FREESTAR

WHITE PAPER · 2026

BRAND SAFETY · PERFORMANCE · NEWS

The Untapped Advantage

Why advertisers who avoid news are leaving performance on the table.

A White Paper by Freestar | 2026

TRUSTED BY THE WORLD'S MOST TRUSTED PUBLISHERS

Global newswires

National dailies

Business & financial media

Broadcast news

Wire services

> "If you're in the marketing department at a major brand, and you're not buying news by choice, you are not doing the best job you could be doing for your brand."

VP OF DIGITAL REVENUE
GLOBAL NEWS NETWORK

THE SHORT VERSION

— EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

News advertising works. A landmark study of 50,000 U.S. adults found no meaningful difference in brand perception between ads next to “unsafe” news and ads next to “safe” content. Meanwhile, the most sophisticated advertisers in the world are paying significant premiums to be in news — because it performs. The brands that figure this out in 2026 will access premium inventory before the rest of the market reprices. The ones who don't will spend the next two years wondering how their competitors got there first.

This paper makes the case in three moves: the audience you've been ignoring, the brand-safety myth dismantled by 50,000 people, and the closing window of advantage that the best advertisers are already moving through.

THE REFRAME

You Think You're Playing It Safe. You're Not.

There's a version of the brand safety conversation that made sense in 2015. A chief marketing officer receives a screenshot. Their toothpaste ad is running next to a headline about a mass shooting. It goes to the board. Someone gets fired. A policy gets written.

That fear became a category exclusion. The category exclusion became a default. The default got baked into DSP settings, IAS configurations, and blocklist templates that nobody has reviewed in three years. And now, in 2026, you might be unintentionally blocking publishers and categories you're not even aware of.

Here's what that decision is costing you: the most engaged, most educated, most affluent audience on the open internet. It's costing you premium inventory that your competitors haven't figured out yet. It's costing you performance that outpaces blind programmatic buying. All of it is sitting there, depressed in price, because the rest of the market is scared of a boogeyman that the data repeatedly, conclusively shows doesn't exist.

News avoidance is not brand safety. It is performance sacrifice.

The data supports it. The economics support it. And the brands that get there first will win the category before the rest of the market catches up.

THE AUDIENCE

The Audience You've Been Ignoring

News readers are more educated, more affluent, more brand loyal, and more engaged than the average open-web visitor. They dwell longer, interact more, and return more often. By most measures, they are exactly who you want your brand in front of.

Higher income

News readers skew toward upper-income households well above the general internet population — the consumers making high-consideration decisions.

Higher education

College-educated and post-graduate audiences over-index heavily on quality news sites.

Longer dwell time

Quality news content generates meaningful time-on-page that programmatic blind buying simply cannot replicate.

Active decision-makers

They vote, they buy, they influence. This is not an audience that passively scrolls.

Consider a single global news network often written off over "controversial" adjacency — **the kind that reaches 30–40% of its total worldwide audience inside the United States** and ranks among the most-read outlets across multiple continents. Brands that exclude it by default don't just miss impressions; they miss entire audiences they have no other reliable path toward. That is not brand safety. That is a strategic error.

Look at Who Is Already Buying

If the brand-safety narrative around news were accurate, you'd expect serious advertisers to avoid it. The opposite is true. Across the Freestar news publisher network, **78% of advertisers are actively buying news** — and the entire population of news avoiders barely registers.

