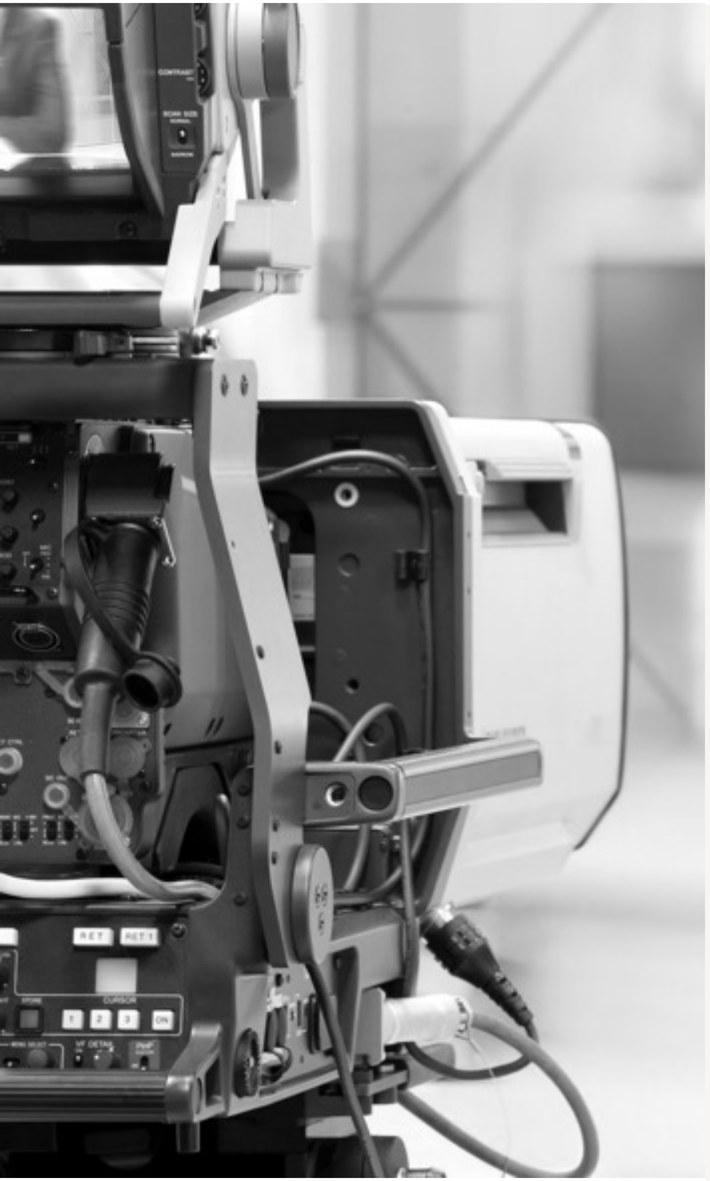
The Mis/Disinformation Problem

This report was commissioned and funded by the Peter G. Peterson Foundation



The Mis/Disinformation Problem

The rapidly shifting media ecosystem has significantly accelerated the creation, distribution and amplification of misinformation and disinformation.

Misinformation refers to false information presented as a fact, not shared with the intent to harm.

In contrast, disinformation is untrue or semi-truthful content presented as fact and spread maliciously. Disinformation could include spreading false information to manipulate people to support a particular viewpoint or to incite chaos and discord.

Sizing the problem is a challenge, since there is not yet an agreed upon measure for trustworthy, credible news and the potential reach of every piece of false content is difficult to quantify, but Magid estimates that 98 million consumers are likely susceptible to misinformation.

Amplifying the problem

The methods of creation and consumption make isolating the problem a challenge. The increase in creators, amplification of content, and decline of true journalists makes for challenges on many fronts.

01

Reduced barriers

- Anyone can create content
  - NewsGuard tracks more than 6,500 “news” sources.
  - More than 42 million creators on YouTube.
- Social platforms intertwine ‘professional’ and amateur content, making the source and validity of information difficult to discern.
- Most misinformation creators have a niche following, but social distribution means even a single ill-conceived tweet can become news to millions.

02

Amplification

- Social media is a primary news access point, and the algorithms serving that content feed the echo chamber, reinforcing consumers’ worldview while they think they are expanding it. This technology is largely undisclosed and unregulated.
- The increase in news hours and the 24/7 access driven by digital platforms means news brands cast wider and wider nets for content to fill the time.

