street Journal* [reported in 2019](#). But agencies and marketers use blacklists and keyword lists as precise and accurate tools to avoid association with specific controversial topics: An alcohol advertiser may use keyword lists to avoid content about “drunk driving” without necessarily blocking the word “driving” alone.

Blacklists are becoming even more refined to address the specific nuances of brand suitability for

each advertiser. Once that’s defined, verification partners can further help protect brands.

The 4A’s APB recommends best practices for advertisers and agencies for using site and keyword blacklists:

1. Use them with other tools.
2. Eliminate content that does not meet the APB Brand Safety Floor. (Verification partners’ solutions provide the ability to eliminate such content.)
3. Address advertiser category- or market-level nuances.
4. Properly maintain blacklists at regular intervals
5. If possible, compile URL-level granularity for blacklists (vs. domain-level granularity) and require URL transparency in programmatic.

Whitelists have helped to create a curated marketplace for trusted brands. But to enable their full value in the news space, whitelists must work with other verification tools that identify contextual adjacencies at the page level. Similarly, in programmatic, brands should push for full transparency in the URL, so page-level analysis is available pre- and post-bid to provide the fullest protections.

We encourage these practices for both news organizations and the platforms that distribute their content to give brands the most effective tools to make informed decisions.

Challenge #4: Brand safety is a shared responsibility.

Response

Both brand safety and brand suitability are shared responsibilities that rely on mutual participation and a free exchange of information among brands, agencies, publishers, and tech providers.

Marketers have an expectation and right to brand-suitable placements, regardless of whether those placements are made directly with publishers or through programmatic exchange. Conversely,

publishers have a right to fair market value in exchange for the creation of trustworthy, professional news content, and to that end should provide the necessary signals and metadata so that their inventory can be fairly and accurately assessed.

Challenge #5: News avoidance remains a perceived low-impact method of brand protection.

Response

The benefit to advertisers of placement within a reputable, high-quality ad environment is well-documented. Audiences on high-quality sites show 20% higher engagement than on lower-quality sites, a recent [Integral Ad Science study](#) showed. And nearly 40% of millennials closely follow [national politics, social issues, and natural disasters](#), according to the American Press Institute, which makes hard news an engaging environment to reach this hard-to-find audience.

Moving the Industry Forward

In 2017, IAB Tech Lab released version 2.0 of the contextual taxonomy giving publishers and verification partners a consistent framework to identify each of the more than 700 types of content across 29 Tier 1 categories. This was a significant effort to move the industry towards shared definitions and taxonomies.

While an update is in the works to address the U.K. Information Commissioner's Office (ICO)'s privacy concerns, there are also discussions to make improvements specifically in the news space. Where there are currently only 12 classified news fields, industry organizations including the APB, DCN, TRUSTX, and IAB Tech Lab are working on expanding those categories to encompass the vast array of news articles and video content produced every day.

To make immediate improvements to the existing IAB Tech Lab taxonomy, the APB also proposes mapping the [Brand Suitability Framework](#) against the more than 700 types of content. The APB will be endorsing the use of the IAB Tech Lab contextual taxonomy in conjunction with this new brand suitability mapping for agencies and marketers to begin using immediately. (Content about substance abuse, bankruptcy, gambling, or celebrity death or scandal could be considered high-risk for advertisers, while specifically in the news category—crime, disasters, and war and conflict—could be considered high-risk.) We encourage brands to learn more about this new contextual delineation [mapped to the 4A's APB brand suitability framework](#).

"Supporting news publishers is especially crucial during these challenging times," said Dennis Buchheim, President, IAB Tech Lab. "We support the 4A's APB effort to formalize the concepts of brand safety floor and brand suitability, and to develop a more nuanced approach to brand suitability in news."

Buchheim added, "We are also working with the APB and others to accelerate greater support and categorization for news within the IAB Tech Lab's Content Taxonomy, addressing urgent needs in our industry."

Additionally, we recognize that social platforms help news organizations create further distribution for news content. We recommend greater adoption of this brand suitability mapping by social platforms to better protect advertisers.