78%

78% of advertisers are actively buying news

22% inventory are not — and they are not the heavyweights

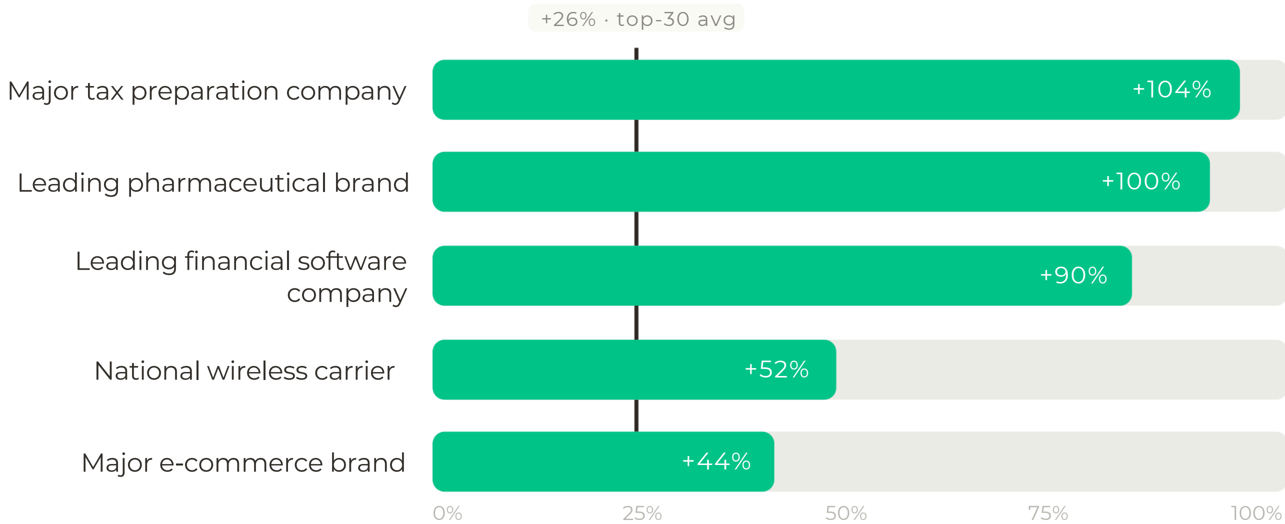
0.15%

That 22% of advertisers represents just **0.15% of total network impressions.** The advertisers staying out of news aren't the heavyweights — they're the rounding error.

And the advertisers who *are* in news pay a premium to be there. Freestar's top 30 advertisers pay CPMs on news inventory that run **26% above their own network-wide averages.** For individual brands, the gap is far larger.

How Much More Top Advertisers Pay for News Inventory

Premium paid on news inventory vs. each advertiser's own network-wide average CPM



Advertisers don't pay 50%, 90%, or 100% premiums for inventory they don't believe in.

The largest, most measurement-driven advertisers in the world are choosing news — and bidding it up — because it works.

THE EVIDENCE

The Brand Safety Myth, Dismantled by 50,000 People

In May 2024, Stagwell published a landmark study of nearly 50,000 U.S. adults, conducted by independent research firm HarrisX. The question: does advertising next to news classified as “not brand safe” actually damage brands? Across every demographic tested, the answer was no.

GEN Z

4 pts

between the “riskiest” topic (65%) and “safest” sports (69%) for purchase intent

AFFLUENT HH

2 pts

between favorability next to Trump/Biden coverage (72%) and entertainment (74%)

MOMS

2 pts

drop next to the most sensationalized crime content vs. inflation & business (70%)

The difference between the riskiest topic tested and the safest was a handful of percentage points — statistically insignificant, across every group. This was not a small study, and it was not funded by a news organization. Nearly 50,000 respondents. An independent firm. Published by one of the largest marketing holding companies in the world.

The conclusion from HarrisX CEO Dritan Nesho was unambiguous:

> **"Our study shows clearly and repeatedly that ads next to news content currently considered 'not brand safe' perform on par with ads next to what is currently considered 'brand safe.'"**
>
> DRITAN NESHO · CEO, HARRISX

The Distinction That Matters

There is a legitimate brand-safety problem — and it is not news. Genuinely offensive content — hate speech, extremist material, content designed to harm — *can* damage brand perception. That's real, and that distinction matters.

"Bad news" is not offensive content. Readers know the difference between the story and the ad next to it.

Tools like Ad Fontes Media provide independent, methodology-driven ratings of news sources by bias and reliability — letting brands target high-quality news with precision rather than painting all news with one exclusion brush. The brands blocking premium newswires are, in many cases, simultaneously running on platforms where algorithmic feeds serve content that would fail every brand-safety standard ever written. That double standard is not brand safety. It is brand-safety theater.