03

Declining gatekeepers

- While the number of content creators overall rapidly multiplies, the number of professional, trained journalists continues to decrease.
  - Journalism has lost more than 30,000 jobs since 2008.
  - 2,100 newspapers have closed.
- Meanwhile, salaries for journalists are not attracting new grads.

Driving polarization

What has the most significant impact?

When bias moves from stances and ideas to stoking animosity for the “other side” through misinformation, disinformation, and strong “othering” rhetoric by those seen as spokespeople or leaders of a side (be they politicians or podcast hosts, etc.), we see the most significant polarization.

This is affective polarization—the most destructive kind of polarization that we are seeing today.

AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION

For decades, polarization was considered to be an ideological matter—how strongly Democrats and Republicans diverge on political ideals and policy goals. Such competition among groups in the marketplace of ideas is a hallmark of a healthy democracy.

But more recently, researchers have identified a second type of polarization, Affective Polarization, focusing less on ideas and more on denigrating the supporters of the opposing party.

Affective polarization has core ingredients that come from human psychology and the media and political landscape. These factors feed off one another to accelerate the problem:

Human factors	⇆	Landscape factors
Othering		Rise of partisan media
Aversion		Negative political campaigns
Moralization		Social media amplification

Money motivates the "Biasphere"

News is a for-profit business, but that can be a solution to the problem

CHALLENGE

- News organizations compete for the audiences that drive revenue, motivating actions that enhance bias to appeal to consumers in an ever more challenging environment.
- Misinformation itself is a significant business within that mix in absolute dollars – at least $2.6 billion. But as a portion of the total news revenue pie it is quite small – just a few percent.
- But this small revenue has had a major impact and could have a profound impact for good if redirected.

OPPORTUNITY

- Advertisers want to associate their brands with trustworthy content, stating it as a top motivator for placing ad buys. They tell us they're lacking the information needed to steer clear of bad platforms.
- Given that disinformation dollars are a small portion of total spend, it would not be adversely difficult to move those dollars to better options.
- When presented with a concept to make them more aware, advertisers found it appealing and said they would pay for it.

5

Landscape of players

- In an effort for advertisers to avoid their products appearing on sites that promote mis/disinformation, several players have introduced solutions.
- The main players fall into two categories: 1) buying agencies who build proprietary “black box” systems that integrate data from multiple sources and 2) the scoring providers themselves.
- The majority of existing entities are rightly focused on the hard work of measuring, evaluating, and scoring media outlets in a credible and verifiable way.
- The outputs are more often than not data sets, with little emphasis on the deployment and application of the data, including being fit for purpose for the applications in ad buying systems design for the specific needs of advertisers.

Ad Buying Ecosystem

MAJOR GLOBAL MEDIA AGENCIES	TOP DEMAND SIDE PLATFORMS	SCALED SOLUTIONS PLATFORMS
PUBLICIS GROUPE	Adobe Advertising Cloud	Google Ad Manager
groupm	theTradeDesk	amazon advertising
		facebook Ads

Examples of Scoring Providers

Focuses on rating news for reliability and bias. A key product is the Media Bias Chart, which places sources on an X-Y graph to show how they compare in terms of their content, rating it from the most reliable (original, fact-based reporting) to the least reliable (inaccurate, fabricated information).

Provides transparent tools to counter misinformation for readers, brands and democracies. Main product is the 'NewsGuard reliability rating' of news sources, granting a 1-100 score, and a 'nutrition label' with information on who controls the site, the content it publishes, and why it received that rating.

Provides independent, neutral and transparent data and intelligence to advise policymakers and business leaders in their strategies to combat disinformation and its creators.

Created a series of digital standards called 'Trust Indicators' – 8 metrics to help identify and surface high quality reporting.

Monitors online video with AI to monitor not just content but context, combining machine learning with the nuance of human understanding.

IF SOLUTIONS EXIST WHAT ELSE IS NEEDED?

Efforts to redirect advertising dollars away from mis- and dis-information sources have been increasing but remain fragmented, under-the-radar, and without scale. Without a concerted, unified effort, there will continue to be no material impact.

