IAA BRAND SAFETY ROUNDTABLE
CANNES LIONS 2026

It's bigger than
Brand Safety

24 June 2026 | Hosted by Seedtag
Chaired by James Longhurst, Content Director, The Media Leader

ML

CHAIR

James Longhurst, Content Director, The Media Leader

FEATURED SPEAKERS

Jort Possel – Global Integrated Media Leader, EY

Kat Daskalou – Head of Group Media & Investment, Sky

Rob Ellison – Head of Media Europe, Visa

Sai Natarajan – Brand Leader, Genpact

Georg Wenger-Rami – Head of Marketing & Communication, oekostrom AG

Cos Mingides – Co-Founder & Head of Effectiveness, True

Samira Brophy – Senior Director, Creative Excellence, Ipsos

Csaba Szabo – MD, EMEA, IAS

Eryn Murphy – VP Strategic Brand Portfolio Management, Schneider Electric

Elizabeth Anyaegbuna – CEO & Founder, Buna Street Collective

Hannah Mirza – CEO & Founder, Responsible Marketing Advisory

Geraint Lloyd-Taylor – Partner | Co-Head of Advertising & Marketing Law, Lewis Silkin LLP

Jamie Jouning – Global Head of Advertising, The Economist

Brendan Spain - VP Advertising, Americas, Financial Times

Brian Danzis – Chief Revenue Officer, Seedtag

Charlie McGee – Managing Director of Advertisers and Agencies, EMEA, Nielsen

Kirsty Giordani - Global Managing Director,. IAA

Sophie Lintott = Global Head of Growth, IAA

Key Takeaways

1. Brand safety and brand suitability are different problems - keyword blocklists are a blunt tool for a nuanced job.

— *James Longhurst, The Media Leader*

2. Overzealous blocking starves quality journalism of revenue and risks sterile, 'vanilla' advertising environments.

– *Kat Daskalou, Sky UK*

3. Contextual and emotion-led AI is replacing keywords, cutting blocked impressions by up to 90% without raising risk.

- *Brendan Spain, Financial Times*

4. The industry must ask 'who is brand safety for?' - protection should extend to audiences and citizens, not just advertisers.

— *Georg Wenger-Rami, Oekostrom AG*

5. Most brand damage from controversy is short-lived; over-caution carries a real, often larger, opportunity cost.

— *Csaba Szabo, IAS*

6. Closing the trust gap needs transparency between brands, agencies and publishers - and platforms held to the same standards.

— *Rob Ellison, Visa*

Three tensions in Brand Safety

01 Safety vs. Suitability

Keyword blocklists treat all risk the same. True suitability is nuanced - it weighs intent, emotion and context, not just the presence of a word.

— Brian Danzis, Seedtag

02 Protection vs. Reach

Dialling safety “up to eleven” cuts reach, defunds trusted publishers, and pushes brands toward bland, risk-free, low-impact environments.

— Georg Wenger-Rami, Oekostrom

03 Trust vs. Transparency

Brands and publishers often don’t understand each other’s strategies. Shared visibility on blocklists and settings is starting to close that gap.

— Csaba Szabo, IAS

The numbers behind the debate

90%

Reduction in blocked impressions when switching from keywords to contextual AI

3,500

Pieces of content one brand now produces a year, up from 150 five years ago

38

Countries one global brand's employees span, each a potential brand-safety risk as a creator

— *Mark Brennan, Financial Times / Charlie McGee, Nielsen*

What the Roundtable Heard

- 51% of companies expected a brand-safety incident this year, but only 30% had a defined response strategy.
- A ban blocking the word "bank" from a bank's own ads shows how literal and blunt keyword lists have become.
- Bud Light was cancelled in 2023, then sponsored a controversial White House UFC fight two years later - proof that "safe" is rarely permanent.
- Marginalised communities and underrepresented topics are disproportionately caught by blocklists never built with them in mind.

