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Digital Platforms as Members of Meta-Organizations: A Case Study of the Online Advertising Market

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Abstract

Digital platforms such as Google, Facebook, and Microsoft are powerful firms, which benefit from having substantial resources and central positions in online industries. Although they are capable of defending their interests autonomously, they still get involved in and fund collective initiatives such as meta-organizations (MOs – i.e., organizations that have organizations as their members), particularly in the online advertising sector. In this article, which is based on an in-depth qualitative case study, we analyze what digital platforms gain from being members of MOs and, reciprocally, what the MOs gain from having these actors as members. We also investigate how these platforms act as MO members, paying attention to the existing literature on MOs. We focus on the Coalition for Better Ads MO, a collective initiative aiming to counter the rise of online ad-blocking. We show that digital platforms that operate in the online advertising market and as web browsers make a significant contribution to the MO. To this end, the MO delegates several organizational elements (i.e., monitoring and sanctioning) to these firms. This delegation reinforces the position of these members and helps them to change the organization of the whole market to their advantage as they control the advertising features (i.e., formats) of their rivals (publishers). The MO gains in credibility and efficiency, but, reciprocally, the MO gives legitimacy to the actions of the platforms, thereby reducing the risk of conflict with stakeholders.

Keywords: *Meta-organizations; Digital platforms; Market organization; Online advertising; ad-blocking*

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Despite their power over digital markets, major tech firms subsidize and participate in numerous meta-organizations (MOs), which are organizations that have organizations as their members. A recent press article revealed that leading tech platforms spend large amounts of money on trade bodies and stated that 'a key part of the companies' playbook is funding groups that agree with the companies' agenda […] Google said in December that it is a member or a substantial contributor to nearly 200 trade associations and political advocacy groups' (Tracy et al., 2021). This significant interest in trade associations by prominent global firms in the digital economy underlines the strategic role of such collective initiatives.

When dealing with an issue that is of partial or total concern to an industry, its actors can implement strategies to collectively solve the problem (Astley & Fombrun, 1983). The most common type of interfirm organization in such situations is trade associations, which bring together, on a voluntary basis, rival firms and firms that have a customer/supplier relationship. They can also host other trade associations or even qualified individuals. As such, they are a heterogeneous type of organization, defined as a 'meta-organization' (MO) by Ahrne and Brunsson (2005, 2008). The MO encompasses hybrid types of organizations characterized by different forms of membership, decision-making processes, goals, and rules, making it a helpful theoretical framework for studying the activities of different types of collective initiatives (Berkowitz & Bor, 2018).

As vehicles for collective action, MOs, like trade associations, are entrusted with the mission to defend the interests of a collective of firms against external stakeholders and to tackle common problems. At the same time, they bring together individuals and organizations that have their own agendas and the ability to enforce them by themselves. This trend reveals the influence that members can exert within an MO, especially if they have a dominant position in a market.

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Digital markets are increasingly being affected by the prominence of platforms, which Gawer and Cusumano (2014) define as products, services, or technologies organized in a common structure, from which outside firms can develop their own complementary products, technologies, or services. Some of these digital platforms are able to foreclose other actors, competitors, or downstream operators by controlling access to crucial market components such as users, data, or advertising spaces. In antitrust language, they are characterized as 'gatekeepers' as they are 'economic agents that can control access by a group of users to some goods or another group of users' (Alexiadis & de Streel, 2020).

Tech firms like Google, Facebook, and Amazon are striking examples of this type of digital platform, which dominates many markets including online advertising. Google and Facebook are dominant operators in the online advertising market, both in search engine advertising and display advertising (i.e., graphic banners and videos). They earned approximately 75% of the online advertising market revenues in France in 2020 and have a grip over the technological infrastructure as intermediaries (Perrot et al., 2020). This situation is common in Western countries (see, for example, Srinivasan, 2020) as the online advertising market is a global one.

The dominant and gatekeeping position of digital platforms such as Google and Facebook should enable them to promote their interests in and views about the online advertising market without having to invest resources on collective initiatives. Paradoxically, they still involve themselves in MOs such as those which set standards.

What do digital platforms gain from being members of MOs and, reciprocally, what do the MOs gain from having such actors as members? How do these types of platforms act as MO members?