Creating and deploying an aggregated tool could make it easy to use, rally industry-leading advertisers, and accelerate the movement of ad dollars away from sources of mis- and dis-information which present brand safety issues.

Creating an inflection point

The availability of an easy-to-use brand safety tool could create an inflection point, accelerating the movement of advertising dollars away from sources that spread mis- and dis-information and drive affective polarization within the country.

By redirecting billions of advertising dollars away from negative, discredited sources and towards credible, vetted sources, such an initiative could make a *material* impact in the fight against mis- and dis-information in America.

The Concept

The need + concept

An initiative is needed to accelerate the movement of advertising dollars away from sources that spread mis- and dis-information and foster affective polarization within the country—creating an inflection point in impact.

This could be accomplished by creating and integrating a new Trust Tool into ad tech systems that is flexible, easy to use, and brings existing best-of-breed media scoring data into one place.

Use of the tool by key advertisers and agencies could be driven through concerted leadership efforts to activate against the problem and motivate the ad industry as a whole to promote and encourage the use of the tool to affect change.

Trust Tool – Value Proposition

A comprehensive solution

The value proposition of a Trust Tool is that it **could unify and highlight best-of-breed existing media evaluation and scoring systems into a comprehensive solution** that provides flexibility, optionality, and easy application for the end users. Unifying the best scoring products into a single solution could yield the following benefits and features:

Easy and effortless

A solution "baked into" existing ad buying platforms

A best-of-breed solution designed for ad buying

A comprehensive, vetted, and simple offering, covering a range of critical ad-supported media, using some of the best media scoring data on the market.

Flexibility

Give advertisers the ability to select different dimensions/ levers of the scoring system that align with their goals and brand safety priorities and that will still enable them to meet reach and frequency goals.

Optionality

Provide brands using the system the choice to include evaluation on journalism dimensions (fact-based, transparent, journalistic standards) and/or bias/contextual dimensions (rumor, intentionally polarizing, inflammatory).

Designed for growth and innovation

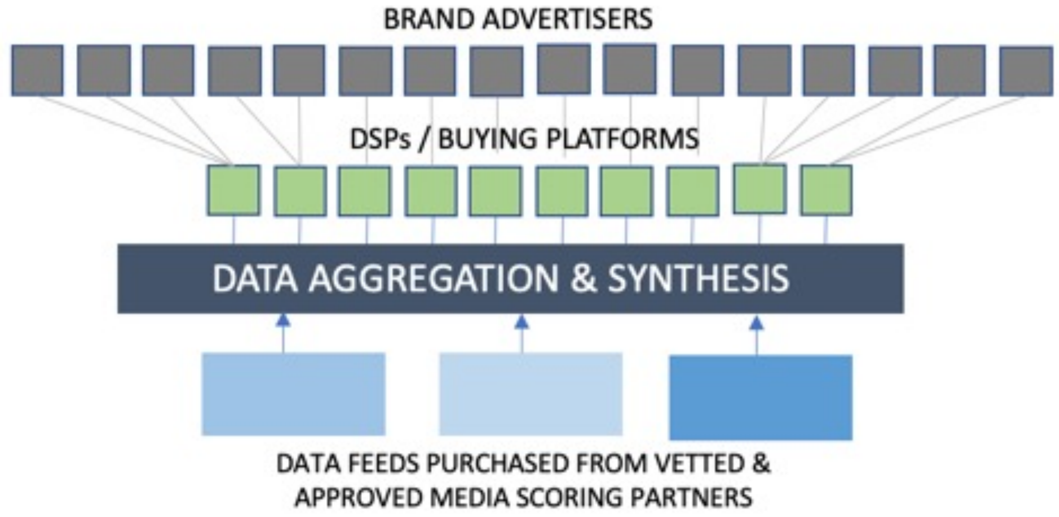
The best-of-breed approach would enable onboarding of new solutions and partners as technology evolves and new ways of spreading and preventing mis- and dis-information emerge.

Scope

Working together to achieve scale in the ad industry benefits individual scoring data providers because they can increase their revenue faster, easier, and more cost effectively than on their own. And if a provider is a nonprofit organization, they can increase the impact of their mission, increase funding, and increase focus on other applications of their data.

