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MEDIA & MARKETING

Companies Avoid Advertising Next to Coronavirus News

The name of the virus overtakes 'Trump' as the keyword blocked by the most brands, a problem for digital news publishers

By [Patience Haggin](#) and [Sahil Patel](#)

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Advertisers are increasingly steering clear of online content related to the coronavirus, a problem for digital news publishers churning out articles about the pandemic.

Companies can use sophisticated tools to limit where their ads can appear online, avoiding certain topics or keywords they don't want to be associated with. Lately, they have targeted coronavirus news.

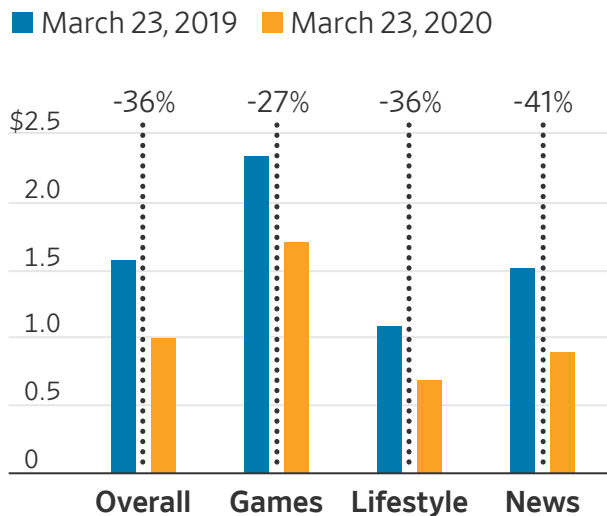
“Coronavirus” is now the keyword blocked by the most brands, having overtaken “Trump,” according to brand-safety firm Integral Ad Science Inc.

The targeted keyword blocking makes it even harder for publishers to sell ads at a time when many companies are pulling back ad spending to cut costs during the crisis.

News Slump

Prices for ads on news sites have fallen sharply during the pandemic.

Price per 1,000 ad impressions



Source: Staq

“No doubt about it: There’s a lot of ad budgets that have just been stopped,” said the chief operating officer at one news publisher. “It’s just adding more pain to the publishers’ situation.”

Publishers are feeling the burn on nonnews stories too. Some advertisers are also avoiding lifestyle content that may mention the outbreak, such as articles featuring recipes to cook while in quarantine, the chief operating officer said.

“A lot of the coronavirus content that is getting flagged is service-oriented stuff: ‘Here’s what you need to know today,’” said Ryan Pauley, chief revenue officer of Vox Media Inc. “There is no brand suitability problem being next to that.”

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Prices on March 23 for automated online ads were on average 36% lower than they were on the same date a year earlier, according to Staq Inc., which aggregates data from more

than 40 digital publications. The price slump has hit news the hardest: ad-impressions on news content were down 41%.

Most online ad-buying happens through automated marketplaces. Typically, companies purchase ads aimed at audiences with certain characteristics—age, shopping habits or interests, for example—rather than space on specific sites. They can hire measurement or “brand-safety” firms to track their campaigns and blacklist their ads from appearing in certain locations.

Such blacklisting has grown more sophisticated in recent years. Even before the coronavirus outbreak, many advertisers were sidestepping articles about politics or President Trump, affecting virtually all publishers, from small outlets to large players like CNN.com, the Washington Post and The Wall Street Journal.

In mid-March, as the coronavirus crisis was becoming acute, Oracle Corp. -owned ad-measurement company Moat Inc. deemed more than 50% of desktop and mobile ad impressions across Dow Jones & Co. properties including the Journal and Barron’s unsafe for brands, according to people familiar with the matter. That more than doubled the share of impressions deemed brand-unsafe in February.

Advertisers use Moat’s brand-safety data to make ad-buying decisions, though the exact revenue impact for Dow Jones-owned outlets is unclear, the people said.

“We understand that there is sensitivity around where ads appear—and this has heightened during the crisis. Our focus has been on developing tools to help ensure that messages are put in the most suitable adjacencies. We work closely with our customers and ad tech vendors to find better solutions for advertising,” said Josh Stinchcomb, chief revenue officer at Dow Jones. Dow Jones, publisher of The Wall Street Journal, is a unit of News Corp.

When brand-safety firm Integral Ad Science deems an ad slot unsafe for the brand that bought it, it fills the slot with an ad for its own service. Those ads became nearly twice as common last week, according to ad-tracking firm Pathmatics Inc.

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Publishers and firms that specialize in brand safety are encouraging brands to relax their blocking measures.

Matt McLaughlin, chief operating officer of brand-safety company DoubleVerify Inc., said advertisers shouldn't block their ads from content with virus-related terms "when these words appear on trustworthy news sources."

As mainstream advertisers back away from virus news, some of those ad slots are being sold through the automated marketplaces to companies with questionable pitches and products. Ads for "miracle cures" have appeared alongside journalism about the outbreak, for example.



The image shows a screenshot of an advertisement for "N95 Mask Respirator". At the top right, there is a play button icon and a close 'X' icon. Below the icons are three side-by-side photos of a woman wearing different styles of dark-colored cloth masks with a white circular filter. The masks are labeled #1, #2, and #3 in green text. Below the photos, the text reads: "N95 Mask Respirator", "Our N95 Respirator Mask Filters All The Bad Stuff.", and "Best Dang Stuff". A circular arrow icon is positioned to the right of the text.

PHOTO: PATHMATICS INC.

"Our N95 Respirator Mask Filters All The Bad Stuff," reads one ad from Best Dang Stuff, featuring images of a cloth mask. Its ads appeared on news sites including Yahoo in

March, according to Pathmatics.

Best Dang Stuff didn't respond to requests for comment.

Ivan Markman, chief business officer of Yahoo parent Verizon Media, said Yahoo supports industry initiatives encouraging brands to support trusted news content. Verizon Media is a subsidiary of Verizon Communications Inc.

DoubleVerify said it has begun filling brand-unsafe ad slots with public-service announcements about the coronavirus instead of its usual placeholder image of white clouds against a blue sky.

Ad-tech company Amobee Inc. is buying ad slots in news stories and filling them with announcements created by the World Health Organization and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"If we're gonna have a lot of inventory that's not being utilized, maybe we can use it for a social good," said Philip Smolin, Amobee's chief strategy and revenue officer.

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