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by Mediaocean

The Future of Ad Verification:
From Negative to Positive Models

December 2024

Introduction

In the rapidly evolving landscape of digital advertising, the way we verify - and value - advertising inventory has remained largely unchanged for nearly two decades. What began as a critical stopgap solution to protect brands and combat fraudulent activities has gradually revealed its inherent limitations. The traditional negative model—focused primarily on identifying and eliminating "bad" behaviors—needs to give way to a more nuanced, sophisticated approach that promises to transform how we monetize digital advertising.

Twenty years ago, the digital advertising ecosystem was desperate for solutions. Trust was broken, as a staggering number of ads that were assumed to be safe and viewed by humans simply weren't. Brand safety concerns were paramount, and the industry needed a way to quickly identify dangerous content, fraudulent traffic, and potential risks. The solution was a quick, binary, defensive model: hack into the ad unit in order to detect and eliminate negative behaviors. Binary viewability definitions, keyword blocking, and blacklists became the primary tools in this arsenal - creating a punitive framework that sought to exclude rather than incentivize.

As the digital landscape has grown exponentially more complex, this once necessary approach has begun to show its age. The negative security model now appears increasingly reductive—a blunt instrument in an era that demands precision and nuance.

It is time to heal and rebuild trust within the ecosystem. It's time to shift to a more positive model.

Shifting From Binary Viewability to Nuanced Attention

Traditional viewability metrics are full of good intentions, but not good enough. They represent the epitome of the negative verification approach—a binary, checkbox mentality that asks only one, arguably ill-defined question: "Was 50% of the ad seen for one (display) or two (video) seconds?"

This approach provides a rudimentary pass/fail assessment that tells advertisers almost nothing about the actual value of their ad placement. It's equivalent to measuring the success of a restaurant by simply confirming that food was placed on a table, without considering whether it was appetizing, consumed, or enjoyed. Or even what the patron ordered!

The transition to a positive model introduces a multi-dimensional approach to measuring ad performance. Instead of just confirming visibility, these new metrics explore:

· Duration of viewability
· Depth of user interaction
· Creative engagement levels
· Interaction quality
· Potential for conversion

By moving from a binary "viewable/not viewable" framework to a nuanced assessment, advertisers gain unprecedented insights. An ad that is viewed longer, interacted with more deeply, or leads to measurable outcomes becomes more valuable than one that merely meets a minimal visibility threshold.
This evolution encourages publishers to focus on creating genuinely engaging ad experiences rather than simply gaming the current definition of viewability.
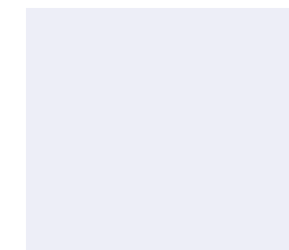
Shifting Brand a Safety from Blunt Saw to Precise Scalpel

The binary approach inherent in a negative model creates an even more perverse incentive structure when it comes to brand safety. Publishers are motivated to generate volume that passes basic verification checks, rather than creating genuinely valuable, high-quality advertising experiences. Three of the most typical applications of the Negative Model underscore this challenge.

Quality Inventory is Wasted

Brand safety protocols have traditionally relied on crude mechanisms like keyword blocking—a method that often creates more problems than it solves, inadvertently blocking high quality, high performing content. For instance, attempts to avoid violent content by blocking words like "kill" and "killing" can inadvertently prevent advertisers from appearing next to articles about successful entrepreneurs "killing it" in their market or athletes dominating on the basketball court. This blunt approach damages both publishers and advertisers by creating artificial content restrictions.

Audience, not Experience, is Extended

The challenge of traffic augmentation and audience networks reveals a critical flaw in current brand safety models. When an advertiser purchases inventory from a premium publisher—say, a specific TV channel or high-end website—they operate with a specific expectation about the audience and context. The delivered inventory can be dramatically different.

Consider a scenario where an advertiser pays a premium rate to appear on a high-end news channel, expecting an audience of educated, affluent viewers engaging with high-quality, relevant content. Through audience network mechanisms, the same inventory might be distributed across multiple, significantly lower-value, misaligned environments. The result is often nonsensical ad placements (i.e. luxury car advertisements appearing in content targeted at toddlers, or feminine hygiene product ads showing up in content primarily consumed by 8-10-year-old boys), simply because these placements are technically within the same household network as the originally desired channel.

Connected TV (CTV) is seen as Universally High-Quality and Safe

There's a widespread assumption among CTV buyers that all CTV impressions are created equal—100% viewable, on large screens, delivered to present users, fully engaged in high quality, relevant. The reality is far more nuanced.