Data Aggregation and Synthesis
The technical aspects of the process would require aggregation, synthesis and data structuring of the various partner sources which a data science team could accomplish for the initiative. The synthesis would act as a bridge and translator between diverse databases structuring them in a way that becomes a unified service with flexibility and optionality, that can be easily integrated into existing ad buying platforms and processes.

The data could be structured in such a way as to provide the end users with the ability to weight up or down different types of criteria on which media are scored and set a range for acceptable performance on different criteria. This optionality would be an important aspect of such a solution.



Optionality + Flexibility

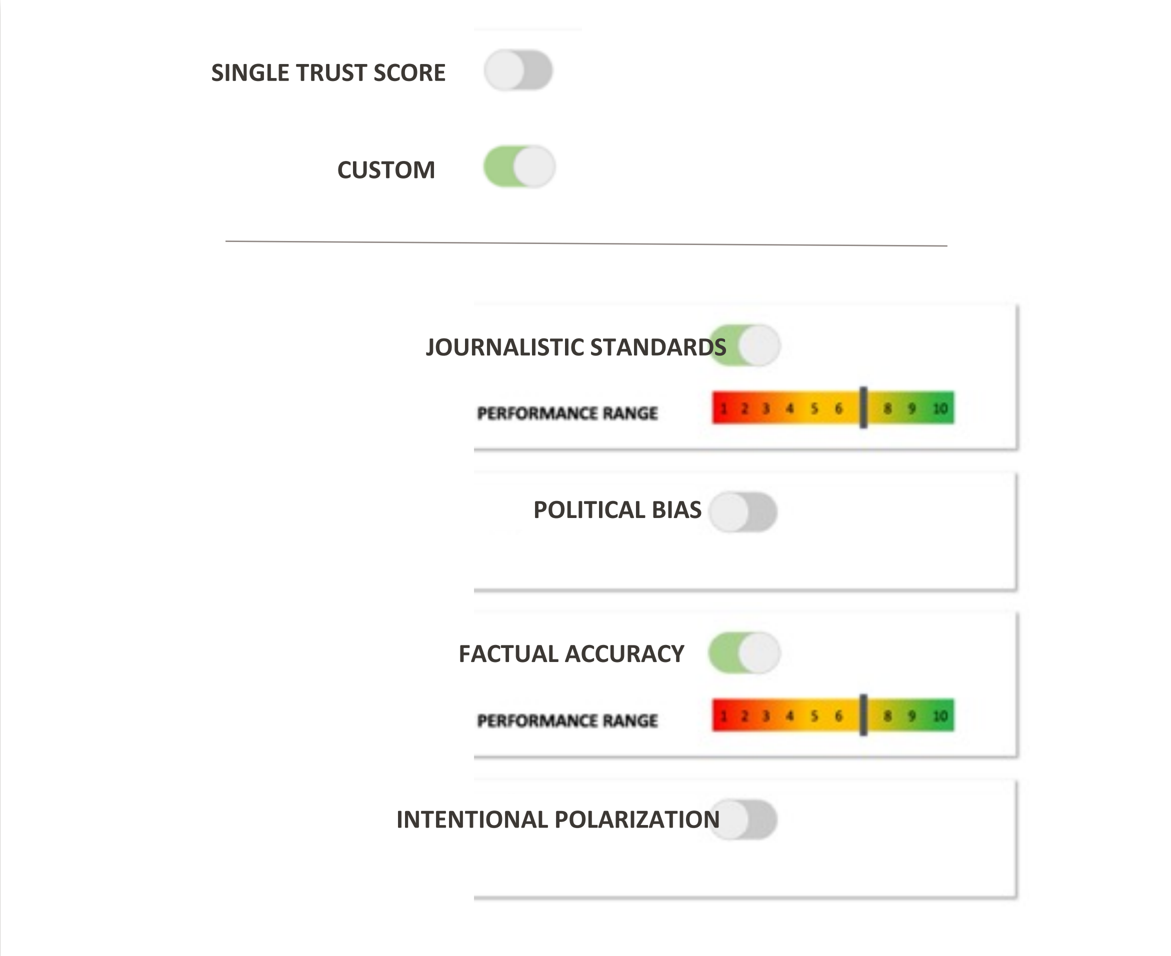
Central to a Trust Tool would be the ability to use a simple aggregate score, or to customize the tool based on specific dimensions and ranges.