To address the needs of advertisers, publishers, and consumers alike, it's incumbent on publishers, with guidance from the 4A's and DCN, to create a user-friendly and uncluttered ad environment as well as more stringent monetization standards.

Monetization standards must include:

- tiered controls that align with the 4A's APB brand-suitability framework
- suitability controls on a content-category level, as defined by the IAB and Media Rating Council (MRC)
- proper classification of opinion articles, to enable third-party controls

To that end, the 4A's has elicited the participation of agencies, publishers, and third-party service providers to support the following action plan:

Publishers

- Provide granular real-time signals to verification providers to enable accurate contextualization and assessment.
- Fully align self-reporting with third-party verification taxonomies, with the long-term goal of establishing standardized assessment and reporting against IAB Tech Lab forthcoming contextual taxonomy in news.
- Eliminate any distinction in brand suitability between programmatic and direct inventory.

DCN and IAB

- Collaborate with the 4A's to develop taxonomies supporting accurate brand-suitability framework evaluation and reporting.

Verification providers

- Evaluate brand-suitability reporting and taxonomies and align with IAB Tech Lab and 4A's mapping to eliminate discrepancies.
- Refine automated brand-suitability reporting to align with human assessment and evaluation.
- Provide greater transparency into classification processes and protocols.
- We also call on ad-verification providers to assess content accurately and fairly, and on advertisers and agencies to support these initiatives financially by committing spend to credible and reliable news organizations that self-report accurately, and withdrawing funding from those that do not.
- Further, all parties involved must develop contextual evaluations that incorporate the tone of the content into ongoing brand-safety analyses as well as simple keyword assessments.

Brands and agencies

- Assess blacklists and eliminate unnecessary or outdated keywords.
- Centralize lists for more efficient and effective onboarding and optimization.
- Assess risk tolerances, in compliance with the APB's **Brand Suitability Framework**, and communicate those standards clearly to partners.

This is a strategic step forward in changing hearts and minds about news avoidance and educating the industry about premium advertising within suitable news environments. This document sets expectations across the industry and creates responsibility on all parties to proactively work on opportunities within news environments appropriate specifically to an advertiser's level of suitability.

As tools available to advertisers and agencies continue to improve from verification partners to address sentiment and suitability, we call on

advertisers to reconsider advertising in news. Even coverage of hot-button issues like politics and the coronavirus can be suitable to advertiser needs, and it's incumbent on everyone to work collaboratively to support journalism.

"The adoption of consistent brand suitability standards across the entire media ecosystem is essential to identifying and supporting suitable news environments to unlock additional premium inventory for our brands and to help limit the proliferation of misinformation," said David Murnick, EVP-Digital Operations & Brand Safety,

Dentsu Aegis Network US. "The unique cross-industry collaboration on this project fostered a more granular breakdown of advertising capabilities in the news category and is a strategic step forward for the industry."

With industry-wide support of this initiative, we can improve the well-being of advertisers, publishers, and third-party service providers alike while supporting the important societal contributions of a free and unfettered press.

Learn more about the 4A's and the Advertiser Protection Bureau [here](#).

About The 4A's

The 4A's helps empower our members to drive commerce, spark connections, and shape culture through infinite creativity. We are dedicated to and vested in, our members' success, just as they are dedicated to helping brands create, distribute, and measure effective and insightful advertising and marketing. With a focus on advocacy, talent and the value of creativity and technology and their impact on driving business growth and powerful cultural change, we provide community, leadership, guidance, and best-in-class training that enable agencies to innovate, evolve, and grow. The 4A's was established in 1917 to promote, advance, and defend the interests of our member agencies, their employees, and the industry at large. More than 100 years later, we continue to support the evolving needs of our community. Today, the organization serves 600+ member agencies across 1,200 offices, which control more than 85% of total U.S. advertising spend. 4A's Benefits division insures more than 160,000 employees, and its Washington office advocates for policies that best support a thriving advertising industry. The 4A's Foundation fuels a robust diversity pipeline of talent for its members and the marketing and media industry, fostering the next generation of leaders.

Brand Suitability and News

A publication of the 4A's (American Association of Advertising Agencies).

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