



ASPEN TECH  
POLICY HUB

PROJECT



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# Programmatic Ad Supply Chain Auditing Platform

Helping journalism by creating transparency in the digital  
advertising supply chain

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the course of the last two decades ad buying has shifted from traditional methods—publishers directly dealing with advertisers—to programmatic advertising—using software to buy and sell ads. Driving these shifts, “ad-tech” (advertising technology) giants like Facebook and Google have seen a dramatic increase in their ad revenue while newsrooms across the country and the world have seen declining profits, leading to reduced newsroom staffing and other impacts on news publishing. This project presents a framework for auditing the current advertising supply chain in order to understand its impact on the journalism ecosystem. In particular, the project focuses on advertisement fraud and its effects on user and audience trust.



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## THE PROBLEM

Programmatic advertising is a multi-billion dollar industry. Online ad revenue in the United States for 2018, for example, was reportedly \$107.5 billion—a 21.8 percent growth from 2017. This new form of advertising is currently not well regulated, leading to rampant abuse and fraud, including ad fraud and click fraud. Moreover, unregulated website tracking and behavioral data usage could affect user trust in news publications due to the loss of publisher editorial control, undermining a core tenet of journalism.



*Despite record levels of online readership, news publishers have seen a steep decline in revenue during the rise of technology giants. This is bleeding news publishers dry.*

## THE SOLUTION

To bring clarity and transparency to the digital advertising supply chain and address issues of fraud and loss of trust, this project proposes a three stage audit plan for the industry. The first step involves creating a task force comprised of representatives from the National Institute of Standards and Technology, the Federal Trade Commission, and technology and news production companies. The taskforce would define auditing requirements and software guidelines. The second proposed phase involves an opt-in visualization of the ad supply chain of news publishers through forensic software tools. From this comprehensive audit, recommendations for the improvement of supply side exchanges will be made by the taskforce.

## ABOUT THE HUB

The Aspen Tech Policy Hub is a Bay Area policy incubator, training a new generation of tech policy entrepreneurs. We take tech experts, teach them the policy process, and support them in creating outside-the-box solutions to society's problems.

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