- For example: brand A (its choices depicted on the dashboard example on the right) wants to customize the filter to enable greater reach. The buyer only toggles on Journalistic Standards and Factual Accuracy and sets the acceptability performance range to include only sources who score and 7 or above on a 10-point scale.

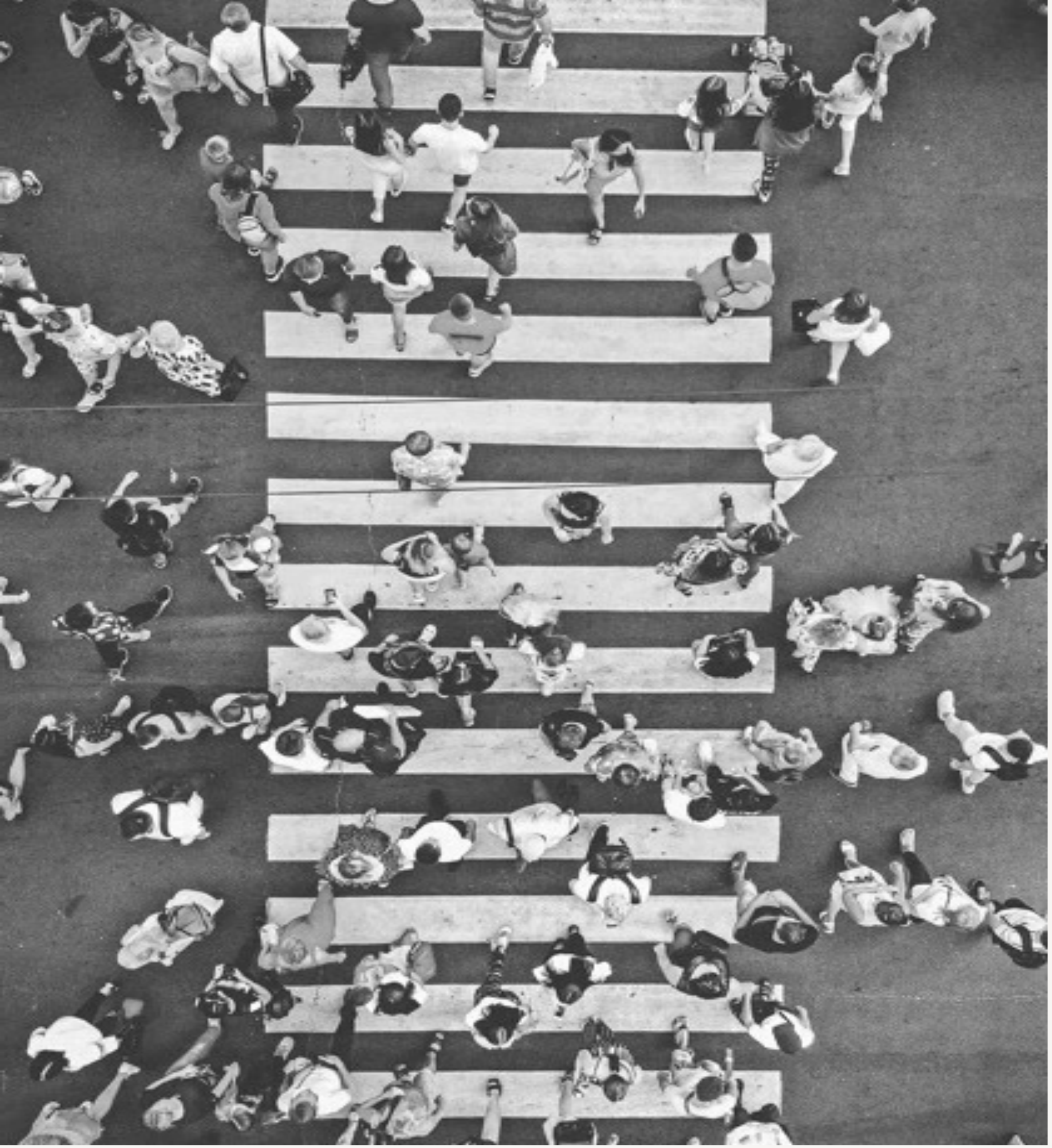
- Brand B may choose to use the simplified version of a single aggregated Trust score.

