Viewability Matters
What advertisers need to know about advertising viewability

Phil Shaw
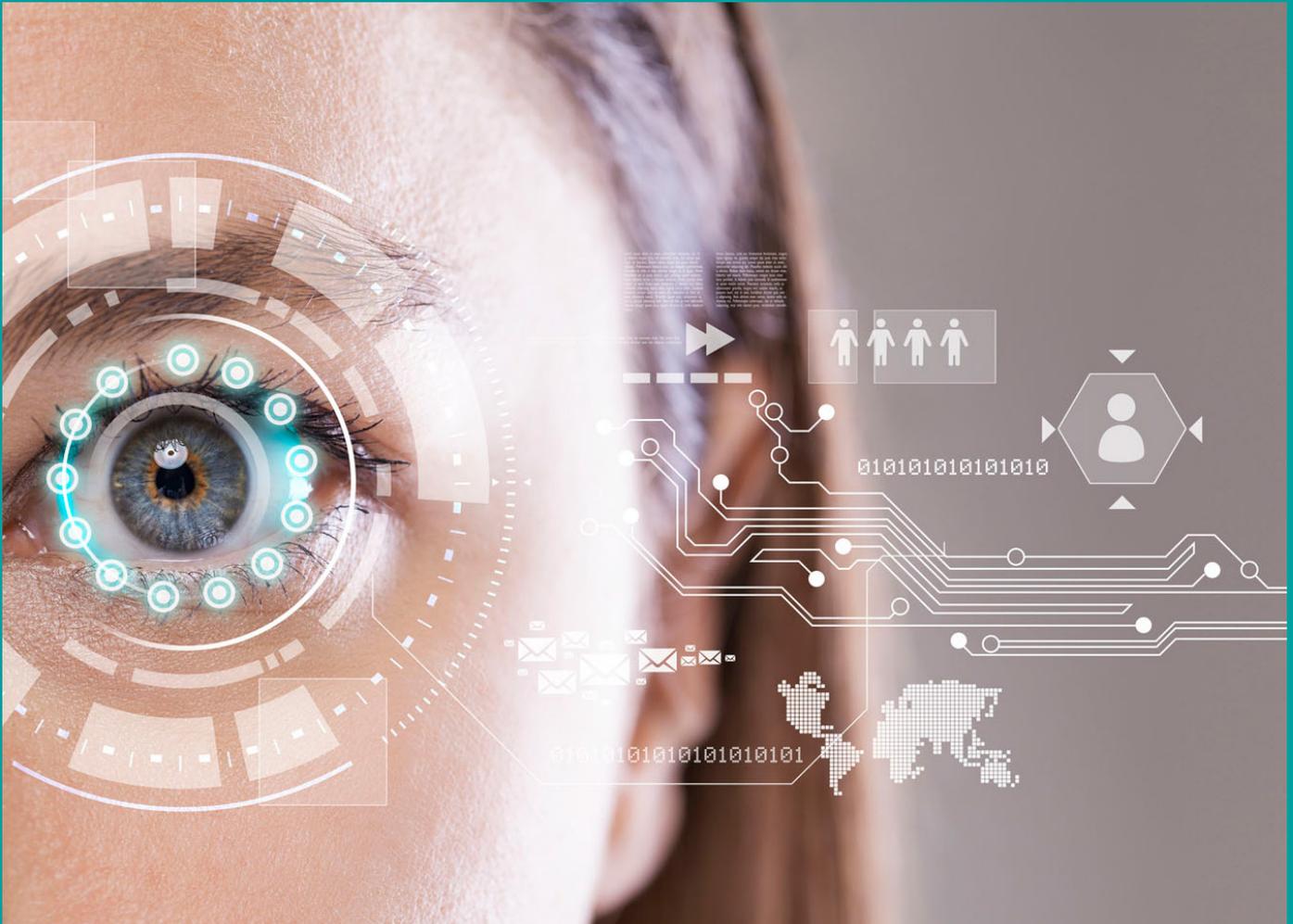
We tend to overestimate the impact of a technology in the short-term and underestimate its impact in the long-term. This maxim, conceived by Roy Amara, an American scientist and futurist, neatly describes the "hype cycle" of new technology and especially that of online advertising.

The promise of online advertising was to deliver more relevant, timely and targeted communications for the mutual benefit of consumers and advertisers.

People would only be exposed to ads appropriate to their desires and at the moments when they were most receptive, while advertisers would cut waste and deliver hyper-efficient campaigns through laser-guided audience targeting and personalised messages.

It hasn't turned out like that. Yet.

