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Better Creative: The Real Topic of the Day?

At the end of January, Google announced that it was abandoning its controversial project to replace cookies, entitled FLoC, in favour of a new proposal: Topics.

The principle behind FLoC was that an AI would learn browsing habits and place users into anonymous cohorts. No individual user data would be shared with the browser itself or anywhere else, with the process occurring algorithmically and then essentially losing individuals amid the crowd. However, FLoC testing was long since postponed in Europe already because it still wasn't clear whether this would comply with GDPR. Essentially, the assignment of a cohort to a user could still be interpreted as the transfer of personal data. This would be especially problematic given users wouldn't be providing publishers with consent to be added to cohorts.

Topics looks best understood as a watered-down version of FLoC. Topics proposes much broader cohort classifications, reducing their number from FLoC's 32,000 categories to just 350 'topics.' The browser will keep data for the last 3 weeks of the user's browsing history and the topics won't include any sensitive categories. There's also an additional layer to increase user privacy further and decrease the potential for groups to be reverse engineered. When a user hits a site that supports the Topics API, the browser will share 3 topics you're interested in, based on the last 3 weeks of browsing history, selected at random from the top 5 topics browsed each week. Users will also be able to review and remove topics from their list too.

However, it's still essentially the same methodology with some additional privacy layers and broadening applied, seemingly to appease regulators. It's hard to see how this still wouldn't constitute a transfer of personal data on an opt-out basis, as opposed to opt-in. And that's where it could still be doomed.

The impact of a cookie-less world could be greater for publishers, than it is for advertisers, who will struggle to monetise their traffic for the same value as before. For advertisers, big tech companies like Google still have access to an abundance of first party data from logged-in users that can be used for targeting. So, advertisers still have options.

However, even vast Google audience sizes would probably shrink if having to lean on logged-in data alone, potentially making higher-value audiences more expensive as targeting becomes increasingly competitive.

If Google, with its significant investment in building solutions, is struggling to find a fix, then this doesn't bode well for the future of the myriad existing data-led targeting methods.

We all know first party data is a priority in a cookie-less future. Investing in the testing of possible alternatives, such as first party data-matching via clean rooms and bunkers (i.e. InfoSum) could be a smart step.

What's not going away, though, are the benefits associated with targeting premium publishers and the power of context multiplied by quality creative. Testing the performance of curated inventory versus data-led buys is a good idea. Even better is investing more time and energy into producing good quality creative. Such a shift in priorities could only be considered a good thing for advertisers and the experience of users alike.





Ethnicity Pay Gap in Marketing

Exclusive data from the 2022 Marketing Week Career and Salary Survey has revealed, yet again, that marketers from ethnic minorities are paid significantly less than their white counterparts, at every level of seniority. This survey examined full-time respondents (35+ hours a week) who quoted basic salary, excluding benefits.

An alarming 23.7% pay gap highlights the divide that exists within the world of Marketing but, more importantly, illuminates the lack of representation prevalent in the sector today.

One of the most ethnically diverse cities in Europe, London accommodates around half of the UK marketing profession, with 56.8% of respondents working here and in the South East. Yet 75.3% of survey respondents identified as white. Evidently, pressing need exists for greater representation across the industry, one that remains overwhelmingly white and middle-class.

Companies across the sector were reminded abruptly of this disparity following May 25th, 2020, when the horrifying murder of George Floyd took place in Minneapolis.

Agencies and brands took to social media instantly to share their disdain for the incident, to express their support for marginalised communities and to pledge themselves to embracing an inclusive approach moving forward. Two years later, however, the battle continues.

The recent 'All In' report – the first and biggest industry-wide survey in the UK conducted by the Advertising Association – emphasised that non-white marketers experience significantly more discrimination due to their ethnicity than their white counterparts (45% Black, Asian and Mixed vs 1% White). This was matched with 78% of non-white marketers reporting that they were likely to leave the industry due to lack of inclusion and/or discrimination experienced.

Clearly, those who value a diverse workforce must be proactive in hiring talented marketers from the same marginalised communities they claim to support, encouraging a sympathetic environment that tackles discrimination daily and offering a salary that reflects merit and role, not background.

In light of this, initiatives such as Media for All (MEFA) are driving the change needed to increase representation at all levels of seniority. Founded in 2017, the organisation – run voluntarily by media industry professionals – exists to close the representation gap and help ethnic minority talent thrive within the industry.