- Brand C may switch on factual accuracy, journalistic standards, where they set the acceptability range at 9 and above, and then also turn on political bias where they set the acceptability range to 5 and above.

Having the option to make these choices would be an important aspect of adoption **across the industry.**



The Market View



Listening to the market

Magid conducted a series of in-depth interviews with executives who represent different facets of the ‘ad community’ to pressure-test the Trust Tool concept as an intervention for mis- and dis-information. While the conversations covered a variety of topics, discussion centered around the following themes:

- How do these individuals feel about current efforts to address these issues?
- What do they think of the idea – is it viable, compelling?
- What are the concept’s strengths and weaknesses?

This summary focuses on the major themes of what we learned and distinctions across the different sectors of this broader vertical. These conversations included individuals from the agency/ad buying side, brands, tech or research organizations, trade organizations, and scoring organizations.

Key take-aways we heard

01 **Things are moving fast**—and not at all. The space is rapidly changing with new entrants, new challenges, new technology, and yet little seems to change in terms of meaningful impact

02 **Advertisers and agencies perceive a need for the concept.** But being excited about the concept and being ready to sign on the dotted line are two different things and getting commitments will take concerted effort

03 **There is confirmation that any initiative needs to be advertiser led**, to motivate key stakeholders

04 **Mis- and dis-information sources is not enough.** Affective polarization—dividing the country into "us and them" is seen by those studying the problem as just as damaging to democracy and stability in the country

05 **There is enthusiasm for a tool that brings a synthesized view of media evaluations from multiple sources**

06 **Companies that plug-in to buying technology to help advertisers with fraud and brand safety issues are an additional distribution possibility** for the concept that needs to be investigated

07 **There is growing sensitivity to potential political implications,** including emerging efforts to thwart work combating mis- and dis-information

08 **Many see the concept as a way to "re-fund" news** – many advertisers want the value of attention news brings and they see the concept as a helpful tool with the brand safety risk

09 **It is important for the tool to be flexible** in order to help advertisers and agencies find a balance between media exclusions and hitting their reach goals

Themes – Feedback on an Intervention Idea

Reactions to the idea were uniformly positive, but praise tended to come with caveats

STRENGTHS

Several strengths emerged across multiple interviews:

- **Fulfilling a need** – this was seen as addressing an unmet need directly targeting some of the very criticisms that interviewees had identified from current offerings
- **Motivating** – targeting ad dollars was seen as leveraging the most motivating element in the eco-system—funding
- **Unified** – the most often mentioned plus was that this would be a unified effort
- **Unique** – the most positive individuals said this seemed distinctive

MUST HAVES

The most consistent questions and concerns centered on implementation, with many feeling the concept was appealing but its success would be dependent on being well executed. Some felt that to succeed it must be:

- **Transparent** – how measurements are determined, the data sets and the methodology used to arrive at results would need to be shared
- **Customizable** – the idea of brand suitability – being able to shape the filter to a specific brand's risk tolerance was key – have a range of metrics and scaling to ensure nuance and customization were key
- **Simple** – there was a sense that this needed to be integrated into current systems and be easy to tap in and out of
- **Impactful** – while most felt this would be more effective if it were able to address social media and go beyond news, but without exception they also felt that even a limited initial launch could have significant impact and be a good starting point

CONCERNS

Beyond executional concerns, there were other cautionary notes that emerged:

- **Idealistic** – some felt that, while worthy, an expectation of getting creators of current competing tools to work together would be challenging
- **Underdeveloped** – some liked the idea but said ultimately it would succeed or fail based on having the technical ability to create the tool. Some felt the concept was too vague
- **Political implications** – several noted recent efforts to politicize the entire issue of mis-disinformation
- **Overly narrow** – some felt the focus on mis and disinformation and/or a specific focus on news made the project overly narrow, missing on some other elements that drive affective polarization – including vilifying others, being sensational and divisive, deliberate fear mongering of the other, etc.
- **Difficult** – when asked why efforts have failed to gain traction in the past, those closest to these efforts also noted that this is difficult, complicated and will take time
- **Lack of financial motivation** – there was some sense that until companies are suffering financially by losing customers, because of their association with mis- and dis-information engagement may be challenging (though some also felt this tool if integrated by some marquee players might lead to a positive tipping point)

Brands

Those most directly involved with brands, the advertisers who spend the money, both current or past marketing executives and brand heads – tended both to see a need and be most positive about the idea of an intervention. While there were no meaningful negatives for this group, there was an underlying hesitancy with questions around wanting more details about how it would actually work.