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The reality

Instead, 600 million devices now carry ad blockers and when ads do reach them, people skip and scroll so often that only around 20% of YouTube Trueview ads are watched to completion[1] and Ipsos data shows just 22% of Facebook video ads are watched for three seconds[2]. At the same time, over a third of programmatic ads are served to the wrong target[3], while ad fraud means that around 10-30% don't reach human eyes at all[4].

It's clear online advertising has big challenges. Despite these problems, the evidence suggests online advertising is effective… if used and measured in the right way. The Advertising Research Foundation (ARF) has shown that campaigns produce the greatest ROI when around a quarter of spend is allocated to online[5], while the work of Les Binet and Peter Field for the UK's Institute for Practitioners of Advertising (IPA) shows that the most effective media combination is TV and online video used together[6].

Advertisers are starting to wake up to this and major global companies are reallocating spend away from online formats and platforms that are proving less effective and insisting on third party measurement and transparency that shows where, how and to whom their ads are delivered.

What it means for advertisers

The start point is to ensure that ads are actually seen. It may seem obvious that an ad can't have an impact if no one sees it but for years, advertisers have paid for ad impressions that may never have appeared to a real person: either because of fraud or because the ads were served legitimately but appeared, for example, below the fold (off-screen) or on a background browser tab.

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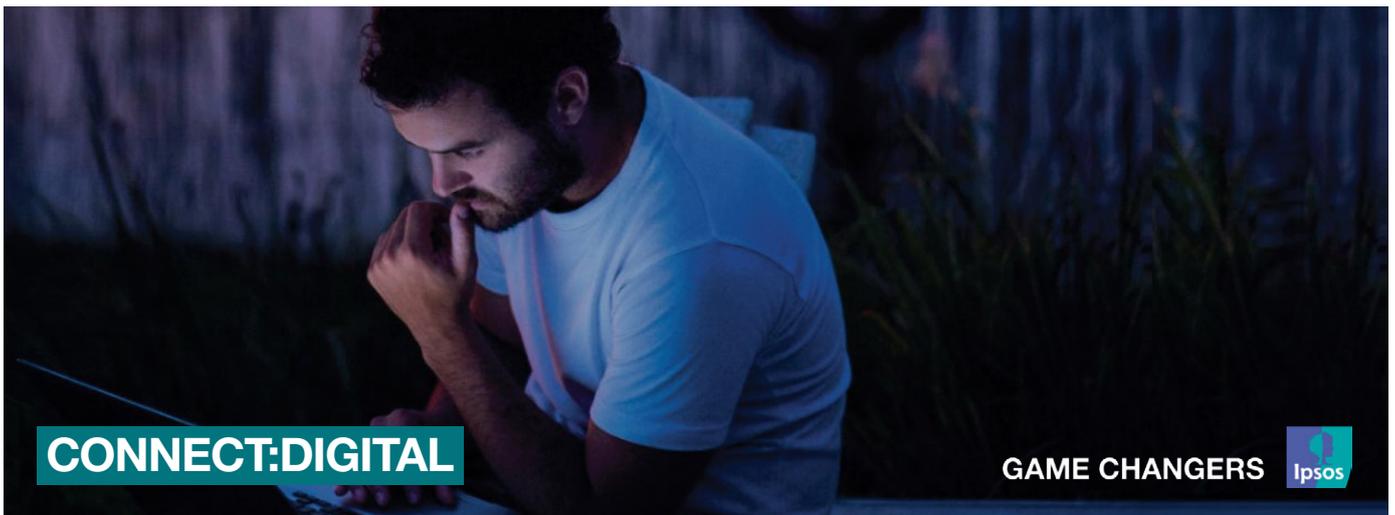
The Internet Advertising Bureau (IAB) and Media Ratings Council (MRC) have developed viewability standards that consider ads as viewable if they're visible onscreen for minimum time thresholds. Advertisers that buy online media against these standards will only pay for impressions that are at least 50% in-view for two seconds for video and 50% in-view for one second for display.

This is a good start. But it's not enough.

Viewability standards aren't universal and individual platforms have different viewability standards: Facebook and Instagram count views at three seconds, Snapchat upon opening and for YouTube it depends on format. Consistency is needed. And just because an ad meets a particular viewability threshold doesn't mean it's effective. Some ads may take longer to deliver the desired impact. Consequently, several large advertisers and media groups are negotiating online buys based on their own definitions of viewability derived from evidence of what is required for their ads to be effective.

Viewability is a measure of ad exposure on a device, not a measure of consumer attention. Advertisers need to understand the attention the ad gains and its impact on people. At Ipsos, we have two approaches that can help:

• Connect:Digital combines viewability and survey data to measure if ads are delivering against brand objectives among the advertiser's target audience, when they run in a live online environment, and how much of an ad needs to be watched before it delivers an impact.

