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THE BATTLE FOR OUR SCREEN TIME

At the end of July, Scarlett Johansson began the process of suing Disney after her superhero film *Black Widow* was released on streaming services at the same time as its cinema release.

Although it set a box office record for a film released during the current pandemic, grossing \$218m in its first weekend, receipts then fell sharply and Johansson argued this was because people were able to watch it on Disney+, therefore depriving her of potential earnings and breaking contractual promises which had been made to her.

While Disney defended itself and claimed it had not violated Johansson's contract, the saga is just the latest example of how powerful streaming services have become, and how traditional film outlets may have more than COVID-19 keeping them up at night.

The streaming industry was one which benefited hugely from the pandemic, with millions of people being forced to stay in their homes. Netflix reported that in Q2 2020, at the height of the first wave of the pandemic, it gained 10 million new subscribers in just three months. Similarly, Disney+ launched in the UK in March 2020, perfectly in time to swallow up droves of viewers in search of new content.

Signs that streaming platforms could garner significant returns on films bypassing theatrical were already there. In spring 2019, a whole year before the pandemic, *Murder Mystery*, a Netflix original starring Adam Sandler and Jennifer Aniston, was viewed in over 30 million Netflix accounts in its first three days of release - a phenomenal figure by any stretch but even more so if converted into equivalent box office numbers. The enforced closure of cinemas during lockdown gave the major studios a golden opportunity to experiment with straight to streaming themselves, which Disney did with *Mulan* (Liu Yifei) and *Soul* (Jamie Foxx & Tina Fey), and then with the simultaneous release on streaming and theatrical ("Day and Date") of *Black Widow* itself. If Day & Date can be made to work for the studios, this would seriously weaken the leverage cinema chains leverage over their share of the box-office.

However, there are clear signs that Day & Date is not necessarily working for the studios resulting in a weaker overall return - there is no incremental revenue from the streaming views - whilst the earlier appearance on TV screens is also ushering in an increase in piracy. The financial model has definitely changed but theatrical releases and cinema itself look set to still be with us for the foreseeable future.





PODCAST MEASUREMENT IS GAINING TRACTION

Despite the impact of the pandemic on media consumption, podcasts have been somewhat 'pandemic-proof'. Following an initial dip in podcast consumption in early 2020 – reflective of a shake-up of consumers' regular routines, where they no longer needed to fill the silence of their daily commutes – loyal listeners soon found the time in their new routines to re-engage.

Whilst radio still tops the ranks for most popular audio source, there are 14.6m podcast listeners in the UK and growing, with 25% considering themselves 'regular' listeners. And with the majority having only listened for 1-2 years, that tally is only set to grow – to an estimated 16.8m by 2024.

Self-reported surveys show podcasts to be a highly effective media channel. In one such Nielsen study, 62% of listeners correctly recalled a podcast ad, with the same proportion considering the product as a result. Thus, podcasts attract an audience which is highly engaged, attentive and curious – all while maintaining a relatively low cost of entry both for publishers and advertisers.

In the UK and globally, podcast audiences skew male, 16-44, and with an above-average income. They are highly engaged and loyal to their favourite podcasters, but also diverse in their consumption, with 40% admitting they consume more podcasts than they did when they first started listening. Podcasts are also successful in driving time spent, with the average listener completing 80% of an episode – substantially higher than YouTube's 50% viewer completion rate.

Taking this into consideration, podcasts appear to be a no-brainer for brands. However, until recently, the ability to target specific and often complex audiences has been a difficult task.

Whilst we know that podcasts garner a loyal following, gaining a more granular audience understanding with effective channel measurement has proven complicated. Recognising this challenge, leaders in the digital audio market have long searched for ways to make buying and measurement more seamless. Tech giants Apple and Spotify are pioneers in this space, looking to create a programmatic inventory that would enable the buying of audiences in aggregate.

In a bid to become the world's largest audio platform, Spotify are investing heavily. By leveraging data and analytics in order to grow the monetisation of their ad ecosystem, Spotify have recently acquired Gimlet Media, Anchor and – critically – Megaphone. Through a partnership with Nielsen, Megaphone has unprecedented access to that golden nugget of audience data. This will allow Megaphone and, in turn, Spotify to use Nielsen data to target podcast audiences.

For the first time, podcast measurement can move away from monitoring downloads only, and towards a more platform-agnostic, real-time view of listener behaviour and interests. This offers not only a lucrative prospect for brands, but a more personalised and engaging experience for the listener. As they become easier to buy and measure and more embedded into consumer lives, podcasts are becoming one of the most effective media channels for agencies and brands alike.





GREENER, FASTER, SMARTER

The road less travelled makes for a turbulent ride, so we are creatures of habit, comfortable in the status quo.

In times of crisis, however, humans are very adaptable. When COVID hit, we quickly got used to working from home, and our laptops became windows into our worlds. Of course, there were rogue children photobombing news reports and lawyers' faces replaced with cat AR in courtrooms, but for the most part, we were okay.

So, when traditional shooting (particularly at scale) became a significant challenge, everyone looked at creative alternatives.

One solution was stock footage libraries. Before the pandemic, these libraries were littered with awkwardly hammy scenarios. Now, with the production world having to pivot and spend time navigating what was now needed to safeguard the health and safety of everyone attending film shoots, sites stepped in erupting with swathes of outstanding material. Thus, a new level of quality, previously inconceivable from stock footage, was born.