To conclude, it is the collective responsibility of all decision-makers and thought leaders across the industry to increase ethnic representation at every level of seniority. Not only this, but they must ensure that marketers at all levels are paid for the role they have been hired to fulfil, no matter the colour of their skin.





What the Narrowing Digital Gap Means for Media

Earlier this month, the IPA released the 4th edition of its IPA TouchPoints report, Making Sense – The Commercial Media Landscape. Findings uphold the trend towards digital channels, which collectively now occupy a greater proportion of the nation's time than non-digital media.

While that is unlikely to cause a major surprise to marketers, evidence below the surface reveals a more complex picture – and with considerable nuances which planners must consider.

Firstly, the digital age gap is shrinking. While much of digital's growth in recent years has been driven by the 18-34 market, there are signs that usage of digital channels among younger age groups may have peaked. Compared to data from the 2021 lockdown, weekly reach among this demographic for social media, online video, and radio on-demand/podcasts remained flat or decreased slightly; the latter two of which had previously grown at a rapid rate since 2015.

While conventional wisdom might attribute this merely to people having less time on their hands post-lockdown, this is not uniformly observed. Among 35-54s, the weekly reach of each of those channels increased by 6-8%, indicating that such growth shows no sign of slowing.

All of which indicates that our relationship with media is becoming more homogeneous. In 2015, the correlation in time spent with commercial media between 16-34s and 35-54s was 58%; by the 2021 lockdown, this had fallen to just 8%. Yet, as over-35s continue to adopt non-traditional channels into their routines, this correlation has grown to 18%. In terms of weekly reach, the increase is even more stark: from 23% correlation during the 2021 lockdown to 52% correlation today.

This dramatic reversal is further highlighted by the fact that, at the very broadest level, patterns of media consumption across audio, video, text and OOH have returned to pre-lockdown form. The lockdowns of 2020-21 were the biggest shake-up to media patterns in decades, thanks largely to our greater time spent at home, minimising OOH viewing potential. Yet, far from a permanent 'new normal', many of those habits acquired in lockdown have already diminished.

Still, the fragmentation of digital channels over the last five years should discourage any planner from thinking that younger and older age groups will soon behave the same way when interacting with media. For most campaigns, multi-channel is still crucial. While 16-34s spent a whopping 78% of their commercial media time with digital channels last year, linear TV still commands a weekly reach of almost 70% among this age group. Despite the proliferation of digital media, there still remains no channel (except OOH) that commands a weekly reach of 9 in 10 adults of any age group.

If there's one thing to take away from this report, it's that stereotypes of target audiences are meaningless in the digital age. No, TV isn't dying, and yes, over-55s do consume AV. But under the surface, vital differences remain. While media reach is converging, time spent per channel still makes us vastly different. A successful campaign will be one that recognises such nuances.





The Right to Misinformation

Since the birth of the Covid-19 pandemic in late 2019, there has been a significant rise in misinformed content circulating on social media platforms daily. From false remedies to questionable theories, the internet has given people the space to share their thoughts on current events (regardless of whether they are factual or not), and those behind the platforms have had to adapt. Most recently, YouTube published an overview of how it plans to combat the spread of misinformation through YouTube videos, which prompts the question: how much control do social media platforms have in the policing of content and free speech?

Preventing the circulation of misinformation became a prominent talking point back in December 2019, when Instagram announced the rollout of their 'false information warning' feature, using third-party fact-checkers to reduce the spread. Whilst this came with good intentions, it started to receive backlash from creators on the platform who found that some digitally manipulated art was being labelled with this warning, with the work of some digital artists and photographers being hidden from the Explore and hashtag pages, limiting their reach and exposure in the process.

The problem remains a talking point amongst creators today, as they attempt to avoid algorithmic hinderance in their efforts to drive exposure of their work whilst maintaining artistic authenticity.

This issue eventually found its way into Parliament when campaigners proposed an 'Online Safety Bill' in May 2021, giving Ofcom the power to punish social media platforms that failed to remove 'lawful but harmful' content. While praised by many children's safety organisations, as this bill would assert pressure on social media platforms to combat hateful content under penalty of large fines, it was also opposed by civil liberty organisations for representing a clear breach of people's right to free speech. Furthermore, as the harmful nature of an item of content is sometimes determined by the individual consumer, the bill ran the risk of discriminating against particular groups (especially political groups) who may hold niche views that others may oppose.

