

BRAND SAFETY IN THE COVID-19 CRISIS



Introduction

The COVID-19 crisis is a profound global challenge: to human health, to our every-day lives and working routines, and to businesses, employment and economies. It is certainly a challenge to the advertising industry, as global advertising spend is [forecast](#) to decline precipitously as a result of this crisis. In this environment, brands face a range of challenges - from finding suitable ways to promote their businesses, to ensuring that their digital advertisements are not placed next to inappropriate content.

As people self-isolate and work from home to mitigate the risk and spread of the virus, the world has moved indoors and online: as a result, the demand for entertaining and informative internet content has increased. For example, Italy has seen demand for bandwidth increase by 30% since the country's lockdown; UK internet traffic increased by 90% on the first day of the school closures; and the city of Seattle has witnessed increases of around 40% when compared with pre-COVID-19 times. Streaming services - such as YouTube, Netflix and

Disney+ - have cut bandwidth usage in Europe to prevent network congestion.

However:

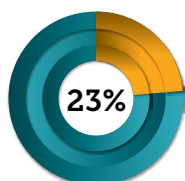
- This demand has also led to an increase in **pirate** consumption as more people search for unlicensed content at this time;
- There has also been an increase in the promotion of **misinformation**, particularly on social media channels;
- There is a shortage of quality ad inventory due to **keyword blocking** of COVID-19 content; and
- **Fraudulent and malware** activity often fills the ad inventory void.

New Trends

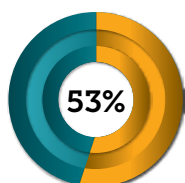
According to figures¹ from anti-piracy specialist, [White Bullet](#):



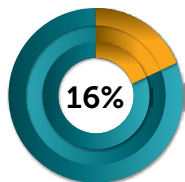
Between Q4 2019 and Q1 2020, overall ad impressions **increased by 50%** to the top pirate websites in the US, UK, Germany, France, Italy and Spain.



Overall ad impressions from brand advertising **increased by 23%** from Q4 2019 to Q1 2020 to the top pirate websites in the US, UK, Germany, France, Italy and Spain.



Overall page views (traffic) to the top 100 high risk pirate websites in the US, UK, Germany, France, Italy and Spain **increased on average by 52%** from Q4 2019 to Q1 2020.



In Q1 2020, **16% of pirate websites globally carried malware in display advertising capable of stealing private information.**

Other experts also identify some concerning trends. For example:

- Nearly 500 out of 109,000 videos related to coronavirus on YouTube and Facebook promoted misinformation, according to analytics firm [OpenSlate](#).
- “Coronavirus” was the second-most blocked term online in the US in March 2020 according to [Integral Ad Science](#)
- UK trade body [Newsworks](#) estimates that, if the COVID-19 crisis continues for another three months, industry ‘blocklists’ preventing ads from appearing next to COVID-19 stories is expected to cost news brands £50m.



¹ White Bullet analysis of the top 5000 high risk pirate websites between Q4 2019 (1 Oct-31 Dec) and Q1 2020 (1 Jan-31 Mar) focusing on six key ad markets: US, UK, Germany, France, Italy and Spain.

The Impact

These disturbing trends are increasing the need to focus on brand safety and are having a significant impact upon the business models of online publishers and content creators. Branded advertising is inadvertently being associated with pirated and other high-risk content, putting the safety of consumers at risk at a time when accurate information is paramount.

Publishers:



Despite the surge in demand for online content, industry ‘blocklists’ are preventing ads from appearing alongside news stories about COVID-19. Not only is this denying much-needed revenue for publishers, such as news brands supporting quality journalism during the crisis, it is creating a void filled with bids from less scrupulous marketers, such as [fraudsters](#).

UK trade body Newsworks (#backdontblock) has called on advertisers to “support UK journalism, as the industry is expected to lose £50 million from advertising blocklists.” In the US, the Brand Safety Institute (BSI) and Local Media Consortium has [launched](#) a whitelist of more than 3,000 news media domains by geography across the US.

What You Can Do?

Content Creators:



The funding of pirated content and counterfeit goods has always impacted content creators and the production of legitimate content.

According to the [US Chamber of Commerce](#), digital piracy costs the US economy \$30 billion annually. The increase in traffic to the top pirate sites during the COVID-19 crisis is exacerbating this situation, as highlighted by White Bullet's research.

Brand Advertisers:



Many reputable advertisers are inadvertently funding piracy. According to a 2017 [report](#) by Ernst & Young, the estimated annual revenue that piracy operations earn from digital ads served to copyright-infringed content was \$111 million in 2016 in the US alone, 17% of which came from well-known household brands. According to White Bullet, overall ad impressions from brand advertising increased by 23% from Q4 2019 to Q1 2020 to the top pirate websites in the US, UK, Germany, France, Italy and Spain.

Consumers:



People who view pirated content are much more likely to be infected with malware than those that do not. At least a third of piracy sites make money by deliberately infecting visitors' devices with malware, often leading to theft of private information. A 2015 report by Digital Citizen's Alliance, [Digital Bait](#), includes that the US Department of Justice found 16.2 million US consumers have been victimized by identity theft, with financial losses totalling over \$24.7 billion. In Q1 2020, White Bullet says that 16% of pirate websites globally carried malware in display advertising capable of stealing private information.



- 1. Advertisers and their agencies should ensure that their campaigns do not unnecessarily block trusted publishers.** This will also ensure people can find informative and helpful content and advice on COVID-19 and prevent less scrupulous advertisers from filling the void.
- 2. Advertisers should monitor their ad placements now more than ever and only partner with companies that are meeting robust industry standards (i.e. TAG Certified).** This helps brands avoid reputational damage from ad placement on websites and other media properties that facilitate the distribution of pirated content or counterfeit products. It also helps prevent facilitate fraudulent activity.
- 3. Advertisers should ensure that they, their agencies and digital ad partners are using all the tools and industry self-regulatory efforts to reduce the risks of their ads appearing on sites that infringe IP, such as TAG's [Certified Against Piracy](#) program which, according to Ernst & Young's US [research](#), is helping to reduce ad revenue for pirate sites by up to 61%.**
- 4. The digital advertising industry should take steps to minimize fraudulent and malware activity via industry programs such as TAG's [Certified Against Fraud](#) and [Certified Against Malware](#).**
- 5. Encourage others to browse responsibly and 'stream safely' by only accessing sites and service that offer legitimate content and services.** Not only will this reduce revenue to pirates, it will also reduce the risk of malware infecting a computer or other device, potentially compromising individual privacy. Visit [StreamSafely](#) or [CrimeStoppers UK](#) for more information.