These individuals are on the frontlines of dealing with ‘brand safety’ issues so any tool that will make their lives easier was seen as a plus. While interest from this group was high, even within this group there were distinctions. But regardless of its importance to specific brands, there was a feeling that this idea would be a welcome tool and one that these individuals would consider supporting and employing with the caveat they would want it vetted and tested before committing. These executives already had general brand safety firms they were using – so this was seen as additive and supplemental but also dealing with an issue no one else was really tackling.

It was striking that there was little to no awareness of scoring organizations among brand marketers and no mention of using trade organization as a way to find or judge options. They dealt mainly with brand safety ad tech firms who dealt with the more traditional brand safety concerns like adult content or violence.

There were also some interesting nuances in *how* these individuals would want to see this tool framed and the user experience they would expect. These brand marketers would want the user experience to be integrated into current ad buying mechanisms and they would want to be able to customize how and what they wanted to filter and to what extent. Brand marketers felt that there would be some sort of ‘good housekeeping seal’ for a tool such as this but could see that coming from any number of things – the involvement of major brands, independent organization ratings, trade organization involvement. They felt that those that currently provide tools would likely *want* to partner on a new initiative, feeling that it would improve their relevance to the marketplace. They also talked about how distinctive this effort was, underscoring that this has the potential to allow brands to go back into the ‘news space,’ which has a highly desirable audience of committed consumers but is an area most brands have avoided as too risky.

Agencies

Agencies essentially matched the brand marketers in their perceived need and openness to a new tool that might directly address these issues – but also brought a broader perspective.

A hypothesis going into these sessions was that agency executives might see a filter such as this as directly competing with their own proprietary tools. That was not the case. In fact, they seemed to see the potential of being able to take a hero stance of introducing their clients to an effective filter and the idea that this would give them one less thing to worry about. The agency individuals we spoke to seemed to act in more of a 'soft advisory' role – steering their clients toward appropriate solutions but not necessarily being the solution itself.

Mirroring their overall responses, agency executives tended to cite the same strengths and appeals as the brand individuals. One thing that agency executives brought up more often than actual brand managers was their concern that their clients' success was less based on 'brand safety' and more on the reach and ROI on ad placement.

The agency individuals did seem to have a somewhat more contextual take on current efforts and were aware of some tools that are already in existence. Some spoke of current efforts as being 'cobbled together' and all the agency individuals saw holes or limitations with current tools. While they noted that current efforts do have some efficacy, they spoke of them as less than ideal. That broader perspective also meant that the agency individuals tended to have a more robust check list of what a new tool would need to look like – underscoring its need to be fast, customizable, intuitive and distinctive.

There was no consistent take across the various agency execs on who should drive these efforts and especially scattered responses to whether trade organizations might play a role. One felt that pulling in these organizations would kill momentum with things getting stuck in committee and with an inherent conflict of interest from groups threatened that part of their role would be undercut with a tool like this. On the other end of the spectrum, one executive expressed that they could see a role for them (though even they did not feel this was essential).