So far, there has been limited documentation of how these platforms act as MO members. Berkowitz and Souchaud (2019) analyzed the case of sharing economy platforms through the emergence of a sectoral self-regulation initiative. Platforms are more often described as MOs themselves (Ciborra, 1996; Kretschmer et al., 2020). However, there has been little analysis of the specificities of platforms or digital gatekeepers as MO members and the actions they take with regard to other members, the MO itself or even the market.

In this article, we study a specific MO, the Coalition for Better Ads (CBA), which was set up to deal with the issue of ad-blocking in the online advertising market. Its goal is to enforce better business practices in terms of ad formats and ensure that the advertising experience is satisfying enough to prevent web users from blocking ads. We document chronologically and extensively the rise of the ad-blocking phenomenon and how, in this context, the CBA MO has succeeded in imposing minimum quality standards on the whole international industry. In our case, a single firm, Google (later joined by two other platforms that operate web and mobile browsers – Microsoft and Naver), decisively contributes to an MO which it helped to create by using its gatekeeper position in the advertising value chain to enforce and monitor compliance with the CBA standards.

Our case study sheds light on the role played by digital platforms through their membership of MOs. First, it shows that their central position in the value chain as technical intermediaries is an asset for the MO as they can manage the MO's monitoring and sanctioning role in a particularly efficient way. This process, driven by the MO, then changes the organization of the whole market as the agreed rules apply across the entire industry. This reinforces the digital platforms' market power as they have a form of control over their rivals' advertising features. Finally, by enforcing these standards in the context of a collective initiative, they gain legitimacy and reduce the risk of conflict with concerned stakeholders and antitrust authorities. This appears to be a fundamental issue for digital platforms when they try to change the organization of the market and underlines the platforms' interests in participating in MOs.

After introducing our theoretical background, we explain our methodology. We then provide contextual details and describe the functioning and goal of the MO on which we focus: the CBA, which we analyze in the discussion section to answer our research questions. We conclude by describing the limits of our work and suggest further avenues for research.

Theoretical background

Meta-organizations and the organization of markets and competition

For many decades, markets have been regarded as processes in the making rather than ready-made structures. Rather than being abstract and spontaneous, markets are increasingly conceptualized as social constructs shaped by their actors. Ahrne et al. (2015) revealed that markets can be studied through the same five elements, which constitute a formal organization (i.e., membership, hierarchy, rules, monitoring, and sanctions), even if they are totally or partially present (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2011). *Membership* refers to the ability to restrict the participation to a market, for buyers or sellers. *Hierarchy* can be found when decisions made by market actors are binding for existing or new market participants, for instance in the case of dispute settlements. Decisions are also taken to impose *rules* within a market context, like in the case of standardization. *Monitoring* activities among markets can consist in producing certifications or ratings to evaluate the quality of products or services. Eventually, *Sanctions* – either rewarding (e.g., awards) or penalizing (e.g., refusal of certification and boycott) – can be used toward market actors.

In this context, 'market organization' refers to the action of establishing or changing the configuration of these organizational elements within specific markets. Ahrne et al. (2015) considered three types of market organizers. *Profiteers* are economic actors who seek a direct advantage in the organization of the primary or secondary markets, usually by being in an intermediary position (e.g., brokers and auction houses). *Sellers and buyers* are actors who are directly involved in the market, which they wish to organize in their own interest. Finally, *others* 'are directly involved in market organization or they offer views and advice on how other people and organizations should act as organizers' (Ahrne et al., 2015, p. 16).

Organizational decisions have significant impacts on the dynamics of markets and directly affect relations between buyers and sellers. Recent studies have insisted on the diversity of the practices of sectors and actors involved in the process of organization and reorganization (Brunsson & Jutterström, 2018). The digital economy field appears to be particularly fruitful for studying cases of market organization. For instance, Kirchner and Schüßler (2019) showed how digital marketplaces act as 'profiteers' when organizing markets. Platforms designed to match buyers and sellers (e.g., AirBnB, Lyft) generate significant profits from supporting a new form of market organization while promoting the values of the so-called 'sharing economy'. More generally, the features of the digital economy strongly support changes in how transactions are made and markets are shaped, bringing new agency among actors, revaluation of products, and changes to the market settings and scales (Hagberg & Kjellberg, 2020).

