



ExchangeWire deep dive

The business of media, marketing and commerce

The Future of Programmatic will be Curated

In association with

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CONTENTS

Introduction	3
What is Programmatic Curation?	4
Curation: a secret weapon for agencies	5
The Publisher's Dilemma	6
Data Providers and the DSP Short-Circuit	7
Programmatic Curation: The next evolution of SPO	8
Responsible media investment / ethical media buying	9
Publisher curation allows collectives to work in harmony	10
Identity: explore and test different partners.	10
Investment management and brokerage	11
Programmatic Curation in Practice.	12
How have you implemented curation into your own strategies/solutions, and what impact has this had?	13
How do you think curation will shape the programmatic landscape once we reach the postcookie era?	14
About The MediaGrid	15
About ExchangeWire	15

INTRODUCTION

The world of digital advertising has changed dramatically in the last decade.

Not so long ago, deals were done with telephone calls, shaken hands, and manual insertion orders. But, with the advent of programmatic advertising and RTB, the supply chain connecting media buyers and publishers was transformed forever.

Programmatic brings many benefits — unmatched scale, fine-grain targeting, data activation, and more — it has also had another side effect, too: driving buyers and sellers further apart.

With more technology platforms taking an intermediary role in the supply chain as programmatic has matured, media buyers have been *paying more*, publishers have been *earning less*, and data providers have had *less control*, highlighting the need for greater transparency across the ecosystem. In fact, according to a [2020 study carried out by ISBA](#), one-third of supply chain costs are currently unaccounted for.

To solve this problem, and restore confidence in the programmatic supply chain, the industry needs a new way to empower all three key players (publishers, media buyers, and data owners) in a manner that's fair, transparent, and efficient.

It's here that **programmatic curation** steps into the spotlight.

With the **rise of programmatic**, media buyers have been paying more, publishers have been earning less, and data providers have had less control. Curation solves for all of that.

WHAT IS PROGRAMMATIC CURATION?

In response to the growing disintermediation in the programmatic supply chain, programmatic curation delivers a new means to leverage audiences, data assets, intelligence, and premium inventory for all members of the ecosystem.

In practical terms, programmatic curation is a process managed by ‘curators’. These curators could be publishers (or publisher consortiums), agencies, data providers, or any other company that enriches the programmatic supply chain with unique value (AI or rich media providers, for example). Curators bring value to programmatic buyers by creating packages that combine their unique offering — whether it be better inventory selection, proprietary data or identity segments, or preferential publisher access or rates, just to name a few — with hand-picked supply from across the open internet.

These packages are built as private deals which can then be sold and executed via a deal ID using any DSP. In this way, curation can be used to build **curated marketplaces** based on unique premium supply, specific audiences, or first- or third-party data assets, and to unlock new opportunities for all parties.

While the fundamentals of curation remain consistent across the programmatic ecosystem, it offers unique benefits to each player depending on where they sit and what their goals are:

- For **agencies**, curation makes it possible to create new unique value propositions and differentiated supply strategies for their advertisers. In a saturated marketplace, curation represents an opportunity to truly stand out and build (or restore) 1:1 publisher relationships.
- For **publishers**, curation opens the door to new audience extension and data monetisation opportunities. Even if publishers don’t actively run ads on their properties, curation makes it possible to monetise first-party audiences without compromising on brand values or privacy compliance.
- For **data providers**, curation delivers more control of their unique assets outside of existing DSP systems. It also affords them greater visibility of data usage, improving forecasting capabilities.

Finally, and perhaps most crucially, curation represents a guiding light as we all head towards the cookieless future. Because curated deals are built outside of the open marketplace, Personally Identifiable Information remains secure, making curation privacy-compliant by design.

With the third-party cookie on the way out in 2023, and multiple identity solutions still jockeying for position, curation offers a layer of insulation against the imminent identity changes for all corners of the ecosystem.

CURATION: A SECRET WEAPON FOR AGENCIES?

The fragmentation of the programmatic supply chain has been a double-edged sword for many, but it's perhaps agencies that faced the toughest challenges.

Traditionally, agencies have set themselves apart through expertise in the areas of media decisioning, intelligence, and optimisation. But, with the disintermediation of the supply chain, many of these functions have shifted to automated platforms — making programmatic buying more accessible but also making it more difficult to carve out true competitive differentiation.

Agencies faced challenges on two fronts:

- A reduction in the value of 1:1 relationships with media owners (and the preferential rates/access/terms that brings).
- A loss in value of their cumulative media planning expertise.

So, how does curation address these agency challenges?

Firstly, curation allows agencies to offer better transparency to their advertisers. Because curation isn't reliant on multiple paths to the same supply — and there can be hundreds across DSPs — it's easier to reassure advertisers that they are utilising fully transparent and optimised supply paths. Agencies can choose their preferred publishers and data segments, then activate them through their DSP of choice.