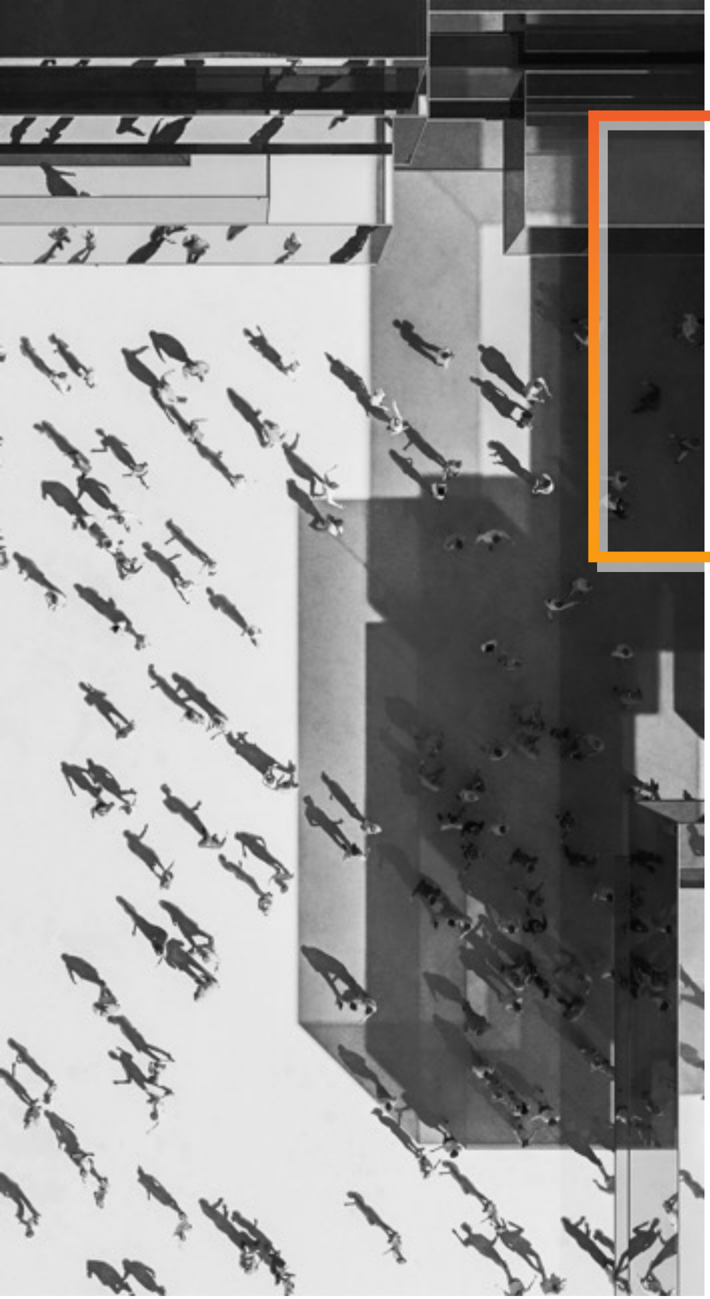
Trade Organizations

Those from trade organizations – especially those who did not have additional agency or brand roles – were the most skeptical about this concept.

They were less urgent in their belief that there was a need. They still felt that mis and disinformation were issues but they felt they were currently being addressed with a number of tools and that they 'have this covered.' They noted that as organizations they vetted these and offered their members useful insights and measurements to judge the quality of different options.

When discussing the concept, they raised some of the same executional issues that were heard in other interviews but tended to see these as greater barriers. They also were the most doubtful that current scoring companies would ever agree to be part of a consortium, essentially feeling this would undermine those businesses competitiveness.

One of their strongest takes was on the need for any effort to be driven by trade organizations as a natural way to form a community, create outside objective standards and let brands know this was a credible effort. Interestingly that need for trade organization involvement faded in other parts of the ad community ranging from feeling it was optional to several seeing these organizations as not able to develop products.



Final takeaways

01 ***Positive but limited efforts*** There was broad appreciation for current efforts but there was a sense these are nascent and ‘chipping away’ rather than comprehensive. Current efforts are not delivering – most felt current efforts are incomplete, underdeveloped or flawed – and those that were on the agency side or part of independent agencies were especially critical of current efforts. As a group, interviewees felt these tended to be:

- Piecemeal –different tools address different aspects
- Lack consistency – there are no shared standards or approaches
- Lack transparency – how measurement happens and on what basis is not consistently shared
- Complex – tied to the piecemeal nature of what’s available, there is no simple streamlined way for brands/agencies to figure out what they should use so finding the right resources is too complex and time consuming
- Lack of integration – the tools that do exist are severely limited because they are not woven into existing systems

02 ***No best in class*** Not one person was able to call out a ‘best in class’ potential partner – again, suggesting that no single current option has defined itself as the lead or emerging lead provider for this kind of service

03 ***The need exists*** Based on feedback, there is a need and opportunity – it is especially felt from the brand/agency side