Sector views on Brand Safety

Publishers: A Red Herring for Cancellation Fear

The FT and The Economist argue brand safety is often used as cover for brands not wanting to be cancelled - while blanket blocklists quietly exclude legitimate news content.

— Brendan Spain, Financial Times / Jamie Jouning, The Economist

Brands: Trust Is the Real Currency

Visa and Schneider Electric both frame safety around trust and context rather than keywords - what is "unsafe" for one B2C brand may be entirely suitable for a B2B one.

— Rob Ellison, Visa

Agencies: A Hygiene Factor, Not a Strategy

True admits brand safety is treated as compliance - outsourced to verification partners and rarely discussed by the strategy team at all.

— Cos Mingides, True

Verification & Tech: Rewriting the Rulebook

Seedtag and IAS report that contextual, sentiment-led AI cuts blocked impressions by ~90% versus keyword lists, unlocking reach for brands and revenue for publishers.

— Csaba Szabo, IAS/ Brian Danzis, Seedtag

The cost of over-caution

Brand safety is treated as table stakes, yet most organisations still lack a defined, evidence-based strategy for it.

01 Lost Reach

Broad keyword lists reduce reach and increase frequency on the audience that remains - dollars that could work harder elsewhere.

— Brendan Spain, Financial Times

02 Underfunded Journalism

Blanket exclusions on hard news - conflict, climate, politics - starve trusted publishers of the ad revenue that funds quality journalism.

— Jamie Jouning, The Economist

03 Hard-to-Measure Damage

Controversy rarely sticks for consumer brands, but for trust-led B2B and financial brands, reputational damage is real even if it's hard to quantify.

— Charlie McGee, Nielsen

04 Transparency Gap

Brands rarely see how publishers monetise their settings, and publishers rarely see why brands block what they block - new tools are starting to open that visibility.

— Csaba Szabo, IAS

Structural Brand Safety Risks

Social platforms structurally avoid adjacency, leaving open-web publishers to carry a disproportionate share of the risk

— Geraint Lloyd-Taylor, Lewis Silkin LLP

Marginalised voices and underrepresented topics get unfairly caught by blocklists never built with them in mind

— Sai Natarajan, Genpact

Employee and creator-generated content is a largely uncontrolled brand-safety frontier

— Elizabeth Anyaegbuna, Buna Street Collective

Trade bodies are too wary of collusion accusations to set common, cross-industry standards

— Rob Ellison, Visa

A widening gap between what CMOs say on stage and what their agencies actually buy and block

— Cos Mingides, True

What the Best Practitioners Do

- Separate brand safety from brand suitability, and resource them differently rather than running both off one blunt blocklist.

  — *Kat Daskalou, Sky*

- Move from keyword blocklists to contextual, sentiment and emotion-led AI to unlock reach without raising real risk.

  -Brian Danzis, Seedtag

- Build transparency between brands, agencies and publishers. Share the logic behind blocklists, not just the block.

  — *Csaba Szabo, IAS*

- Ask “who is brand safety for?” and design protection around audiences and citizens, not advertisers alone.

  — *James Longhurst, , The Media Leader*

- Hold social platforms to the same adjacency and accountability standards expected of the open web.

  — *Rob Ellison, Visa*

- Build diverse teams so blind spots in what counts as “unsuitable” content are reduced.

  — *Sai Natarajan, Genpact*

- Treat occasional controversy as a calculated, usually short-lived risk, not an automatic failure.

  — *Elizabeth Anyaegbuna, Buna Street Collective*

Reflection

Brand safety is shifting from a defensive, blunt instrument to a strategic, contextual discipline - one that protects audiences as much as advertisers.

The brands and publishers willing to invest in nuance, transparency, and AI-led context will widen access to premium environments while keeping trust front and centre.

For further discussion on this roundtable
and future IAA roundtables, please contact the IAA team.

https://iaaglobal.org