



What's Hot?!

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Authenticity in Sport Advertising: The Opportunity and Risk of In-game Formats

ITV's [introduction](#) of in-play ads during the Six Nations marks a significant shift in sports advertising in the UK. For the first time, advertisers can appear during live play in the Six Nations. The format uses a split-screen effect, with the ad occupying half the screen while the rugby continues uninterrupted. When done correctly, this format can deliver high visibility and create a powerful moment to embed brands directly into moments of peak cultural attention.

According to Kantar [research](#), culturally relevant brands grow nearly six times faster than those with low cultural resonance. Few moments command attention like the Six Nations. Taking advantage of heightened moments of consumer engagement and aligning with one of the biggest sporting events of the year can significantly accelerate brand salience. However, taking centre stage during gameplay also invites scrutiny. As broadcasters seek new ways to monetise premium sports inventory, brands must balance the opportunity and risk that accompany new formats. With the World Cup approaching, when advertiser investment will spike again, brands will have to weigh the upside of cultural relevance with the risk of disrupting the experience fans care about most.

Initial results support this balancing act. The format launched with Virgin Atlantic and Samsung as inaugural advertisers, and YouGov [found](#) that 63% of viewers during the Six Nations first weekend noticed the in-game advertising. However, 59% of those viewers rated the new format negatively. Quantcast's social listening [shows](#) similar trends: Samsung's in-game presence generated 63% negative sentiment, while Virgin Atlantic saw 80% negative sentiment across the open web. Despite appearing only once per half, and only in natural pauses in play, the ads still felt intrusive to some rugby fans.

The strong fan reaction may have been mixed, but the high engagement shows promise that, with time, the new format will be a success. As *The Cost of Dull* [report argues](#), the biggest challenge in advertising today isn't outrage, but indifference. With neutrality the enemy of effective campaigns, the new in-game formats may present a way to break through with audiences. Nielsen has previously [found](#) that 81% of consumers trust brand sponsorship in sport. Sporting moments are emotionally charged, communal and culturally meaningful. This is an important context where brand perceptions are formed and reinforced.

As the TV ecosystem evolves and advertisers unlock new ways to engage with sports inventory, brands must navigate the balance between opportunity and intrusion. Brands experimenting with these formats should bring a clear sense of identity that enhances the atmosphere, deepens connection, and feels like a genuine part of the sporting experience. The advertisers who succeed will be those whose creative not only fits the moment but earns its place within it, adding value to the viewing experience rather than competing with it.



Shots, Strikes and Attackers: Navigating Media's World Cup Word Conundrum

Blunt-force ad-word blocking is a problem when it comes to hard news, but with the World Cup around the corner, it could be holding brands back when attention is at its highest.

Brand safety has been a hotly contested topic for the past decade, since a Times investigation [uncovered](#) instances of prominent brands appearing alongside terrorist content. This exposé led, altruistically, to most digital advertisers adopting word-blocking technology to ensure their brands did not promote harm. However, the mass uptake of blocklists has had unforeseen consequences, with completely safe content often arbitrarily blacklisted due to select words – public-benefit news content during the Coronavirus pandemic being a prime example of this.

As the FIFA Men's World Cup approaches, this phenomenon is likely to recur. Keywords which will be used time and time again during the World Cup include 'strike', 'attack', and 'shoot' – essential words for a match report, but a fast track to losing prime attention on editorial content if blunt-force word blockers strike down content as unsafe.

A growing bank of research suggests such arbitrary blocklists could be detrimental to brands. In 2025, Bountiful Cow released a [report](#), *Relative Advantage: Unblocked*. It was both an extensive piece of research into the effectiveness of using 'unsafe inventory' and a rallying cry to the industry of the inherent brand safety of newsbrands for advertisers.

Bountiful Cow CEO, Adam Foley, explains: "Blunt ad-word blocking has had a hugely deleterious impact on the news industry as a whole, where journalism of the highest possible standard has been penalised by endless lists of poorly thought through brand safety restrictions. Some newsbrands were unable to monetise their coverage of the Euros two years ago. With the World Cup, advertisers are in danger of leaving some of the best, widest-reaching content on the table if they don't rectify this problem."

The IAB, meanwhile, has since the days of the pandemic advocated for a more pragmatic approach. According to IAB Europe's brand safety [guidelines](#), "We do not advocate a blanket approach or overzealous use of keyword blocking."

As AI revolutionises ad tech practices, there have been [calls](#) to move away from strict brand safety guidelines and towards a contextual, agentic layer, where harmful content is still rightly blocked but where LLMs are used to determine whether the context a keyword is used in renders the environment brand safe.

Brand safety guidelines are of course essential, but they should not be applied uniformly. As global football fans descend on North America for the biggest tournament on record, there is a whole world of brand-safe attention at home, from trusted editorial outlets, waiting to be scooped up by advertisers.



Bundles of Joy: What Sky's Streaming Gambit Means for Advertisers

In late March, HBO Max completed its long-awaited launch in the UK. Boasting titles like *The Pitt* and fan-favourite *Friends*, the titans of US broadcasting bring an impressive back catalogue across the Atlantic. But for many consumers, the arrival of a new streaming service drew a similar reaction to [that of a famous Bristolian woman](#): 'Not another one?!'