Taking full advantage of this, Supernova – the7stars' in-house creative arm – fulfilled a brief for Penguin Random House in this way, advertising the new book by Lianne Moriarty, author of *Little White Lies* and *Nine Perfect Strangers*. By utilising the expanded stock footage libraries, we were able to create a trailer-style film in a quality once unimaginable – by thinking smart, acting fast.

When it became clear that stock wouldn't cut it for all briefs, the production world pushed ahead with computer-generated imagery. Virtual sets and packshots were created, often using photo-realistic, real-time rendering through the Unreal Engine. A technology once limited to gaming was now being used to produce Lurpak ads; seen on a colossal scale when filming *The Mandalorian*; and combined with parallax techniques for dramatic effect.

When parts of the world opened up once more, the production community began attending shoots remotely, saving on unnecessary travel costs and, more importantly, on carbon emissions.

And with shoot production the most significant cause of carbon emissions in advertising, each of the above techniques – relatively new to adland – can help us to mitigate that carbon footprint.

The past few years have proven that we can discover new and better ways of working when challenged. Much like virtual meetings, many recent innovations are here to stay, meaning we can work greener, smarter and faster to produce results. As the media industry continues to evolve, such techniques show we can innovate to benefit our staff, clients and, above all, our planet.





TO ADVERTISE OR NOT TO ADVERTISE

Some brands are so universal that it raises the question of whether they even need to spend on advertising. Many people claim that they are not influenced by ads at all and, once brand loyalty is established, it's a tricky task to get consumers to change their behaviour.

The difficulty in understanding the impact of turning advertising off is that few studies have been conducted; those in the industry are more focused on the effectiveness of their media. In the past, some studies have been conducted looking at pausing TV advertising, with findings suggesting a 50/50 chance of sales decline, but the majority of these focused on established brands.

The Ehrenberg-Bass Institute for Marketing Science has now released a report examining brand sales once advertising is halted. The study looked at the media spend and sales of 70 brands in the Australian consumer goods category over 20 years. Of these, 57 cut media for a year or longer. The initial results showed that stopping advertising for one year led to a 16% sales drop; two years saw a 25% drop and three years a 36% drop.

However, within these averages there is significant variation. Therefore, the study split the brands into small (<250k units), medium (250k-1m units) and large (1m+ units). Given that the larger brands will have greater mental and physical availability, we would expect them to be more resilient once advertising stopped. Indeed, the study found that big brands were fairly stable after a 2-year advertising pause. Medium and small brands both saw a more marked decline in sales.

The data also differed depending on the brand's stability. Stable brands saw a substantial decline after 2 years with no advertising. Brands that were growing had very different results depending on their size. Big and medium brands continued to grow for 1-2 years, whereas small brands immediately stopped growing and then declined. Unsurprisingly, brands that were already declining dropped off at a faster rate once they stopped advertising.

The evidence shows us that while brands might be tempted to pull advertising, it's highly likely to have a negative impact on their sales. Mental availability falls if the consumer isn't exposed to the brand, making them more likely to be swayed by a competitor's advertising. This is particularly important when we consider that most of any customer base is made up of light buyers. Without these customers, brand growth is impossible. Even large brands will be sacrificing sales growth if they pull their ads.

While some may consider advertising to be a nice "add on", this study proves it to be an integral part of a brand's success.



MINI STORIES

In 2010, X Factor gained peak viewing figures at 19.4 million, but now it's curtains for the talent show. We've seen the programme launch the careers of musicians including One Direction, Little Mix, and Alexandra Burke. However, after the lacklustre celeb version which saw viewings drop as low as 2.95 million it's no surprise to see it retired from our screens.

Simon Cowell is gearing up to launch a new show called Walk the Line, which has been described as a "musical gameshow". The format has been developed by Syco Entertainment and Lifted Entertainment, who are behind smash ITV hits such as I'm a Celebrity and Love Island.

X Factor may always remain a British classic, but TV viewers are ready for something new.



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As Summer comes to an end, a new batch of Love Island influencers are released from the villa. Over 2.8 million viewers watched Millie Court and Liam Reardon win the 7th series, beating 2020's peak figures but falling short of 2019's.

This year JD Sports and ISAWITFIRST partnered with the show to supply contestants with wardrobes. Now, fans will be looking out to see which contestants clinch the best brand deals, with earlier season star Molly-Mae Hague recently signing a seven-figure fashion deal with Pretty Little Thing.

This year, 21-year-old Liberty Poole looks to be the most successful islander, with an Instagram following exceeding 1.2m. While some argue that Love Island's best years have passed, it's clear that viewers remain invested.

The Tokyo Olympics have come to an end, with the Paralympics now in full swing. Team GB made the country proud with 65 medals, an amazing achievement given a year of disruption to training schedules.

2021 marked the first year that the BBC did not have wall-to-wall coverage, with a subscription to Discovery needed to watch all the events. However, with free access and the top two events broadcasted on the BBC, it's no surprise they still topped the viewing figures. According to BARB, the men's 100m final gained 5.1 million viewers on the BBC, but only 100,000 on Eurosport 1, the Discovery owned channel.

Due to many events airing live in the early hours of the morning, many viewers used BBC iPlayer to catch up on the games; Charlotte Dujardin in dressage was watched by 2.8m viewers online.