The actions of platforms in the organization of markets can be analyzed and related to the literature on MOs. Platforms can affect the organization of the whole market. Their intermediary position enables them to impose rules on downstream operators and complementors, as they must comply with them to get access to the market. This process is reinforced when platforms have the technical ability, as in digital markets, to control access. This influence over organization of the market can be fostered by participation in MOs and raises questions about the impact it has on competition within the market.

Like trade associations, MOs appear to be crucial to the process of market organization and reorganization. They can have a direct impact on firms' practices, for instance when establishing formal (e.g., standards) or informal rules (e.g., better business practices), among other organizational elements (Rasche et al., 2013). Their actions are often directed at addressing collective concerns, which, as Marques (2017) underlined, are either detrimental to or beneficial for society. Therefore, MOs, at different levels, are the relevant unit of analysis for studying self-regulation initiatives (Berkowitz et al., 2017; Berkowitz & Souchaud, 2019). Their actions, when they combine organizational elements with the aim to solve common problems, lead to the organization and reorganization of markets. In doing so, they transform the nature of the market to make it an instrument of economic stability (Frankel et al., 2019).

However, these market (re-)organizations performed by MOs can have a significant impact on competition, which can itself be analyzed as organized (Arora-Jonsson et al., 2020). Porter (1980) identified the three generic competitive strategies as cost leadership, differentiation, and focus (on a specific target such as a customer segment or a narrow category of product). In this view, the promotion of better business practices goes along with a quality assessment of the conduct of firms and their production. Trade associations can endorse the production of norms, such as standards for compatibility or quality purposes (Lad & Caldwell, 2009). In doing so, MOs such as trade associations change how markets are fashioned, function, and evolve: they intentionally change the organization of the markets (Ahrne et al., 2015), particularly through the organizational element of rules (Rasche & Seidl, 2019).

When they establish standards, MOs can change the cost structure through the imposition of norms. This can be described as the process of 'raising rivals' costs' (RRC), which, according to Salop and Scheffman (1983, p. 267), takes place when 'some non price predatory conduct can best be understood as action that raises competitors' costs'. Previous studies have revealed how regulations are used for RRC purposes (McWilliams et al., 2002). In the context of industry self-regulation, the actions led by the trade associations can create barriers to entry and enable collusion in coordinated price-setting or product uniformity (Garvin, 1983; Maitland, 1985). The production of private standards, in particular, can have anti-competitive effects in how they are chosen, set, and enforced and can favor the leaders to the detriment of challengers, particularly by controlling innovation (Foray, 1993). A longitudinal analysis by Barnett (2013) demonstrated that trade associations tend to favor the voice of the leading firms in an industry as they are more able to push their own interests.

Thus, the normative activity of MOs is at the core of strategic moves as the competitiveness of firms can be affected by standardization processes. In this context, the characteristics of the Mos, which produce standards, must be investigated, particularly when they have platforms as members, and even more so when these platforms act as gatekeepers in this industry.

Reciprocity between the meta-organization and its members

MOs can have a strong impact on markets, their organization, and on their members' rivals. This macro perspective underlines that meta-organizing is strategic for MO members as it helps them to solve collective problems and foster their vision within a market or an industry.

However, this depends on the ability of MOs to achieve their goals, which is linked to their ability to recruit members. Ahrne and Brunsson (2008) underlined that it is crucial for MOs to attract members, especially strong members, in terms of resources and competencies. This helps them to recruit new members and reduces the risk of having strong organizations as competitors outside the MO. But it is also linked to the dependency of MOs on the resources of their own members, as MOs tend to have fewer resources than most of their members, compared to organizations composed of individuals (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2012).

This can lead to MOs being dependent on its members for carrying out specific organizational roles. In the interests of efficiency or out of necessity, these roles can be shared with or wholly delegated to members of the MO. Strong actors such as digital platforms, especially when they have substantial resources and a central position in a specific market or industry (and are therefore considered as gatekeepers), can endorse these roles for the benefit of the MO. To the best of our knowledge, there has been limited documentation of this strong dependency situation in the literature.

However, as Ahrne and Brunsson (2008, p. 87) show, an MO is dependent on the membership of attractive organizations, 'but attractive organizations are often precisely those with the least reason to join a meta-organization'. Having strong members also benefits MOs by giving them higher status and credibility in their concerted action. This credibility is associated with the identity of these members, but, reciprocally, joining an MO confers official status on the members.