IV

THE MECHANICS

You're Blocking News Two Ways —and Only One Was Your Choice

TYPE 1 · INTENTIONAL

The Intentional Blocker

A brand manager, planner, or CMO who made an active decision to exclude news — a client complaint, an inherited category exclusion, a policy written after one bad screenshot.

They know they're not buying news. The argument is simple: read the Stagwell data. The category you're avoiding is outperforming the open-web inventory you're running in its place.

TYPE 2 · ACCIDENTAL

The Accidental Blocker

Far more common, and far more consequential. Major DSPs and verification platforms set defaults that classify news as restricted. Blocklists populate automatically. The logic is opaque and rarely disclosed.

The result: many brands aren't in news — and never decided that. It was decided for them by a default in a platform they onboarded two years ago and haven't audited since.

Advertisers routinely discover, when they pull their blocklist reports, that entire categories of premium inventory have been silently excluded — because an algorithm made a conservative assumption and no one corrected it. That absence suppresses bid density, depresses CPMs across premium news, and reinforces the false narrative that "real" advertisers don't buy news.

The fix is often a single configuration change. Pull the blocklist report, find out what's actually being excluded, and unlock premium inventory you've been paying to avoid.

THE SHIFT

The Market Is Shifting — and News Is Where It Lands

For a decade, the performance edge in programmatic was scale and targeting at low cost: buy the open web blindly, layer on behavioral targeting, optimize for volume over context. That model is under serious structural pressure.

Made-for-advertising (MFA) sites now represent a meaningful share of open-web programmatic — content farms built not for readers but to generate impressions. Privacy regulation is eroding behavioral signal. Brand-suitability incidents on the open web are increasing, not decreasing.

The industry is correcting. Curation is coming back. Advertisers who were told context didn't matter are rediscovering that it matters a great deal when performance starts falling. **News is the original premium context** — a known brand, a known editorial standard, a known audience — priced for years at rates suppressed by fear-based exclusions the data shows are unfounded.

You're not changing how you buy. You're changing where you're willing to buy.

And performance will follow. The advertisers who figure this out in 2026 will get there before the market reprices. That window will not stay open indefinitely.

VI

THE PROPRIETARY VIEW

What Freestar Sees That No One Else Does

Freestar manages advertising for some of the world's most trusted news publishers — global newswires, national dailies, business media, and broadcast news brands. No one else aggregates performance data across a news network of this quality. This isn't a category benchmark. It's direct campaign data.

News inventory commands higher rates — from better advertisers

Average CPM on news vs. the advertiser's own network-wide average

ADVERTISER	NEWS CPM	NETWORK AVG	PREMIUM
Leading financial software	$8.38	$4.41	**+90%**
Major tax preparation company	$4.13	$2.02	**+104%**
Leading pharmaceutical brand	$4.47	$2.24	**+100%**

$11.58

The same financial-software advertiser's CPM on a single business-news site

When sophisticated, measurement-driven advertisers acknowledge the premium cost of a news impression and keep bidding anyway, that is not a brand-safety problem. It's a performance signal the rest of the market is missing.

The Best Publishers Generate the Best Returns

The pattern intensifies at the publisher level. On **one premium business-news site**, a leading tech company reaches a CPM of **$11.98**. On **a top global newswire**, a major technology-hardware company pays **$8.41**. Premium publishers generate premium returns — for the advertisers willing to be there.

In-House Teams Are Leading the Way

Every major holding company buys news through the Freestar network:

IPG · Kinesso | Publicis | WPP | Omnicom | Dentsu | Stagwell

Logo lockups to be supplied — placeholders shown. Confirm usage approvals before print.

But the most sophisticated buying comes from **in-house teams**. They're more willing to supersede blanket category blocks based on quality signals — because they have the authority, the tools, and the mandate to optimize on performance rather than policy defaults. Agency teams face a higher bar: removing a block usually requires explicit client approval, so inertia wins by default.