The UK streaming market is already a crowded affair, and several services go toe-to-toe with traditional broadcasters for share of audience. [According to Barb](#), Netflix has a similar pedigree to ITV, Amazon ranks close to Sky, and Disney+ is not far behind. Newer entrants to the market, including Apple TV and Paramount+, reach over one-tenth of UK households. And that's before factoring in the paid version of ITVX, smaller competitors like BFI Player, and the litany of sporting-based streamers available.

On this evidence alone, the conventional wisdom would be that any TV service newly entering the market would face an uphill battle to gain subscribers.

However, the HBO Max launch reveals more about the direction of SVOD, for it appears certain that the vast majority of its users will not subscribe directly. Immediately upon launch, Sky [announced](#) that HBO Max, Disney+ and Hayu would automatically be bundled with all Ultimate TV plans, with Netflix already included. When Paramount+ (included with Sky Cinema) is thrown into the mix, this means that Sky customers can now access two-thirds of the UK streaming market – through a single TV package, with Virgin and NOW offering similar deals.

This highlights the role the UK's legacy pay-TV companies have adopted in the new streaming landscape. As the number of choices consumers have grows, so too does confusion. Platform exclusives and rights being passed around make it harder to ascertain which services are truly 'necessary'. Sky is offering a return to the days of old: customers pay a single monthly fee for (nearly) guaranteed, no FOMO viewing.

This is a far cry from the launch of Netflix as a true alternative to the TV package, ad-free and promising uninterrupted content, but it might offer the best of both worlds for both Linear and SVOD: broadcasters maintain a grip on the way audiences consume TV while streamers expand their potential audience base.

For advertisers, the promise of an all-in-one package is also lucrative. Bundled TV packages almost invariably feature the 'Basic with ads' tiers of subscription services, further increasing the reach of ad-funded SVOD services, which were [already predicted](#) to surpass ad-free models in 2026. This safeguards brands' access to high-attention, appointment-to-view streaming occasions.

Whether Sky's all-in-one gambit will prove successful remains to be seen, but it highlights that legacy TV providers will continue to influence the way Brits buy and consume content, even as SVOD grows its share of viewing time. As for HBO Max, it is [set to be combined](#) with Paramount+ into a single streaming service next year – at which point the ever-changing list of subscriptions might have to change again.



Will Fringe Anti-Tech Movements Ever Become Mainstream?

Gen AI has revolutionised the search experience. In the first eight months of 2025, ChatGPT [had](#) 1.8 billion visits in the UK alone, a figure that will only grow as LLM adoption becomes widespread.

Despite the surge in popularity of AI tools, pockets of discontent have emerged in some communities. In the US, last month's [announcement](#) of a deal between ChatGPT and the US military sparked a backlash, with celebrities including Katy Perry and Mark Ruffalo [backing](#) a grassroots 'QuitGPT' movement that eventually led OpenAI to reform its military agreement.

While many of the estimated four million people who switched from ChatGPT following the announcement migrated to OpenAI's chief rival, Anthropic's Claude, the movement's success highlights the unsteady relationship between consumers and tech. It also shows how fringe anti-tech movements can snowball into collective mainstream action.

The US has been at the centre of anti-tech discourse in 2026 so far, but the UK has experienced pockets of activity. March Against the Machines, organised by Extinction Rebellion at the end of February, saw the largest protest staged yet surrounding the general use of AI. More prevalent in the national discourse has been the rise of a more disparate anti-smartphone movement. A campaign, *Smartphone Free Childhood*, [has received](#) signatures from over 180,000 parents pledging to delay the age at which they will give their children a smartphone.

These moves follow a recent Ofcom report [which showed](#) adults are feeling less positive towards social media. In 2025, only 59% of British adults said the benefits of social media outweighed the risks, a drop from 72% in 2024. The common thread linking all anti-tech sentiments is how fast they can move. What can begin as a fringe anti-tech movement can gain considerable traction within a month, affecting change at both a grassroots and government level.

Yet, usage data tells a more nuanced story about how anti-tech discourse affects change on a behavioural level. Social media usage remains widespread, with Ofcom reporting nine in ten still access at least one social media platform daily. Indeed, according to IPA TouchPoints, usage of social media [has risen](#) rather than declined since 2024. Likewise, adoption of AI continues to grow across the UK. Anti-tech movements, while gaining traction among communities such as parents, have not fundamentally changed consumer behaviour on a national scale.

Brands should view the broad anti-tech movement through an audience-first lens. Different audiences are engaging to vastly different extents; while some have called for action against tech companies, millions more continue to adopt AI and social media into their daily routines. Furthermore, most 'successful' anti-tech movements focus on specific issues of how tech is used and who it is controlled by, rather than disparaging tech with broad brushstrokes.

These movements, while gaining traction, have focused on shifting behaviours among a segment of the population; shifts that can be harnessed by agile brands. If brands take time to understand their audience's relationship with tech, they can continue to play a positive role in their lives.