Next, investment management on the agency-side also benefits, because agencies can centralise their programmatic efforts through a single supply chain, rather than chasing specific premium supply or data segments across multiple platforms and supply pathways. This means tracking spend and investment commitments throughout the supply chain is much easier and more transparent for advertisers.

Finally — and perhaps most importantly — curation is a step towards restoring those 1:1 relationships between buyers and sellers. When curating programmatic deals, agencies can work closely with publishers to garner preferential terms and rates — even establishing direct payment workflows for some partners to ensure full auditing controls — which they can then pass on to their advertisers to create differentiation in the market.

In this way, curation really can be something of a secret weapon for agencies looking to deliver a differentiated supply strategy in an otherwise crowded and commoditised supply ecosystem.

Curation is a secret weapon for agencies looking to deliver a differentiated supply strategy for their advertising clients in an otherwise crowded and commoditised digital ecosystem.

THE PUBLISHER'S DILEMMA

While there has never been a precise programmatic pecking order, there's no doubt that publishers have often faced unique challenges in this space.

Monetising their first-party audiences is naturally a priority, but it's not easy when their goal is to deliver a high-quality user experience without alienating or overwhelming users.

Many publishers have a limit to the number of ad units (and thus potential impressions) on their web properties, and might not want to leverage tactics such as automatic ad refreshes or buying traffic to boost their metrics. Other publishers might not show ads at all, raising unique challenges around how best to monetise these audiences while still balancing revenue with user experience.

Many publishers are facing a dilemma — and curation could be a solution.

A publisher's most valuable asset is their first-party audience: they can choose to share this audience data with agencies for targeting purposes, but most would prefer to keep control over it, or their privacy policies may prevent them from sharing it entirely. In these cases, curation enables publishers to monetise their audience by essentially retargeting them on the open web, at scale outside of their owned and operated properties. If the concept sounds familiar, it's because this is a new spin on **audience extension**.

Historically, audience extension has been carried out on the publisher's side using their own trading desk via a DSP seat. They've had to run everything themselves, including carrying out the actual buying, handling end-to-end reporting and optimisation, and paying for a DSP seat — often at high volume minimums. Just as it sounds, this form of audience extension can be time-consuming, laborious, and expensive — not to mention, it's increasingly not how agency buyers want to buy media (i.e., managed service).

With curation-based audience extension, publisher curators maintain full control of their first-party audiences thanks to the ability to package this data with third-party supply that best fits their brand values. From there, these bundles are sold via existing programmatic workflows through deal IDs. Easy.

Not only is curation less resource-intensive, but it also represents a new opportunity for publishers with content paywalls. With curation, they can offer their audience a premium ad-free experience, while also monetising these audiences in parallel via deals-based audience extension.

**With curation, publishers open up new
revenue streams **without giving up control**
over their first-party audience data.**

DATA PROVIDERS AND THE DSP SHORT-CIRCUIT

Data providers have traditionally been something of a middleman when it comes to the programmatic supply chain.

Sitting between buyers and sellers, data owners offer highly-targeted audience segments for targeting on the buy-side. Of course, being somewhere in the middle doesn't mean data providers are immune from the challenges of a complex ecosystem — quite the opposite, in fact.

Just like publishers and agencies, data owners must go toe-to-toe with others to reach media buyers. But the competition isn't just a numbers game — data owners also face a unique challenge in that they have a level of reliance on their visibility within DSPs themselves. The way such providers usually work is that they syndicate their audience segments into DSPs, where media buyers are able to select and activate the data on a per-campaign basis.

This can limit the potential reach of their data segments, because providers must rely on media buyers to find their segments, and on DSPs to make them visible enough for that to happen. In addition, some DSPs may limit the number of data providers they offer in their platforms, making some of the biggest players potentially closed shops.

Thanks to curation, data owners can now effectively bypass all of these concerns, and instead reclaim control of their assets and the way they're used by media buyers.

From the data provider's perspective, curation offers a raft of benefits, including:

- **Better control and protection of proprietary data.** Because curation means data owners package up supply themselves, they don't need to worry about potential risks of sharing it with third-parties, like DSPs.
- **A shift in focus from the buy-side to the sell-side.** Moving away from a reliance on the DSP means that data owners package their data with supply into deal IDs. They then have full visibility into exactly when those deals are activated or deactivated.
- **Enhanced control and forecasting.** Packaging on the supply-side means data providers can forecast financially with more confidence, rather than waiting until the end of the month to see if their data was used or not.
- **Insulation against the cookiepocalypse.** With the upcoming deprecation of the third-party cookie, data providers offering third-party assets will need a way to maintain viability in a privacy-first market. Curation can enable data providers to layer their assets into deals from leading identity solutions — even if the data provider is not directly supported by the DSP.