Furthermore, this reciprocity in giving credibility can be linked to the notion of legitimacy. Berkowitz et al. (2017), for example, investigated several MOs in the oil and gas sector, which were involved in implementing corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives. The authors underlined that MOs vary in terms of scope (infra-sectoral, sectoral, cross-sectoral, and supra-sectoral) and types of members (e.g., firms and nongovernmental organization (NGOs)), depending on the aim of the collective action. This plurality of possibilities helps the firms to develop 'communication channels with a variety of stakeholders [and] can be a great means to provide legitimacy to the firm's operations and reduce the potential hostility to CSR policies defined in closed-door meetings between members of the industry' (Berkowitz et al., 2017, p. 767). The notion of legitimacy has been intensively investigated in the management literature through a variety of approaches (Suddaby et al., 2017) and was notably defined by Suchman (1995, p. 574) as 'a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions'.

In the context of firms and organizations joining forces to enforce quality standards, the search for legitimacy relates to a strategic approach where legitimacy is perceived as a type of resource managed by organizations. Organizations need to find coherence and alignment between their activities, the social values associated with them, and the norms conveyed by the social system which they are a part of (Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975), particularly in order to gain other resources (Zimmerman & Zeitz, 2002). Legitimacy is, therefore, a crucial element for MOs, as shown by Laurent et al. (2019). Internally, MOs need to convince their members of their ability to achieve the goal that they have been set, particularly when using self-regulation and voluntary constraints. Externally, MOs need to acquire legitimacy when representing their members and engaging with external stakeholders. In what follows, we focus on legitimacy as a reason for members joining an MO in the specific context of a standard-setting activity.

Research method

This paper takes the form of a single case study. This choice of research method is supported by the fact that the CBA and our analysis of the online advertising market are current and ongoing. A single case study, therefore, enables us to delve into a complex and rich situation, to detail its specificities and relate them to the existing theoretical background (Yin, 2009). This exploratory case helps us to provide insights into an understudied phenomenon and to document the emergence of an MO.

To process the collected data, this case study relies on a historical narrative of the development of ad-blocking as a global issue within the advertising market, which led to the emergence of the CBA. The narrative approach is commonly used in the social sciences for communication and knowledge transfer (Czarniawska, 2004). It can be defined as the 'construction of a detailed story from the raw data' (Langley, 1999, p. 695). Here, we provide empirical evidence, supported by a back-and-forth movement between facts and theory (Dumez, 2007). This is helpful in analyzing the evolution of a market situation, which is affected by a disruption and is then rebalanced. This progressive view is particularly relevant for understanding the evolution of competition in a dynamic context and for formulating hypotheses. In line with Dumez and Jeunemaître (2006), in our analysis, we follow the chronological steps in the evolution of the ad-blocking problem and in the creation of the MO, focus on critical phases in its development, and ensure that we take into account the actors' level of knowledge. Our study is based, first, on our observations of the online advertising market before and after the ad-blocking surge, which we consider to be a disruptive force, and we assess the role of the CBA in attempts to recreate a stable environment.

This detailed narrative has an exploratory motivation and relies on multilevel (industry, organization, firms, and stakeholders) data and heterogeneous sources, which we bring

together in a general hypothesis. This is a way to organize and present data compiled from several sources and helps to expose meaningful events (Czarniawska, 2004; Myers, 2019). Langley (1999, p. 695) also promoted narrative strategies as a way to exploit the richness of data and produce a 'thick description that will allow the reader to judge the transferability of the ideas to other situations'. This method enables us to identify underlying patterns and unveil the mechanisms and dynamics of organizations (Pentland, 1999).

In this paper, the detailed narrative is a convenient way to present the evolution of a phenomenon and, in this complex context, how a specific MO emerged to respond to the issue. This narrative is a central product as it contributes to the literature by stressing the issues that led to the emergence of the MO. This is particularly useful as the creation of an MO is often the answer to solving a collective problem. Our narrative identifies such problems and the options that are chosen to address them.

Data collection and analysis

Inspired by grounded theory methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1994), we collected a variety of data to produce this narrative on the ad-blocking phenomenon. This approach stresses the importance of empirical reality in the building of concepts. In this view, concepts emerge from the data and evolve concomitantly with discoveries in the field. We developed our theories from the various data sources in three steps.

