population science

CURIOUS ABOUT CURATION?

A GUIDE FOR UNDERSTANDING & CAPITALIZING ON THE FUTURE OF MEDIA ACTIVATION.

Overview

When buying digital media most resources go into the inputs of the ad buying process (campaign strategy, creative, and platform). Most agencies and in-house teams do not have enough resources to take on the complex, downstream marketplace analysis and optimization that is required to run a truly efficient campaign.

Media buyers either add verification vendors or hope their platforms optimize their media marketplace for them. Unfortunately, those efforts are woefully inadequate. As validation vendors come up short, signals become more segmented, and third party data provide dubious value media buyers need to take a more active role in controlling the media they are buying.

This guide was created to help the programmatic ecosystem better understand curation/sell side decisioning and how it can help solve some of these challenging issues.

Topics Covered:

- How the open web became a nontransparent, chaotic mess.
- What is curation?
- What is curations role in creating and managing efficient media marketplaces?
- How your organization can get into curation.
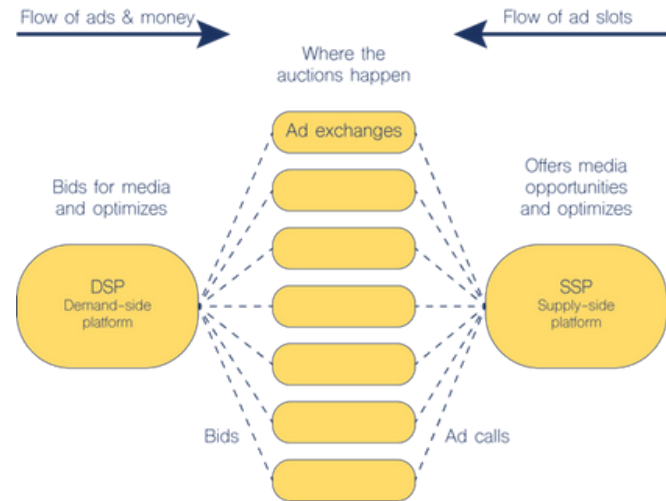
The Open Web: Infinite Chaos

The open web was supposed to democratize access to media. It actually made digital media buying more complex creating massive inefficiencies along the way.

Key Issues With The Open Web

- Too much inventory and too little bandwidth to process it all. This leads to largely arbitrary, algorithmic-based decisioning on bidstream traffic.
- Seemingly unlimited intermediaries across the supply chain providing (often) unknown value.
- Lack of bandwidth from buyers to truly analyze the value of the media they buy at scale.
- Lack of quality control when it comes to implementing IAB standards creating confusion.
- Rampant fraud and brand safety issues.

Why Is The Open Web So Complex?

This visual is a very basic workflow of the programmatic ecosystem. To put it into more perspective lets look at each level of the workflow:

Flow of ads & money → ← Flow of ad slots

Where the auctions happen

Ad exchanges

Bids for media and optimizes

Offers media opportunities and optimizes

DSP Demand-side platform

SSP Supply-side platform

Bids   Ad calls

Demand Side Platform (DSP)

There are 100s of DSPs in the market. While the technology is largely the same, access to inventory can vary by platform. For example, if you want to buy Prime Video programmatically it must be done via Amazon. Another thing to consider is some DSPs are stronger in certain channels than others. (i.e. some DSPs focus on CTV, Native, Digital Out of Home, etc).

Challenge: *Whether it's walled garden O&O limited to certain DSPs or exclusive inventory/data partnerships no single DSP can do it all.*


Exchanges/ Supply Side Platforms (SSP)

There are 100s of ad exchanges and/or SSPs that facilitate the transaction between ad buyer and ad seller. To make things complicated the same inventory (from a single publisher) can show up via a number of different SSPs (Supply Side Platform) across a number of ad exchanges at different rates.

Challenge: *Buyers and DSPs are overwhelmed with traffic and signals. This leads to arbitrary traffic throttling at the DSP level and massive log files for media teams with little bandwidth to analyze.*

Enter Curation

The sell side of the open web has largely been a mystery to buyers. A largely non-transparent group of exchanges, SSPs, and other intermediaries sending trillions of signals via billions of bid requests from a seemingly infinite number of publishers. That is until the supply side opened itself up to curation.