17.2%

of network news impressions come from **Amazon TAM** buyers

2.3%

LinkedIn — B2B buyers know exactly what they're doing in news

The Concentration Signal

The most sophisticated buyers are concentrating in news in a way that goes well beyond their general buying behavior.

42%	vs	11%
of news impressions come		the same concentration

When the best buyers concentrate at this ratio, the market reprices. **This is the window.**

In every other category of programmatic, when the best buyers concentrate share, the rest of the market eventually follows — and the price advantage disappears. The advantage is real today. In two years, it will cost significantly more to access what you could buy right now.

THE SECOND LAYER

VII There Is a Right Answer for Journalism, Too

The ROI argument makes the case — and it's good enough. But it has a second layer that directly affects your long-term cost structure. There are five ways to fund a news organization.

State funding
Invites the perception of propaganda — regardless of actual independence

Billionaire ownership
Independence becomes a matter of the owner's mood, not the institution's standards

Subscriptions
Fatigue is real; paywalls exclude communities and build echo chambers

Non-news revenue
Games, cookbooks, terminals — dilutes editorial focus; only for the largest

Advertising ✓
The only model that keeps editorial clean, scales with audience, and doesn't force compromise

This has direct implications for your media budget. When advertisers exit news, supply contracts: newsrooms cut reporters, premium publishers move behind paywalls, and the inventory that produces these CPM premiums gets harder — and more expensive — to access. **The ROI argument gets you in to news. The supply argument is the reason to build durable relationships once you're there.**

VIII
THE PLAYBOOK

What to Do Right Now

1 **Audit your blocklists**

Review your DSP and verification platform brand-safety configs — specifically news and content-category exclusions. The audit takes hours; the insight can be immediate.

2 **Run a controlled news publisher test**

Allocate 10–15% of a current campaign to a curated news PMP alongside open-web spend. Run both 4–6 weeks. Measure head-to-head on CTR, viewability, conversion, ROAS.

3 **Apply your existing targeting within news**

You don't need to change your audience strategy. The same behavioral and contextual segments apply within premium news environments. This is additive, not disruptive.

4 **Start with publishers whose audiences you already want**

Global newswires reach business decision-makers. Wire services carry some of the largest English-language footprints in the world. International broadcasters reach audiences most brands have no other path toward.

5 **Measure the same way you always do**

Conversion tracking, attribution, brand-lift— all of it works the same in news. The only variable that changes is the quality of the context your ads appear in.

Ready to audit your blocklist?

Access Freestar's news network and proprietary performance benchmarks.

Contact Freestar →

IX

THE CLOSE

The Competitive Edge IsHiding in Plain Sight

Brand safety is real. The standards that protect brands from genuinely harmful adjacency serve a legitimate purpose. But news is not that risk. It never was.

Here is a question worth taking to your next planning session. At a panel at Cannes — hosted with Mobian and Ad Fontes — someone asked the room: how many CEOs actually know they are actively blocking news advertising? These are executives who read the world's leading newswires, national dailies, and business titles every morning. Then they walk into work and sign off on media plans that block every publisher they just read. The answer, from everyone at the table, was the same: **probably none of them know.**

The gap between what executives consume and what their brands buy is not strategy. It is default-setting drift — the kind of accumulated inaction that creates real competitive opportunity for the brands willing to look at the evidence. The advertisers currently avoiding news are not protecting their brands. They are ceding a proven, high-performance, premium audience to the competitors who will. Every week that default stays unchanged, the gap grows.

The only question left is whether your brand will lead on this — or follow.

FREESTAR

Trusted Publisher-First Monetization
for the AI Age.
www.freestar.com

APPENDIX

APPENDIX A

About the Stagwell Future of News Study

METHOD

49,990 U.S. adults surveyed March 29 – April 19, 2024 by HarrisX (a Stagwell company) via quantitative online interviews. Margin of error ±0.44% for the total study. Data weighted to a nationally representative sample across age, gender, region, race/ethnicity, education, and income.