Many CTV views occur in scenarios where:

· Users are actively fast-forwarding through ads
· The television remains on for hours with no one in the room
· Ads are consumed on small screens with minimal user attention
· Viewers are multi-tasking versus engrossed in the content
· Advertisers have minimum insight into the contextual environments where their ads run

Under the current negative verification model, these - and many more - varied scenarios are often lumped together as simply "valid" impressions.
This introduces opacity and erodes trust by masking critical differences in actual contextual alignment, user engagement, and ad performance.

Shifting from Gaming the System to Mutual Success

The current negative verification approach has led to some remarkable—and problematic—publisher behaviors.

Consider a typical scenario: A user lands on a webpage, and an ad appears in a viewable position. Instead of allowing that ad a meaningful opportunity to communicate its message, the page automatically refreshes, generating a new "viewable" impression from another brand. The publisher receives payment from multiple advertisers, but the actual chance of user engagement with any one brand diminishes dramatically.

This is just one example of the kinds of tactics emerging directly from the negative model's perverse incentives. When measurement focuses solely on avoiding "bad" outcomes rather than encouraging "good" experiences, publishers are motivated to optimize for verification metrics rather than user value.
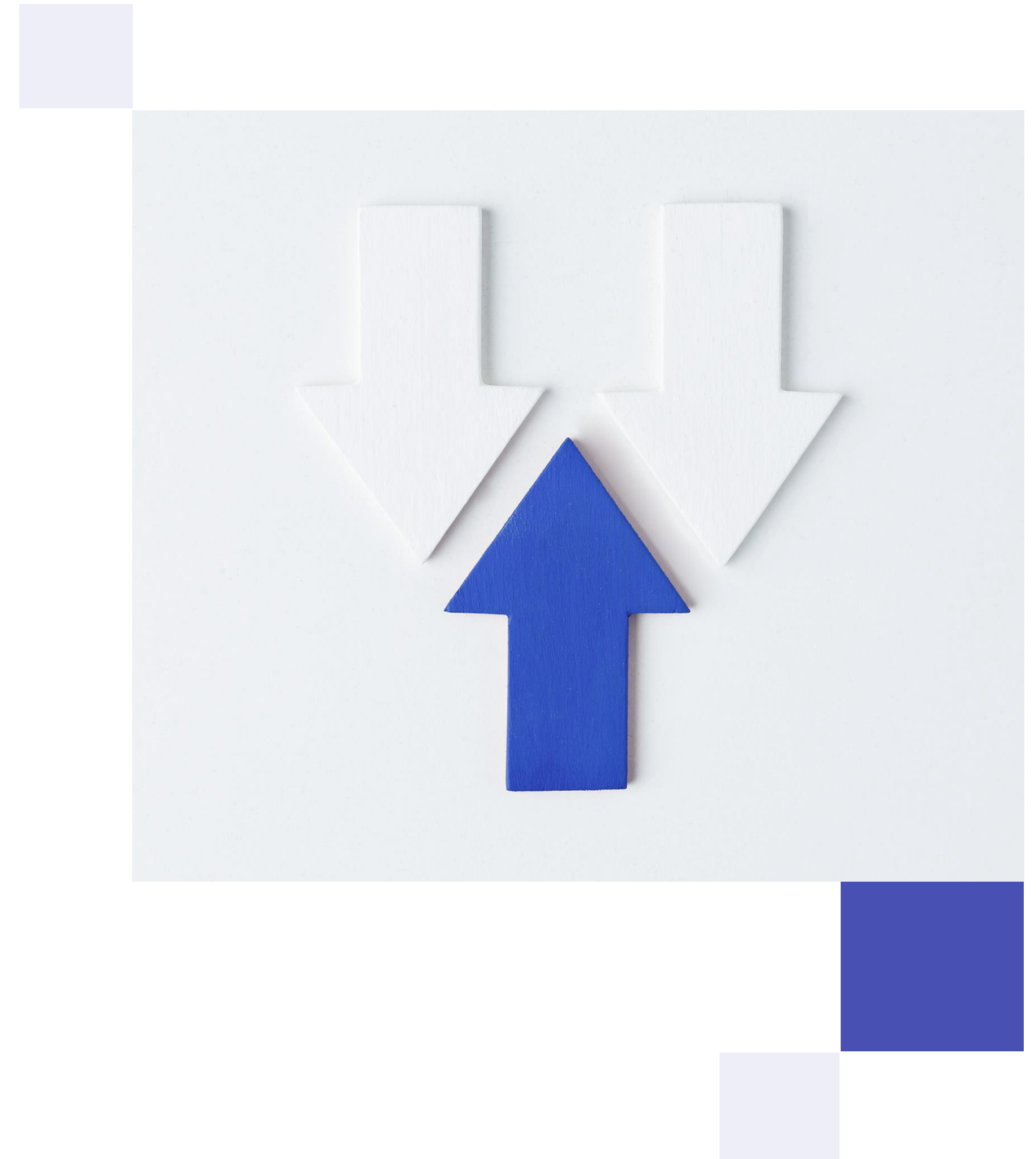
Shifting to the Promise of a Positive Verification Model