As a new tool to be utilised by publishers, media buyers, and data owners, curation can give all three additional control, flexibility, and transparency into their media trading, helping to drive incremental revenue while protecting valuable assets.

The Future of Programmatic will be Curated

Programmatic Curation: The next evolution of SPO



Page 8 of 15

As the programmatic ecosystem became more complex and multi-layered, media buyers and publishers needed cleaner, more efficient media trading. Buyers wanted brand-safe, fraud-free inventory, while publishers wanted quality demand.

Put simply, all players in the ecosystem wanted more efficient and transparent ways to buy and sell premium inventory. To untangle the increasingly convoluted paths to premium supply, and clean up the supply chain, Supply Path Optimisation — or SPO — was born.

In early iterations of SPO, the goal was usually to exclude large swathes of supply. Brands and agencies pushed to find the most direct path to their desired inventory, removing resellers and intermediaries so that more of their spend was transferred to working media. This broad culling of supply was limited by the crude data and tools of the time, meaning the baby *and* the bathwater were discarded in equal measure. This resulted in improved supply paths, but also a considerable reduction of quality inventory.

So, where are we today? As the limitations of SPO have become clear, a new solution has evolved: **programmatic curation**.

Curation can be seen as the next natural step beyond SPO because it brings buyers and sellers closer together to facilitate cleaner, more effective media trading. As the new standard for SPO, curation will likely expand to encompass more players in the programmatic supply chain in the near future. How it is utilised depends on which specific outcome is trying to be delivered.

With that in mind, here's how curation might change and evolve as we look toward a more efficient, transparent programmatic future.

1 Responsible media investment / ethical media buying

Data and audience intelligence have been the backbone of the digital ecosystem, pushing media buyers to focus on audiences with targeting/retargeting, reporting, and attribution, with less consideration given to context and content quality. With the deprecation of the third-party cookie, the heightened concern about user privacy, as well as the increasingly dynamic demographic and social landscape, a sharp focus on the values a specific medium, domain, or piece of content represents is now an important facet of the planning process.

Moving forward, many advertisers will be looking to invest in content which aligns with the values of the brand, putting social responsibility and ethical media buying at the forefront of their marketing. Brands will want their messaging to be tied to publishers and content that better aligns with their core values. Curation will be an essential part of this strategy. Curators can build inventory packages that represent different types of ethical media buying: carbon neutral, BIPOC-owned, or sustainability packages which align with the goals and values of the media buyer.

2 **Publisher curation allows collectives to work in harmony**

Publisher collectives, where a number of “competitive” publishers band together to exert a more dominant position in the market and level the playing field with the walled gardens, have been tried out a number of times in various regions. But, as with many coalitions, it’s not always easy to have all members feel equally represented and pull in the same direction at the same time, which can lead to mixed results.

A curation platform offers publisher collectives cleaner execution for shared data and inventory monetisation. By being a part of a curated marketplace, publishers can create unique cross-publisher packages — such as those that target first-party data or contextually similar content — that can be sold via a single deal ID, all at CPMs that are negotiated at the collective level. Curation modules that offer a data licencing capability allow bespoke pricing for data to be applied to trading depending on which publisher’s data is being leveraged. This publisher-controlled amplification of scale can be a critical driver of cookieless ID adoption and first-party data utility, especially if the collective shares a specific ID. This would allow them to band together around that ID to create addressable scale for buyers.

3 **Identity: Explore and test different partners**

With the deprecation of the third-party cookie, marketers will be looking to replace audience insight with first-party data assets wherever possible – and to activate these (and supplement them further) with new alternative identity solutions. With the dozens of different ID solutions vying for position as a preferred partner, it will be difficult for buyers and sellers to understand which solutions can bring them value – not every identity solution can be integrated, so how do you determine which to work with?

Curators can play the role of a testing partner and allow media traders (both buyers and sellers) to execute identity vendor A/B testing. Centrally located in the ecosystem, curators can distribute cross-DSP audience targeting via curated PMP deals loaded with specific ID vendor audiences. They can add value by providing insights and analytics to understand which IDs are driving performance and, in turn, help buyers to make decisions about which IDs correspond to the hardest-working media based on their desired outcomes. This is fast becoming a key requirement as the cookieless future approaches. Brands who have CRM data will want to successfully migrate and activate that addressability, and those who don’t will wish to explore other techniques, such as contextuality and first-party publisher data.

4 Investment management and brokerage

Curation can also play a role in the management and tracking of media investments across multiple buying platforms and supply partners. With a centralised marketplace, curation provides media buyers with control and visibility over their programmatic activity to streamline deal management workflows and focus on building relationships with your most valuable supply partners.