• Connect:Live serves Facebook video ads live in the newsfeed – these are effectively "mini campaigns" taking place before the ads go fully live and giving the advertiser time to make changes to the ads or media weight behind each. It combines view and audience data with survey results to determine if ads deliver against brand objectives when they run live on Facebook.

In our tests so far, we've found that while longer view durations are associated with more brand impact, ads are also capable of delivering impact in short timeframes. Most ads perform better as non-skippable but those that have well integrated branding (use of distinctive assets and brand iconography is essential) grab attention (often with high energy or humour) and communicate simple and relevant messages can also work well in formats with shorter views such as skippable, outstream and in newsfeeds. A great example was an alcohol brand in Italy which created a high energy ad in a bar with very engaging visuals, strong product presence and a clear message. The ad drew attention immediately, the brand and message were obvious and the high energy and visuals held attention.

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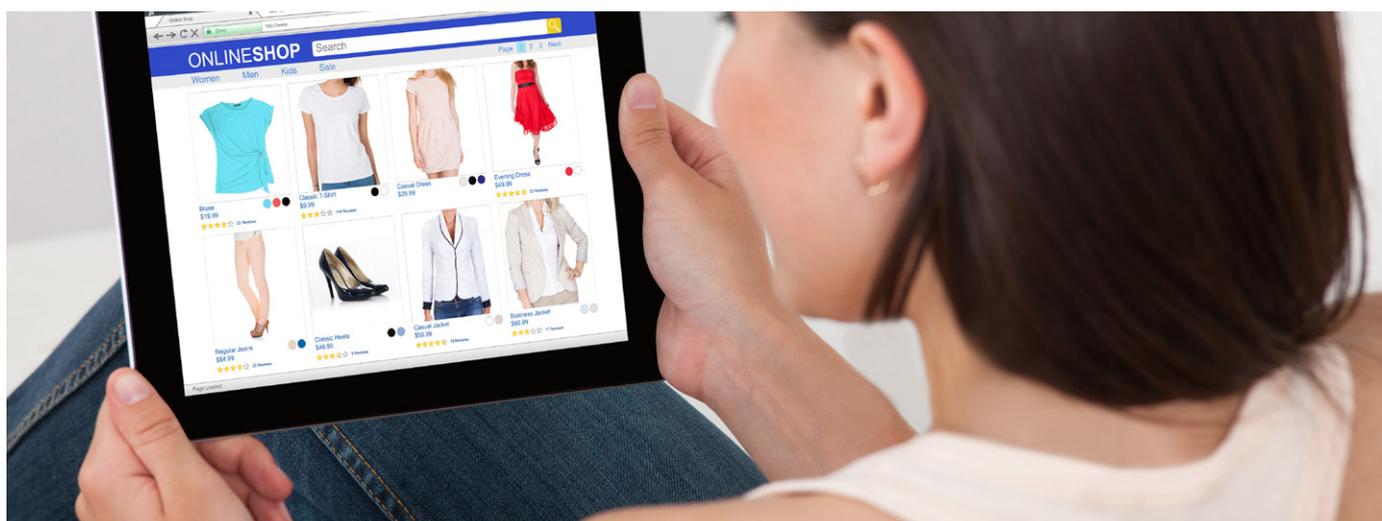
Viewability is one part of the equation. **Success comes from making great creative that is optimised to the platform on which it will run and from making evidence-based buying decisions that bring together viewability, audience and survey data to tell the full story.**

And while it may seem obvious to insist on only buying viewable impressions, advertisers need to be aware of the potential for unexpected consequences. Research has shown that younger people scroll through their Facebook feeds faster than older people. Which means buying only 3-second viewable impressions may lead advertisers to under-deliver to their intended audience. Advertisers may also find that limiting themselves to only fully viewable inventory means they end up only able to buy premium priced inventory that drives down overall campaign ROI. Very short views of the right content can raise brand salience and improve effectiveness for the wider campaign.

Looking forward

If online advertising is to reach its potential, then advertisers need the knowledge to make informed choices and that means understanding the differences in how their ads will appear and perform across different platforms, formats, contexts and view lengths. Robust research and transparent data is vital.

References:

[1] *Emarketer*

[2] *Ipsos Connect:Live database*

[3] *Nielsen*

[4] *World Federation of Advertisers (estimated range)*

[5] *'How Advertising Works' - Advertising Research Foundation*

[6] *'Media in Focus' – Les Binet & Peter Field (IPA EFF Works)*

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