Inventory

Publishers

Signals
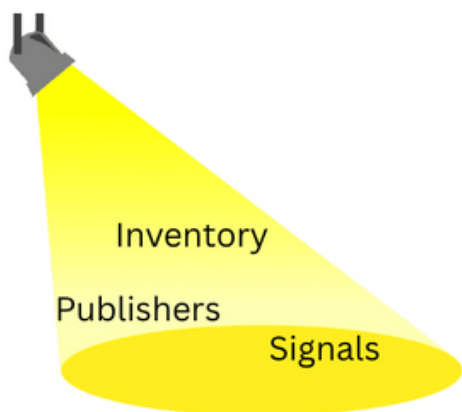
Curation in programmatic advertising refers to the process of selecting inventory and activating data through deal-based transactions. It allows media buyers to create customized inventory packages that align with their unique goals. In short, it takes your media decisioning to the supply side where it sits closer to the inventory and signals you're bidding on.

Now that the buy side and the sell side are linked via open platforms buyers and sellers can more efficiently bundle quality inventory and data to improve outcomes for both sides of the ecosystem. At a high level this helps solve some of the challenges currently plaguing each side of the ecosystem:

- **Demand Side** – An over-reliance on one size fits none platforms. Curation allows any platform with their unique inventory, data, and other insights to plug and play into any DSP making activation more portable.
- **Supply Side** – Buyers can now declare to the supply side what kind of traffic they want to see before their DSP bidder gets bombarded (and ultimately throttled) with queries.

Why Organizations Are Investing In Curation

The first wave of programmatic media buying was entirely focused on doing as much as possible within the DSP. With the sell side now open for business critical media decisioning can now be deployed further up the supply chain. This provides a myriad of benefits, including...

- **Better Media Quality** – By controlling which inventory is included in a curated deal, buyers reduce fraud, viewability issues, and wasted spend.
- **Finding Alpha** – Unlock value in mid to long tail publisher inventory that often slips through the cracks. Bundling this traffic with an expert curator can provide buyers with scale across valuable, lesser known publisher sources.
- **Media Flexibility** – Buyers that work across multiple DSPs are no longer forced to replicate their media decisioning across platforms. Deals are plug and play across all DSPs so your can literally take your activation with you.
- **Improved Supply Path Transparency** – Curation enables buyers to identify which SSPs and publishers perform best, helping eliminate unnecessary intermediaries and provide supply path optimization.
- **More Effective Targeting** – Combine your current data strategy with seller-defined audiences, contextual relevancy, and better signal efficacy for improved targeting.
- **Traffic Shaping –** Define the traffic you want your bidder to see; not what a throttling algorithm thinks you want to see.
- **Cost Efficiency** – Buyers can negotiate preferred rates with publishers or SSPs within curated deals, optimizing CPMs without sacrificing quality.

Starting Your Curation Journey

Brands, agencies, data providers, solution providers, and publishers (basically everyone in the open web ecosystem) is developing a curation strategy. No matter where your organization sits you have unique needs/goals when it comes to curation. Here is a step by step guide to help you on your curation journey.

Step 1: Build Direct Relationships With SSPs/Exchanges

A lot of buyers still rely heavily on DSP teams to sort out the supply side for them. This is a mistake. As a buyer you have unique needs and goals with your media budget. It is critical that you have a direct relationship with the exchanges and SSPs you are buying media from. Why?

You need to know "how the sausage is made." While you can easily see the domains and apps you're buying in a log file, do you know how the exchange/SSP is handling publisher vetting, invalid traffic, brand safety, supply path optimization, viewability, etc?

Do you know if they are ID bridging or doing anything else to enhance the bidstream data from publishers to make it more enticing to buyers? While traffic is traffic, how it's onboarded, audited for quality, and ultimately passed on to the buy side can vary.