First, we carried out 12 interviews between July 2017 and June 2018 with executives from stakeholders (mainly in France but also from the United States, Germany, and the United Kingdom) involved in this global issue (ad-blockers, trade associations, ad tech intermediaries, NGOs, and institutions), as detailed in Table 1. These were complemented by two additional interviews with an advertising sales manager (I13 – July 2019) and with the Director of the CBA (I14 – October 2019). This last additional interview helped us to obtain an official opinion from an insider at the CBA, that is, the MO we are studying.

It was difficult to convince firm executives to talk about the ad-blocking issue as it is a 'sensitive topic' (Renzetti & Lee, 1993). For example, the ad-blocking phenomenon demonstrates the failure of companies to provide a satisfactory user experience and highlights potential financial difficulties and failed revenue models. However, we also interviewed trade associations representing publishers (i.e., Groupement des Editeurs de Contenus et de Services en Ligne), advertisers (i.e., Union des Annonceurs), and marketers who specialize in online advertising (i.e., International Advertising Bureau France, Mobile Marketing Association France), who were more open to discussing and addressing the issue. These interviews enabled us to tell a story about the ad-blocking phenomenon from the actors' point of view. Interviews in French and English were recorded, or notes were taken, and transcribed. Following grounded theory (Creswell, 2007, pp. 64–65), we coded the interviews, starting with open and descriptive labels (e.g., actors and technologies). We then identified recurring patterns (e.g., actors' strategies), and finally, we renamed our labels accordingly.

Table 1. List of interviews

No.	Title	Firm	Type of organization
I1	CEO and Cofounder	Multinational	Ad-blocker
I2	Chief Communication Officer	Multinational	Ad-blocker
I3	General Secretary	National	Trade Association
I4	Cofounder	Multinational	Ad-blocker
I5	General Secretary	National	Trade Association
I6	Head of Office	National	Ministry
I7	Head of Commission	National	Trade Association
I8	CEO and Founder	National	Ad Tech company
I9	Head of Unit	Multinational	European Commission
I10	Advocacy Officer	National	Nongovernmental Organization
I11	Head of Unit	National	Antitrust Authority
I12	President	National	Trade Association
I13	Sales Manager	Multinational	Ad Tech company
I14	Director	Multinational	Trade Association

N.B. The verbatim was translated by the author when the interview was conducted in French.

Secondly, we collected as much information as possible about the CBA from its website. This method of systematically collecting and using official documents produced by this specific MO (Table 2) was inspired by Carmagnac and Carbone (2019). We continually updated this data collection as the MO is still developing and introducing new projects. The content of this document was summarized and coded with similar labels.

Finally, we collected and used various market reports, white papers, specialist press articles, and tweets on the topic. This grey literature was helpful in gaining access to crucial financial information such as market shares or prices. We also carried out an extensive reading of academic literature in other fields such as marketing or computer science in order to include their analysis of the ad-blocking phenomenon in our own analysis. The heteroclite dataset used for this case study provided a deep insight into the specificities of the online advertising market and its practices. These elements, especially from the specialist press, can be crucial for getting opinions from insiders who do not agree to be interviewed. Following Miles and Huberman (2003), we were able to

