

THE DATA REVOLUTION

Rob Bradley, CNN International's director of digital advertising revenue and data, on the latest **zeitgeist** in the media industry.

When did data become the zeitgeist of modern media? It's hard to put a finger on the exact moment, but what's beyond doubt is that the influence of data is here to stay and is set to only expand further. To understand an audience, feed an algorithm or inform real-time bidding, data and insight have roles to play in every part of a media company's business.

CNN, for example, has built up a huge digital audience at scale over the years, but the value of that audience is diminished if we can't understand it, respond to our users' behaviour and harness the insight for our advertisers. Sounds like a mighty task, right? Well, it would be downright impossible if we didn't have data insight.

Take, for instance, how data works in understanding and targeting an audience. Is it better to start with a large audience dataset and then narrow in and optimise targeting, or to start with a tight dataset and broaden it if delivery is hard or it's under-performing?

Having worked with publisher data using several management platforms for four years now, I've come to understand that

this balance is vital to the success of a data-targeted campaign. Utilising the platform to create both broad and tight datasets to optimise dynamically against is key.

Specific segments should be fluid, because one set audience won't always behave the same way for every campaign. By using the real-time data insight and reporting back to the client, the marketing message can be tailored for best success during this campaign or the next.

The bad news for smaller publishers is that only a large scale [operation] allows you to start big and tighten in segments to meet performance goals. Without the scale in the first place, where do you go to optimise? Some Western European and US media owners can utilise third-party data, but other regions will struggle to find meaningful volumes of accurate data, or, indeed, any data at all.

Scale can be bought in other ways, of course: huge audiences are available to any advertiser happy to be cast adrift in an ocean of inventory. Anyone can put money into Facebook to boost a post on a hobby page to target a group of users by demographic or interest anywhere in



Rob Bradley
Director of digital
advertising revenue and data
CNN International

the world. However, what about context, environment and a site's natural audience, harnessed over years of providing quality content? These mean something before data even enters the room.

Programmatic trading struggled for credibility in its formative years, but, as premium publishers entered the arena, programmatic became a means to reach upscale audiences. With premium publishers also comes reassurance about ad fraud – we like humans seeing our ads not bots – and marketers could rest easy knowing that even without the data to back up the results, they broadly knew what type of upmarket users their message would be reaching.

We need to be wary of an over-reliance on data, because a great creative solution in a relevant environment can succeed on its own and we don't want to risk creeping out a user by over-targeting them; but, overall, the positives far outweigh the negatives as long as we're sensible. In fact, data-informed decisions about capping the frequency of ads and re-targeting them can enhance the user experience and make our audience less likely to want to install that pesky ad-blocker. It's

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also important that we, as an industry, are sensible with our targeting choices, purely due to best practice.

However, the biggest opportunity for using data to its full potential is in the area of reporting. A tedious chore delegated to the most junior member of staff not so long ago, data-rich reporting is enabling publishers to

deliver true audience insight to clients. At a time when there's so much competition for ad dollars, the onus is on the publisher to go beyond the click-through rate.

There's a whole range of complex metrics – viewability, engagement, dwell-time and audience behaviour before, during and after they visit our site – that we can use to tell an important story: what type of audience saw your ad, how they reacted to it, what their next step was and how we can serve them better in the future. Only then can we, as an industry, truly say that we're not just relying on scale, but we also really understand the opportunity of the data revolution. ■

