

Platforms' increasing focus on brand suitability lets advertisers claw back a bit of control

Article

The news: Facebook is expanding its test of tools that allow advertisers to keep their ad placements from appearing alongside certain topics, [per](#) a company blog post from last

week.

- The “Topic Exclusion” feature can currently be used to bar content tied to news and politics, social issues, and crime and tragedy.
- Facebook users will also be able to toggle whether they are included in these three topic groups via an Ads Preferences dashboard.

How we got here: The move follows a trend of platforms placing increasing emphasis on brand *suitability* rather than brand *safety*. For example, some brands may want to avoid their ads being shown near political content—not because it's NSFW or against site guidelines, but because it's misaligned with their brand identity.

- **YouTube** hopped on the trend as early as 2018 through an expanded **partnership** with **DoubleVerify**—likely out of necessity, as the video platform has long been criticized for poor brand safety controls.
- In 2020, shortly before the US presidential election, **Reddit** **rolled out** three ad inventory tiers—standard, limited, and expanded—warning that the increased reach of the expanded tier would come at the expense of possibly placing ads next to more controversial content.

What this means: For one, focusing on brand suitability acts as a stopgap solution for less-than-perfect safety measures, especially for platforms grappling with reining in harmful content and misinformation.

- Returning to the politics example, advertisers that mistrust Facebook’s ability to separate tame from harmful political content can now simply avoid *all* political posts.
- Even as Facebook rolls out this change, it has still failed to achieve brand safety accreditation from the **Media Rating Council (MRC)**.

Suitability tools also offer a bit more content control back to advertisers at a time when so much of that control is being lost.

- Two weeks ago, Facebook parent **Meta** **announced** it would stop letting advertisers target ads based on sensitive content like race and sexual orientation, likely in preparation for upcoming EU regulations that would limit the practice.
- That’s in addition to the loss of targeting capabilities resulting from **Apple's** and **Google's** privacy changes.

- Topic exclusion is certainly no substitute for laser-focused targeting capabilities, but it does give advertisers some say over the context their ads appear in. Importantly, it will also be difficult for regulators to argue that advertisers shouldn't have expanded brand safety controls.