Table 2. List of documents collected from the Coalition for Better Ads website

No.	Title	Date	Category	Active hyperlink (Oct-2019)
CBA-1	An Experimental Methodology to Measure Consumers' Perception of Online Ad Experiences	04/2016	Research Methodology	https://www.betterads.org/research/perceptionpaper/
CBA-2	An Experimental Methodology to Rank N Ad Experiences by Consumers' Perceptions	04/2016	Research Methodology	https://www.betterads.org/research/rankingpaper/
CBA-3	Determining a Better Ad Standard Based on User Experience Data	2017	Research Methodology	https://www.betterads.org/research/standardpaper/
CBA-4	Better Ad Standards – Content Environments	02/2018	Recommendations	https://cdn2.hubspot.net/hubfs/4231068/Better_Ads_August2018/PDF/Better-Ads-Standards-Content-Environments-02-18.pdf
CBA-5	CBA Interpretation Panel Decision	26/06/2018	CBA Decisions	https://cdn2.hubspot.net/hubfs/4231068/Better_Ads_August2018/PDF/Interpretation%20Panel%20Decisions.pdf
CBA-6	Better Ads Experience Program. Dispute Resolution Mechanism Procedures	07/2018	Procedures	https://cdn2.hubspot.net/hubfs/4231068/Better_Ads_August2018/PDF/Better-Ads-Experience-Program-Dispute-Resolution-Mechanism-Procedures-July-2018.pdf
CBA-7	Framework for a Better Ads Experience Program	18/10/2018	Procedures	https://cdn2.hubspot.net/hubfs/4231068/Better_Ads_August2018/PDF/Framework%20for%20a%20Better%20Ads%20Experience%20Program%20(October%202018).pdf
CBA-8	Improving the Online Ad Experience for Consumers: Building on a Year of Progress	12/09/2017	Blog Post	https://www.betterads.org/blog/improving-online-ad-experience-consumers-building-year-progress
CBA-9	Coalition for Better Ads to Introduce Better Ads Experience Program	18/12/2017	Blog Post	https://www.betterads.org/blog/coalition-for-better-ads-to-introduce-better-ads-experience-program
CBA-10	Adoption of Better Ad Standards Continues to Grow, Benefiting Consumers and Industry	30/09/2019	Blog Post	https://www.betterads.org/blog/adoption-of-better-ads-standards-continues-to-grow-benefitting-consumers-and-industry
CBA-11	Global Online Media Leaders Join Forces to Improve Consumer Ad Experience	15/09/2016	Press Release	https://www.betterads.org/press-releases/global-online-media-leaders-join-forces-to-improve-consumer-ad-experience
CBA-12	Coalition for Better Ads Releases Initial Better Ad Standards for Desktop and Mobile Web in North America and Europe	22/03/2017	Press Release	https://www.betterads.org/press-releases/coalition-for-better-ads-releases-initial-better-ads-standards-for-desktop-and-mobile-web
CBA-13	Coalition for Better Ads Opens Publisher Enrollment in Better Ads Experience Program to Drive Further Adoption of its Standards	15/02/2018	Press Release	https://www.betterads.org/press-releases/coalition-for-better-ads-opens-publisher-enrollment-in-better-ads-experience-program
CBA-14	Coalition for Better Ads Expands Global Operations to Support Increasing Engagement	24/07/2018	Press Release	https://www.betterads.org/press-releases/coalition-for-better-ads-expands-global-operations-to-support-increasing-engagement
CBA-15	Coalition for Better Ads to Adopt Better Ad Standards Worldwide to Improve Consumer Experience Online	09/01/2019	Press Release	https://www.betterads.org/press-releases/coalition-for-better-ads-to-adopt-better-ads-standards-worldwide-to-improve-consumer-experience-online
CBA-16	Coalition for Better Ads Welcomes Microsoft Edge and NAVER Corporation's Whale as Browser Partners in the Better Ads Experience Program	10/09/2019	Press Release	https://www.betterads.org/press-releases/coalition-for-better-ads-welcomes-microsoft-edge-and-naver-corporations-whale-as-browser-partners-in-the-better-ads-experience-program
CBA-17	Advertising Week Europe 2017	23/03/2017	Videos	https://www.betterads.org/videos/
CBA-18	Coalition for Better Ads – Overview	2019	Resources	https://cdn2.hubspot.net/hubfs/4231068/Better_Ads_August2018/PDF/CBA_OnePager_Overview.pdf

Table 2. (Continued) List of documents collected from the Coalition for Better Ads website

No.	Title	Date	Category	Active hyperlink (Oct-2019)
CBA-19	Coalition for Better Ads – Better Ad Standards	2019	Resources	https://cdn2.hubspot.net/hubfs/4231068/Better_Ads_August2018/PDF/CBA_OnePager_BetterAdsStandards.pdf
CBA-20	Coalition for Better Ads – Methodology	2019	Resources	https://cdn2.hubspot.net/hubfs/4231068/Better_Ads_August2018/PDF/CBA_OnePager_Methodology.pdf
CBA-21	Coalition for Better Ads – Members	2019	About	https://www.betterads.org/members/
CBA-22	Coalition for Better Ads – Committees	2019	About	https://www.betterads.org/about/committees/
CBA-23	Better Ad Standards: Least Preferred Ad Experiences for Desktop Web and Mobile Web	2019	Standards	https://www.betterads.org/standards/
CBA-24	Making Online Ads Better for Everyone. Update DMEXCO 2019	2019	Presentation	*Sent by mail*

triangulate our results, thanks to this last interview with the current Director of the CBA and these secondary sources, which were helpful in validating several elements and obtaining opinions from actors.