Another important thing to understand is their plans for the short, medium, and long term. SSPs are finally having their moment in adtech and curation is still very nascent. Everyone is rushing to get into curation and SSPs are rapidly sorting out their competitive advantages. It is vital that you understand that their product roadmap aligns with your needs.

Starting Your Curation Journey

Step 2: Define Your Curation Strategy

Now that you have an understanding of how SSPs and exchanges operate you need to determine which platform(s) best align with your needs. Until now, all of your programmatic decisioning (at least what you can control) has been happening within the DSP environment.


Deciding to move some or all of your activation strategy to new platforms is a significant change to buyer behavior that needs to be carefully planned and executed. Here are a few things you need to consider:

- How much do you plan to curate? It will be critical to understand how much of your programmatic buy will benefit from curation versus leveraging ever growing direct deal opportunities with premium publishers in the DSP.
- What are your priorities for curation? (e.g., brand safety, efficiency, data activation, premium inventory access).
- What types of inventory do you want to include? (e.g., video, CTV, high-quality display).
- What type(s) of data do you plan to activate?
- Do you have the resources to be "hands on keyboard" or do you need help from a 3rd party?

Every curation platform will have similar functionality, but they all have their own unique niches. It is vital that your curation partner(s) are aligned with your long term goals and have the capacity to meet your unique needs.

Starting Your Curation Journey

Step 3: Activate & Optimize
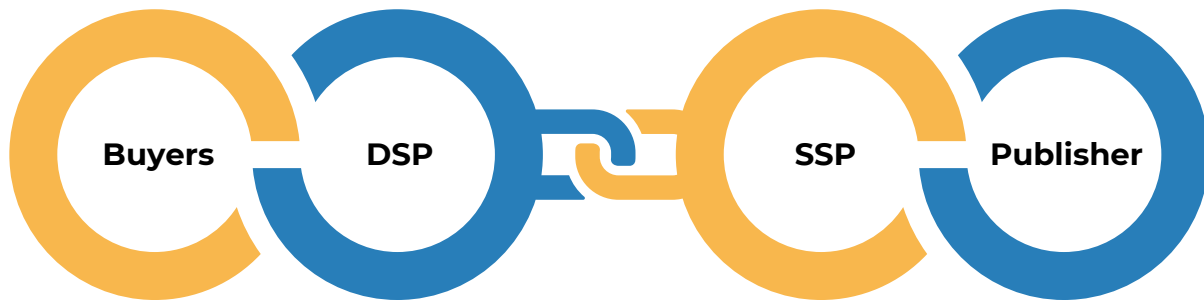
Now that you have chosen your partner(s) in curation here are some tips to make sure you maximize the newest layer in your in your horizontally integrated, full stack media setup:

- **All or Nothing** – You cannot split decisioning between the demand side and a curated deal. There are too many interoperability issues that arise. If you activate a curated PMP, all of your decisioning layer needs to be there so make sure your campaign/line item doesn't have additional targeting parameters on the DSP side.
- **Campaign Optimization** – Not only has your decisioning moved up stream, your post buy analytics can be shared to further optimize deals. PMPs are no longer a "set it and forget it" proposition. You can consistently work to make them better!
- **Curator Collaboration** – 2025 will be the year for curators to be able to share data within data marketplaces. Don't be afraid to engage with other curators that can pass unique data sets, inventory, etc. to you that can further augment the efficiency and effectiveness of your PMPs!

Final Thoughts

Curation is transforming programmatic advertising by allowing buyers to take control of their media supply and improve ad quality. By working with SSPs to curate inventory, your organization can gain greater transparency, improve efficiency, and ultimately drive better campaign outcomes.

If you're curious about curation, now is the time to explore how it can fit into your media strategy. Whether you're looking to reduce waste, enhance targeting, or improve brand safety, SSP-enabled curation is a tool everyone in the ecosystem needs in their programmatic toolkit.

Population Science can help you assess your goals and resources available to implement a curation strategy. Our insights into the various curation platforms and service providers will help you make the best decision on who to partner with. No matter where you are in your curation journey we are here to be a resource!