PURPOSE

To determine whether advertising adjacent to news classified as “not brand safe” actually damages brand perception, purchase intent, or favorability.

KEY FINDING

No statistically significant difference in brand perception, purchase intent, or favorability between ads next to “unsafe” topics and ads next to “safe” topics.

PUBLISHED

May 15, 2024 — stagwellglobal.com/future-of-news

APPENDIX B

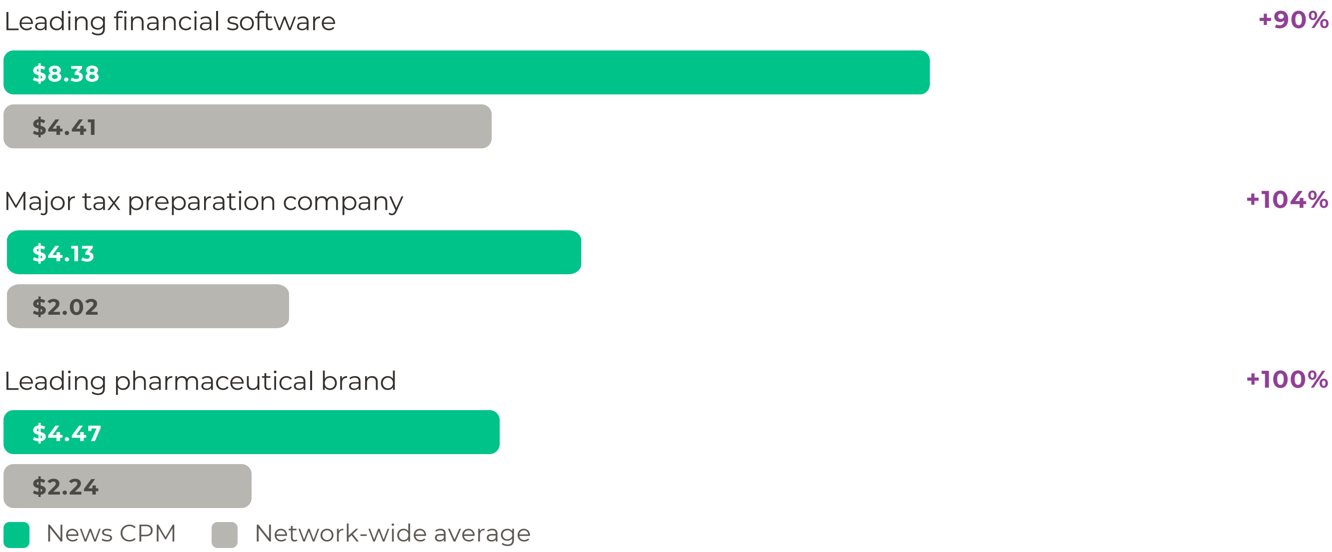
About Freestar

Freestar is the premium publisher services and monetization partner for the AI Age. Through enterprise-level technology, white-glove service, and unmatched industry relationships, Freestar acts as a true extension of publisher teams — maximizing the value of every ad impression while maintaining the editorial quality and audience trust that define the world's most trusted publishers. Freestar works with more Jounce Media Top 100 Bellwether publishers than all competitors combined, spanning global newswires, national dailies, business media, and broadcast news brands. Freestar's NPS score of 77 ranks among the highest in any service industry.

To learn more or to access Freestar's news publisher network and proprietary performance benchmarks, visit www.freestar.com.

What top advertisers actually pay for news vs. their own averages

News CPM compared with each advertiser's network-wide average CPM (USD)



78%

BUYING

of advertisers actively buy news; the 22% who don't are just 0.15% of impressions

42%

of news impressions come from the **top 5 advertisers** — versus just **11%** for the broader network. When the best buyers concentrate like this, the market reprices

Drawn from Freestar's internal advertising performance records across its news publisher network. All figures reflect real advertiser activity across real campaigns on real premium news publishers. Categories aliased to preserve confidentiality. Data through Q1 2026.