Context: The rise of ad-blocking as a global issue for the advertising market

Since 2004, there has been constant growth in digital advertising as targeting technologies and the allocation of advertising spaces have developed. However, for several reasons, this trend slowed down in the mid-2000s, particularly in the field of display[1] advertising. First, the major difference between offline and online advertising is the inability of online advertising to exploit space scarcity, as the web offers almost infinite spaces for advertising compared to offline media. In addition, there was a decrease in the amount of attention users paid to online ads, defined early on as 'banner blindness' (Benway, 1998). This lack of efficiency led to a decline in prices for ad impressions[2] and incentivized publishers to increase their volume of advertising to generate higher revenues (Turow, 2012, p. 72).

New display formats known as 'rich media' have been developed using visual or sound animations to attract more attention than static banners, providing higher viewability (Bounie et al., 2017) and user engagement (eMarketer, 2014). However, these formats are intended to disrupt the content where they are inserted to trigger interaction and they can lead to 'advertising avoidance' (Li et al., 2002), that is, 'all actions by media users that differentially reduce their exposure to ad content' (Speck & Elliott, 1997). Advertising research has shown that it is the format that determines the consumer's behavior toward online ads (Burns & Lutz, 2006).

The first ad-blocking software emerged in 2002, and many versions have since been developed. Nowadays, most of the blocking add-ons interrupt the loading of scripts and prevent the display of advertisements. In 2018, the most famous ad-blocker was Adblock Plus, which claims to have more than 100 million users worldwide (Marolleau, 2017). Ad-blocking extensions for desktops are available on main browsers. On mobiles, ad-blocking takes the form of specific applications that can be downloaded through app stores. Ad-blocking as a technical device developed outside the market and, propelled by browsers, rose under the radar of the advertising firms.

Operators in the online advertising market have belatedly taken into account the ad-blocking phenomenon. This is because of the technical difficulty of building a reliable tool to measure ad-blocking. The first measures were imperfect and could not help to give a broad picture of the ad-blocking phenomenon.[3] Since then, publishers have succeeded in finding effective methods for measuring ad-blocking rates on their websites, but these statistics remain confidential. In parallel, from 2012 to 2016, a grey literature provided by consulting firms and business associations triggered collective thinking about the phenomenon and its causes. The first reports on the subject were published around 2013 (IAB & VisionCritical, 2014; PageFair, 2013), and since then, the number of surveys has increased and produce a largely mediatized quantification of the phenomenon (PageFair, 2017) and its evolution over time, as in Chart 1. This quantification has helped to increase operators' awareness of the issue of ad-blocking by business associations, thanks to the provision of statistics.

From 2013, firms in the advertising sector started to formulate strategic responses to deal with this issue. Two main approaches were considered. One approach – adopted

1. 'Display' advertising defines online advertisements using graphic elements or video technologies, such as banners.
2. Display ads can be billed by CPM (cost per thousand impressions).
3. Interview 13.

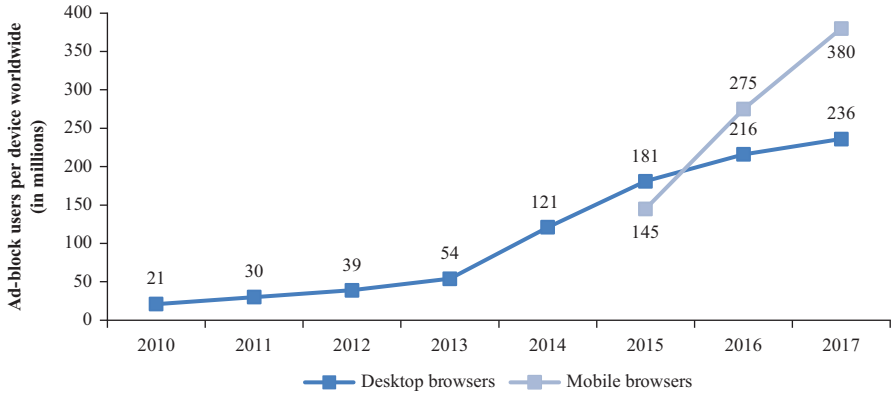

Chart 1. Devices using ad-block software on the open web, according to PageFair (2017)

