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Tech for good: Self-regulatory bodies harnessing new technology to help ensure responsible advertising

Pioneering self-regulatory organisations (SROs) have successfully embraced technology to address the challenges of regulating online advertising. Building on their unique expertise, the European Advertising Standards Alliance (EASA) is now supporting the uptake of tech-enabled solutions across many more markets in Europe. This digital transformation is paramount in order for SROs to efficiently carry out their mission and, more generally for ad SR, to remain relevant.

The challenge of scale

Digital ad spend has been steadily growing and now accounts for 63 percent of the total spend. It is no surprise that, in recent years, digital marketing communications represented the largest share of complaints received by EASA's SR network. The volume of ads to be reviewed by SROs will most likely continue to increase with growing phenomena such as influencer marketing, and the transposition of the AVMS directive which gives

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ad SR a prominent role and extends its provisions to video-sharing platforms.

This is why pioneering SROs, namely in France, the UK and the Netherlands have developed A.I. tools to alleviate the burden of low added value tasks and enhance the efficiency and coverage of their monitoring capabilities. Since the first initiatives back in 2008, much has happened: first prototypes are now fully operational and are used on a daily basis. The main types of tools are detailed below.

Avatar monitoring

SROs proactively carry-out monitoring sweeps utilising avatar technology. 'Avatars' are online profiles that simulate a specific browsing activity to identify what ads are served to that specific profile. They allow identifying trends in how some categories of ads are being delivered to specific audience groups such as children and to take action when ads are being served to an inappropriate target group.

Online display ad monitoring

SROs implement tools that use a machine learning model to automatically detect suspected breaches in online display advertising such as online banner advertising. They flag for review those that seem likely to be illegitimate, helping complaints teams identify potentially harmful ads that the SRO would otherwise not be aware of. Today, these technologies are used, for example, to tackle issues of misleading therapeutic claims, prohibited financial products by analysing text and image.

Social media monitoring

Data-driven influencer marketing monitoring projects aim to assess the content of influencer posts and videos against the provisions of the SR code such as transparency requirements. They allow reviewing large amounts of posts via an automated reporting of violations. For example, 30,000 pieces of influencer content were analysed in only three months. Such actions allow to act on the breaches but also to

study the correlation between compliance levels and the number of followers in order to better target preventive and training actions. They can also be embedded in wider SR approaches. In France, such Data-driven tools are used to monitor influencers in the scope of a certificate granted to responsible influencers who successfully passed a test on the rules for online advertising.

Going further

But this is an ongoing endeavour as A.I. technologies are evolving in many ways. First, models are being improved and machine learning gets more efficient as increasing quantities of data are being analysed.

Secondly, such technologies are being leveraged to tackle other forms of advertising such as radio ads.

Thirdly, developments in one country are being transferred to other geographies.

EASA supports data-driven SR initiatives

EASA is investing to accompany such initiatives and foster widespread adoption across Europe. EASA set up a dedicated data-driven working group to allow exchanges of ideas and best practices as well as to raise

the network's awareness about the added value of data-driven SR. EASA supports innovative SROs that are exploring natural language processing and visual recognition technologies or investing in in-house data science capabilities, as well as those that are adopting existing data-driven solutions to enhance their operations. As of now, EASA expects data-driven technologies to be rolled out in 9 additional countries, including Germany which will be carrying out an influencer marketing pilot project.

...and it's only the beginning

The first SRO and the ICC code was established over 85 years ago, at a time when TV advertising, let alone online advertising, was unheard of. Ever since, ad SR has constantly adapted to change. In 2020, the Alliance welcomed Google as its first digital pure-play company member.

This year, at a moment when EASA will be celebrating its 30th anniversary, ad SR, is living up to its longstanding legacy and demonstrating, once again, its nimbleness. Members of EASA's SR network are collectively embracing technology to continue ensuring tomorrow that advertising is legal, decent, honest and truthful.