By centralising their media buying into an “inventory pool”, media buyers gain a holistic view of their media investments and spend across all buying platforms and media outlets. This simplifies reporting across brands/campaigns. Moreover, with a centralised buying position, curators can gain access to key publishers to negotiate rates and commitments with essential partners, all while monitoring and tracking spend across their portfolio of investments. Enabling investment groups to activate their own publisher SLAs and terms programmatically is a key advancement made possible by curation.

Acting as a kind of application layer, curation sits on top of existing programmatic infrastructure and operates within existing workflows. Every curator brings their own application or unique use case to the supply chain in a way that creates differentiation, performance, or value for their business or their partners. At the same time, curation helps buyers and sellers to get closer together and gives both sides greater visibility into and control over their unique supply chain. In the next section, we will speak with a couple of programmatic curators to see how they are utilising this emerging capability today.

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The Future of Programmatic will be Curated

Programmatic Curation in Practice



Ted Smith, head of enterprise sales at Audigent, and Arthur Cole, chief operating officer at Avocet, tell us about how curation has benefitted their respective operations and what role it will play in the post-cookie landscape.

How have you implemented curation into your own strategies/solutions, and what impact has this had?

Ted Smith: It's been obvious for a while that the feedback loop between data originators and programmatic buyers is broken. The traditional model of pushing data into a data-management platform (DMP) poses issues, because there is little to no opportunity for buyers to optimise the composition of their audience segments mid-flight in order to drive better performance.

As a data originator ourselves, we began looking to fix this issue back in 2018. When Google announced that it had plans to deprecate the cookie, it provided us with the perfect opportunity to take a leadership position in cookieless targeting through curation. Because we work so closely with our publisher partners, we can take a different approach to how we action first-party audiences through the supply path, then leverage a data bridge between buy-side and sell-side signals to optimise performance in real-time.

Google's delay has allowed advertisers to invest critical time and budget towards proving our cookieless solutions while there remains a bit of a safety net. We see curation as the future, and the recent growth and maturation of the category only confirms this theory. By breaking down walls in the supply chain, and powering data and inventory curation, we have seen both the value and impact of every impression increase.

Arthur Cole: At Avocet, our LAMP (Lumen's Attention Measurement Platform powered by Avocet) product effectively tracks the attention of ads — whether an ad was physically seen and, if so, how long for. We believe that curating PMPs of the highest attentive supply out there is a way for clients to buy more effectively. Currently we use The MediaGrid platform to curate for a client the supply that has proven (based on the data we've collected) to be of the highest attention.

To date, the LAMP system has measured over 1.5 billion ad impressions and has amassed a great many data sets specific to media supply across domains and formats. Clients are able to buy this curated mix of supply, and receive instant attention lifts. We've merged performance and brand uplift data with measured attention to prove that attention equals response, and the curated PMPs have a natural advantage on this. At Avocet we fully expect more clients to adopt curated PMPs to help them buy user attention and to see positive results from their ad spend.

How do you think curation will shape the programmatic landscape once we reach the post-cookie era?

Ted Smith: Curation solves several issues that are top-of-mind for programmatic practitioners. A lot of the concern in the market right now is about whether cookies are used in data collection, and everyone is ignoring the data activation process. The truth is, you can gather data without cookies and then activate it in ways that are, from a privacy perspective, completely unsafe. Right now, everyone is describing their products as cookieless, but that's table stakes for the future.

What's equally important is maintaining privacy and consumer friendliness. Curation solves that issue. Because curated marketplaces are activated on the supply-side, they can avoid the bidstream data leakage that is prevalent in the programmatic landscape right now. By embracing curation, not only will programmatic ad buyers get better performance and campaign outcomes, but they'll also help clean up the ecosystem.

Arthur Cole: The fact that curation will become critical post-cookie should not undermine the fact that it is already important. Good-quality inventory and formats have always needed curated marketplaces to be bought effectively. In a post-cookie world, we can expect more money to move this way but curation isn't the only way to buy smart.

Many DSPs support some form of custom bidding solution that can be fitted to meet the objective of the buyer. Most businesses are knee-deep in a first-party/identity-less setup and we should expect to see some exciting announcements around how brands should think about buying over the next 18 months. No doubt curation will form a large and exciting part of that, but the added context of data into the curation is where it gets really interesting.

By embracing curation, not only will programmatic ad buyers **get better performance and campaign outcomes**, but they'll also help clean up the ecosystem.

ABOUT THE MEDIAGRID

The MediaGrid, engineered by IPONWEB, is a next-generation supply curation and monetisation platform, built to power a new era of programmatic trading for agencies, publishers, and data owners. The MediaGrid was designed to address the emerging challenges of a maturing programmatic supply chain with powerful inventory packaging and yield optimisation tools that deliver more control, efficiency, and transparency to all parties — while closing the gap between buyers and sellers.

Visit www.themediagrid.com to learn more.

ABOUT EXCHANGEWIRE

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