Pester Power Repositioned: the7stars' Gen Alpha Thought Leadership

As media professionals, we are inherently passionate about understanding different audiences and how best to engage them. A people-first strategy is foundational to strong media performance and, ultimately, drives business success.

the7stars' latest whitepaper, *Pester Power Repositioned*, is the culmination of a yearlong focus on uncovering and demystifying Generation Alpha, the latest and most digitally native generation ever. In recent years, this group has been in the headlines often – from the award-winning Netflix series 'Adolescence' to the John Lewis Christmas advert – with the prevailing narrative being one of a life spent in online worlds, of parents unable to break through and unsure what goes on behind closed doors. With the oldest Gen Alphas soon entering adulthood and becoming the consumers of today, it is imperative for brands to move past these portrayals clouded in mystery.

Contrary to the damning portrayal of this generation, this research finds that the relationship between children and their parents has evolved into one of mutual trust. Since 2015, the percentage of children who say their ideas are 'very different' from their parents has nearly halved (52% to 27%), while the proportion who say they are granted a degree of financial freedom has gone in the inverse direction, rising from 26% in 2015 to 53% today.

Across almost all categories – from toys and games to technology, entertainment, and holidays – Gen Alpha feel they know more than their parents. Contrary to creating conflict, this enhanced knowledge is fuelling greater collaboration over where the family spends its funds. Almost half (46%) of Gen Alpha say they research holidays on behalf of their parents, while 55% have final say over tech purchases and 34% help to pick out furnishings for the home.

This relationship is being felt and appreciated on both sides of the generational gap, with 60% of parents we surveyed saying their relationship with their children is 'more collaborative' than what they had with their own parents growing up, and 65% agreeing they take their children's opinions into account 'quite a lot' when making purchases.

Ultimately, both parent and child recognise that the final say always lies with the adults in the room – and that, despite being born after most social media platforms came into existence and being digital natives from day one, parents are still the most trusted source of information for Gen Alpha. But it is this circle of trust and financial empowerment that should be the prevailing narrative of this emerging generation – not the isolation of Adolescence.

All of which points to an undeniable fact: pester power isn't dead, it's simply repositioned. Today's pester power is more considered: less about, well, pestering, and more about collaborative decision-making in areas of mutual expertise. For brands to win with this next generation of consumers, understanding their trade-off between digital discovery and human relationships will be critical to remaining relevant.

the7stars' full whitepaper, *Pester Power Repositioned*, will be released later in Q2 2026.



Grand Prix Cancellations Impact Major F1 Sponsors

The [cancellation](#) of the Bahrain and Saudi Arabian Formula One Grands Prix has sent ripples through the sport's commercial landscape, particularly for high-profile global sponsors. Beyond racing, these events are major spectacles of luxury, innovation, and international attention, offering sponsors a prime stage to showcase their brands to millions worldwide.

Financially, the impact is significant. The two races together are estimated to generate over \$100 million in hosting fees and sponsorship-related revenue, meaning brands lose substantial returns on investment when events are cancelled. Headline sponsors like Rolex and DHL will miss out on trackside advertising, global broadcast impressions, and high-value hospitality events used to strengthen client relationships.

Overall, while long-term contracts remain intact, these cancellations will have a major impact in one of Formula One's most important regions.



Reddit Introduces Carousel Ads

The social media platform Reddit [has announced](#) that it is testing a new carousel ad format. Under this feature, which is currently being shown only to select users in the US but has potential to be rolled out further, users who search for product-related queries on Reddit may be served an assortment of products selected by AI, alongside forum results.

In its 20-year history, Reddit has evolved from a simple message board into a primary engine of discovery, with [over 80 million](#) people using the platform's search function each week. Indeed, many large language models (LLMs) – which themselves are redefining brand discovery – rely heavily on Reddit for sources of data and training, given the crowdsourced nature of its recommendations.

While Reddit was initially slow to adopt ads, sponsored content has become more prominent in recent years. Should the trial of carousel ads prove successful, it could provide another means of delivering high-impact impressions for brands seeking to nudge consumers through their purchase journeys.



UK Programmatic DOOH Investment Set for Big Rise

A new study has claimed that investment in the UK's programmatic digital OOH (pDOOH) sector [is forecast](#) to rise by 41% in the next 18 months. The study, by supply-side DOOH platform VIOOH, suggests the recent traction for the channel is only set to continue in 2026 and beyond.

Currently, around one-third of campaigns include pDOOH in the media plan, but this is set to grow to nearly half by the end of 2027, according to VIOOH. This growth comes as increased efficiencies, greater optimisation possibilities, and enhanced targeting capabilities make the digital outdoor sector more appealing for brands seeking to target specific audiences in contextual formats.

Alongside this trend, there has been much for brands to say 'ooh' about OOH in recent years. Digital ads now make up around two-thirds of the total outdoor sector, a share that is predicted to grow to 75% by 2027. Additionally, new LHF restrictions have led many brands to shift investment into the OOH sector.