



## Voluntary Advertising Initiative May Hold a Key to a Responsible Internet

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BY NEIL FRIED

If I told you the advertising industry might hold a key to saving the internet, you'd probably say I'd downed one too many Old Fashioneds with Don Draper. But stick with me. A House Digital Commerce and Consumer Protection Subcommittee hearing today entitled [Understanding the Digital Advertising Ecosystem](#) may make things a little clearer.

Advertising—including digital advertising—is an essential way to support and distribute compelling and diverse content. As we are all aware, however, the internet is also increasingly riddled with illicit activity, from child sex trafficking to rogue pharmacies, identity theft to theft of intellectual property, and fake news to malware. Unfortunately, online advertising supports those endeavors, too. This intersection of advertising and the seedier side of the web creates problems for everyone, albeit solvable ones.

Ad agencies, ad brokers, websites, and advertisers see financial and reputational harm to their businesses when legitimate advertising is connected to disreputable content.

This is perhaps best evidenced by YouTube's [recurring problem](#) of placing clients' ads next to [terrorist propaganda](#), [hate speech](#), and [sexually inappropriate content](#). Online advertising also funds illegal activity, including content theft, with criminal enterprises collecting hundreds of millions of dollars a year from [ad-supported piracy](#), for example.

Sometimes the advertising is itself nefarious, such as "[malvertising](#)" that infects computers and spawns botnets, or "click fraud" that artificially inflates a site's revenues and steals from advertisers. According to the Interactive Advertising Bureau, ad-related clickfraud, piracy, and malvertising cost the U.S. digital marketing, advertising, and media industries [\\$8.2 billion a year](#), and that doesn't include the cost to consumers, which may be even higher.

The good news is that one of the witnesses at today's hearing, Trustworthy Accountability Group President and CEO Michael Zaneis, is helping to fight harmful and illicit online activity through a collaborative, private-sector initiative between the advertising and content communities. As his [written testimony explains](#), TAG seeks to combat fraud, malware, and piracy while promoting transparency and rebuilding trust in the internet. It brings together companies from across the digital advertising ecosystem to keep good ads off bad sites.

This is by no means a simple task. Much work remains to be done, and TAG can only help steer advertising away from unsavory sites when advertisers actively participate in the process. But if legitimate advertisers refuse to place ads on harmful and illicit sites, and if reputable sites refuse to accept ads from less than reputable sources, the internet will be a better place. Bad actors will have less revenue, legitimate sites will be easier to distinguish from disreputable ones, and the web just might be a little more civil.

TAG is just one of several important initiatives in this space. Payment processors such as Mastercard, Visa, and Paypal are working to prevent bad actors from using their financial networks to collect revenue from unlawful online activities. Amazon and eBay

have measures to keep counterfeit goods, piracy devices and applications, and other harmful or illicit products off their online marketplaces.

Other online platforms and internet intermediaries would do well to better emulate these types of voluntary initiatives, especially in light of growing scandals. Unfortunately, many continue to resist overtures for such cooperative problem solving. By acting responsibly and collaboratively to keep digital neighborhoods safe for communication, commerce, and creativity, online platforms and internet intermediaries could help ensure we realize the vision we all have for the internet.

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