Reflecting on the debate for free speech and YouTube's attempts to cap the spread of misinformation, we are also faced with another challenge: misinformation is both authored and manipulated daily. The first step in YouTube's overview suggested that the platform would begin 'catching new misinformation before it goes viral.' This would be done through an automated detection algorithm which would be built on past examples, which could work well for older conspiracy theories, but not for misinformation and conspiracies in their infancy, as these algorithms require a significant number of content/examples to train their systems. This means that the algorithm will always remain a step behind in a world where new theories and concepts are birthed and uploaded continuously onto the platform from around the world.

In summary, there is a clear desire from social media platforms across the board to tackle the spread of false information and harmful content in order to create a safer and more enjoyable experience for users. However, we are yet to discover a method of doing so that is just as fast as the speed at which content is created.





Did Coinbase Really Win the Super Bowl?

QR Codes Hit the Big Time

It doesn't happen during every Super Bowl, but once in a while a commercial airs that will be remembered long after the game. Crypto exchange platform Coinbase made the biggest impact among Adland commentators with an audacious 60" ad featuring a floating QR code in the style of the DVD meme. No branding or call-to-action, it simply held attention by enticing viewers towards a satisfying corner bounce. According to Coinbase, 20 million people were intrigued enough to get out their phones and activate the code which sent them to a promotion on the Coinbase site. That's quite a conversion rate out of the 150 million viewers for the Super Bowl.

Difference Generates Mass Appeal

This isn't the first time QR codes have made it onto TV, but it probably is the first time they have appeared solo in a \$14m dollar media buy. Some have been quick to herald this as the dawn of a new era of addressable TV, but this wouldn't necessarily be a sound conclusion. Above all, this was about standout; generating buzz and conversation. It grabbed attention because it was different, so it's unlikely to have the same effect a second time.

The ad itself was polarising in the extreme. Adweek named the spot the best of this year's Super Bowl ads, though the mainstream viewers who determine the USA Today Ad Meter rankings placed it dead last among the 2022 line-up out of 66 commercials.

This raises the question of who this ad was actually for. As the biggest crypto exchange brand, awareness is unlikely to have been the aim. This was more of an acquisition play. Coinbase used a quintessential top of funnel spot to pull off a lower-funnel stunt. Their primary audience is millennials; old enough to have disposable income and open to crypto. The visual cue of that QR code bouncing and changing colour like a '00s DVD player is subtly but precisely targeted.

The ad can also be deemed a success if we consider earned amplification - we're all talking about it. Coinbase probably doesn't care whether the overall sentiment is positive or negative. It was far more important to be noticed by its core audience than to be liked by everyone.

A Touchdown for Attention

You may think it's the death of creative storytelling, but if you're judging whether it was effective and a creative way to address their business challenges through marketing then it does seem to have delivered. It doesn't really provide a playbook for meeting a brand's marketing challenges, beyond underlining the importance of getting noticed in the first place.

Using the most iconic 'traditional media' ad spot to create a 'digital activation' also demonstrates that there's no real division between digital and traditional anymore, just integration - which is a perfect fit for a marketplace of digital currency.



NFTS, AD-LITE AND AMAZON

Warner Music Group has recently partnered with NFT platforms Blockparty and OneOf to create an exclusive range of NFTs for artists' catalogues, making it the first-ever major record label to officially partner with digital collectible platforms. The platforms will enable the label to generate PFPs (NFT-based profile pictures), music royalties and in-real-life experiences, whilst also removing the middleman for creators and fans when buying and selling NFTs. The first WMG artist to release a series of NFTs is Finnish artist STIG. The creatives will be focused on the artist's 'iconic moustache.'



Discovery UK is rolling out their new 'Ad-lite' offering across the UK and Ireland on the Discovery+ platform, following its initial launch in the US. The service will enable customers to pay a cheaper monthly subscription fee (£3.99 a month) for exposure to 'limited' ads, making Discovery+ the first subscription video-on-demand service in the UK to do so. The rollout of the platform has placed a primary focus on the 'user experience,' according to Katie Coteman (VP, head of advertising and partnerships for Discovery Networks in the UK and Ireland), who also believes that this could be a great opportunity for advertisers as the platform focuses on delivering 'really high-quality content, a limited ad load, and a premium experience.'

Amazon dramatically increased its advertising spend by 55% in 2021, arguably making it the largest advertiser in history by annual spend. The \$16.9bn (roughly £12.5bn) spent last year far exceeds previous global leaders, including P&G and Unilever, and comes as the company's sales have risen by almost 70% since the onset of the pandemic. In the same period, Amazon's advertising sales more than doubled – highlighting the company's position as both a major e-commerce player and media owner.