The transition to a positive model represents more than a technical shift—it's a fundamental reimagining of how value is created and measured in digital advertising. Instead of a punitive approach that places the burden of identifying and eliminating negative behaviors solely on the buyer, a positive model creates a collaborative ecosystem where both publishers and advertisers are motivated to generate high-quality, meaningful interactions. This approach transforms digital advertising from a defensive posture to a generative one, where transparency and quality become the primary currencies.

For Publishers

This model offers a compelling value proposition – publishers can now be rewarded for creating genuinely high-quality environments. A CTV publisher, for instance, would be incentivized to provide granular data about viewer engagement—not just proving that an ad was technically viewable, but demonstrating the quality of that viewing experience.

- The exact duration an ad was in view
- Whether the user was actively present
- The screen size of the viewing device
- Interaction levels with the ad creative
- Potential downstream conversions

This level of detailed reporting transforms the publisher from a potential suspect in a verification process to a trusted partner in delivering advertising value.

For Advertisers

The positive model offers unprecedented granularity. Rather than receiving a binary "valid/invalid" assessment, Advertisers and their Agency partners gain a multi-dimensional understanding of their ad's performance. They can make more informed decisions about inventory pricing, understanding that not all impressions are created equal.

For the Industry

The economic implications are profound. A large-screen, fully attentive CTV viewer watching an ad in a premium content environment would be valued differently from a small-screen, partially engaged mobile view. Pricing becomes dynamic, reflecting actual value rather than meeting minimal verification thresholds.

Shifting to a Positive Verification Mindset

Despite its clear advantages, transitioning to a positive verification model is not without significant challenges. The primary obstacles are both structural and psychological, require a new mindset and approach.

The Challenge of Change
The current verification ecosystem has developed sophisticated tools, relationships, and economic models around the negative security approach. Large players who have mastered the existing system have little immediate motivation to disrupt their own success.

The Challenge of Trust
Implementing a positive model requires unprecedented levels of collaboration and trust between publishers and advertisers. It's not enough for one side to change—both must simultaneously commit to a new framework. Publishers must be willing to provide extraordinary transparency. Advertisers must be prepared to compensate differentially based on verified quality. Early adopters will need to demonstrate tangible benefits, creating a virtuous cycle that encourages broader adoption.

The Challenge of Building New Standards
Developing standardized metrics for measuring positive engagement, creating robust tracking mechanisms, and building trust in these new measurement frameworks will require significant investment and collaboration.

Shifting to The Path Forward

The transition to a positive security model won't happen overnight, but several emerging approaches are paving the way for this fundamental shift in digital advertising verification. Protected Passport, created by Protected by Mediaocean, has begun to create bridges of trust between publishers and advertisers, offering technological frameworks that enable more granular, transparent measurement.

Key strategies for implementation include:

- Developing multi-dimensional scoring systems that go beyond binary pass/fail metrics
- Creating refined advertiser requirements and publisher economic incentives that directly reward high-quality inventory
- Establishing industry-wide standards for measuring attention and engagement
- Investing in technologies that can provide more nuanced tracking of user interactions
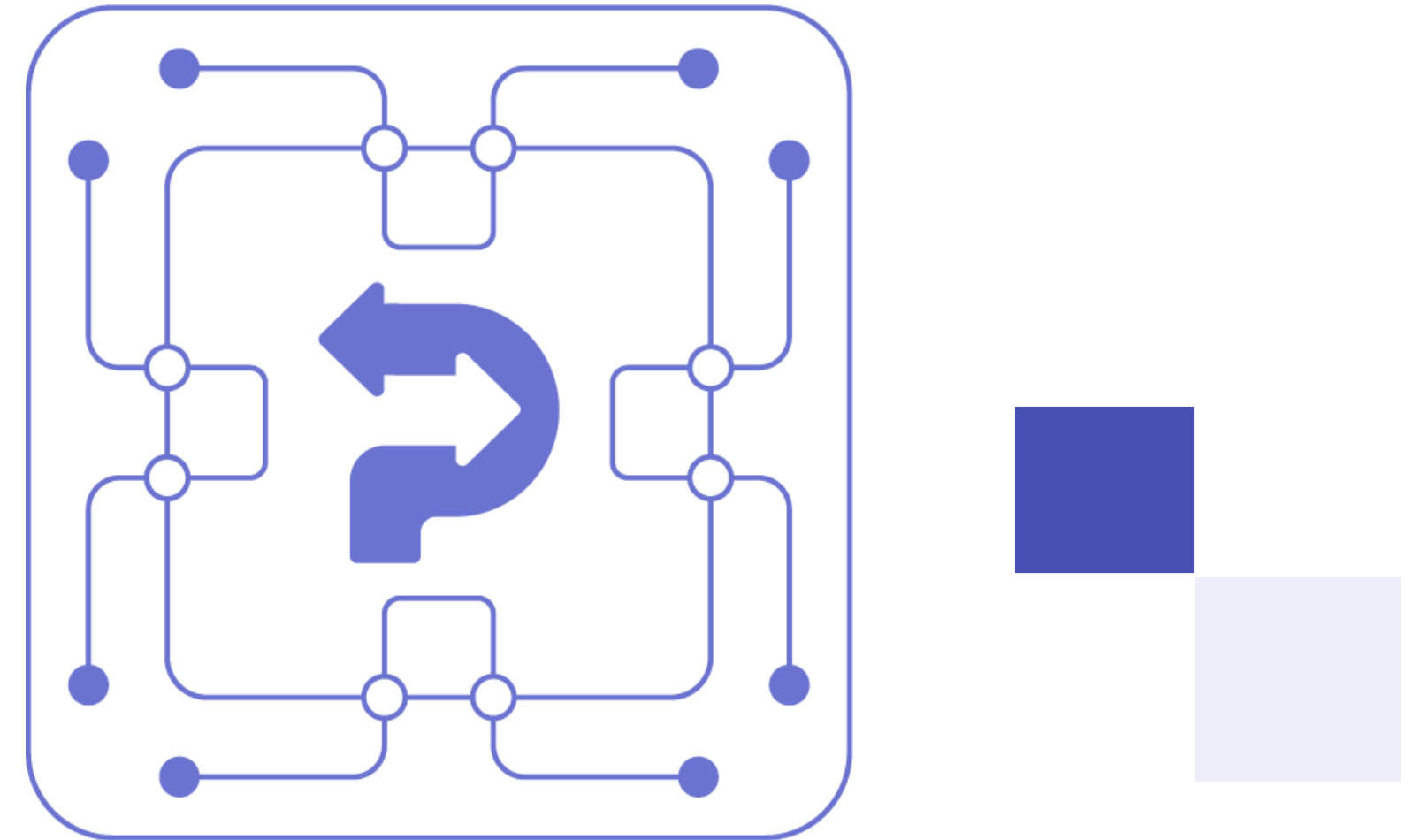
There are several ways this new model can be adopted but the most successful approaches will be those that:

- Provide clear, actionable insights
- Offer economic benefits to both publishers and advertisers
- Maintain user privacy
- Create transparent, verifiable measurement mechanisms

Conclusion

The move from negative to positive security models represents more than a technical evolution—it's a fundamental reimagining of digital advertising's value proposition. By shifting the industry mindset from a defensive, punitive approach to a collaborative, value-driven model, we can create more meaningful connections between advertisers, publishers, and audiences.

A Call to Action
This transformation won't be simple, but with over 87%* of the industry agreeing that rebuilding trust is critical, the motivation is there.

The time is now to drive:

- Technological innovation
- Unprecedented industry collaboration
- A willingness to challenge existing verification paradigms
- Economic models that reward transparency and quality

A Reason to Take Down the Walls
As media spend continues to shift to large social networks and Connected TV channels, the mandate for change is further amplified. These players have increasingly created "walled gardens"—environments that restrict third-party verification technologies. These platforms limit measurement to their own internally generated data, ostensibly to maintain platform stability, security, and user privacy.

However, a more cynical interpretation reveals that these restrictions persist because these platforms can simply get away with it. The current negative security model provides no meaningful mechanism to compensate publishers for demonstrating higher-quality, more granular measurements.
Paradoxically, these large, dominant publishers are likely to be the first adopters of the positive security model.

They have the most to gain from creating direct financial differentiation based on demonstrating nuanced quality attributes. These platforms can more easily enable sophisticated buying mechanisms, allowing advertisers to select inventory with unprecedented precision.
By allowing buyers to pick and choose from a much more granular inventory landscape, these platforms can transform from being viewed as opaque gatekeepers to becoming true partners in delivering advertising value.

A (Protected)
Passport to Success

The future of ad verification is not about catching bad actors but about creating environments where good actors can thrive.

Where transparency, quality, and mutual value become the primary currencies of digital advertising, providing a passport to successful outcomes.

Visit www.protected.media to learn more about Protected by Mediaocean and solutions for ad verification built on a foundation for positive change.

87%
of marketers believe the industry needs to restore **trust between buyers and sellers** when it comes to ad verification.

*TechValidate, 2024