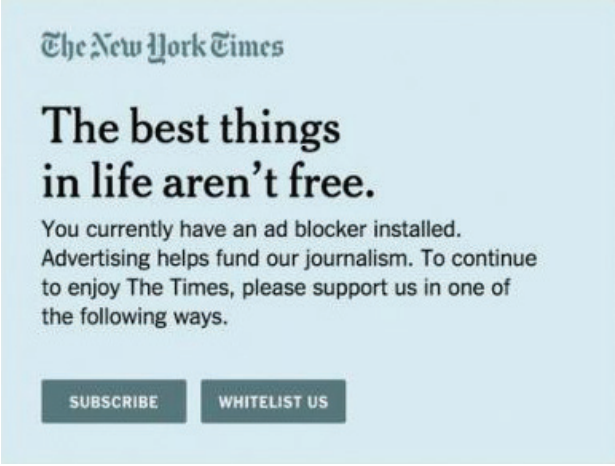

Figure 1. A counter-blocking campaign by the *New York Times* (nytimes.com) in 2016

mainly by publishers – considered the use of ad-blocking as a moral fault or a breach of a tacit contract between readers and publishers, as illustrated in Figure 1. Several defense tactics, such as legal action (Butler, 2016) and counter-blocking solutions (Nithyanand et al., 2016), were used to counter ad-blocking directly. However, in the European Union, legal action did not result in the prosecution of ad-block developers (Meyer, 2017). Initiatives were taken by publishers to block access to their websites by ad-block adopters. The view of ad-blocking as a form of piracy led to individual strategic responses, which were not very successful in countering the usage of ad-blocking.

Implicitly accepting the argument developed by advocates of 'acceptable' advertising, business associations gradually started to revise their methods and their discourse to counter the phenomenon (Heine, 2015). From 2013 to 2016, there was a significant change in the perception of ad-blocking. Ad-blocking was no longer seen as a type of marginal protest by users against online campaigns but was considered instead as a massive threat. By considering the ad-blocking phenomenon as a new reality constructed through quantification and measurement, the online advertising industry paved the way for a collective strategy, which led to the creation of the CBA MO.

Findings: The crucial role of digital platforms in the functioning of the Coalition for Better Ads

Established in September 2016, the CBA is an MO created by leading actors in the industry to solve the ad-blocking problem by determining the quality of online advertising formats (O'Reilly, 2016). To begin with, several US trade bodies, the Association of National Advertisers, the American Association of Advertising Agencies (4A), and the Interactive Advertising Bureau (IAB) opened discussions with other self-regulation initiatives and trade associations such as the World Federation of Advertisers (WFA), the IAB Europe, and the Network Advertising Initiative. To enable them to take action and pave the way for establishing a coalition, they contacted leading digital platforms (e.g., Google, Facebook, and Microsoft) and publishers (e.g., NewsCorp) (114).

However, the details of how this coalition was created are somewhat blurry, as the press releases mainly described it as a spontaneous and collective effort by trade bodies and major firms in the advertising industry. Few press articles mentioned that the coalition emerged from a recent IAB working group called the LEAN program ('Light, Encrypted, Ad-choice supported, and Non-invasive ads'), which was already aiming to improve the quality of industry wide advertising (Di Quinzio, 2016). The CBA can, therefore, be considered as the constitution of a proper MO derived from an emergent group out of an existing MO. The constitution of a specific MO, in a more

global perspective and with the help of pluralities of existing organizations (firms and trade bodies), demonstrates an effort to create momentum on a collective initiative. This gradual process leading to the emergence of a proper organization has been described previously, particularly in the case of individual networks and social movements (Ahrne et al., 2016).

The CBA is a joint initiative, which aims to 'improve consumers' experience with online advertising' (CBA-8) through the standardization of advertising formats. This solution is consistent with the self-regulation tradition in the advertising field. From the second half of the 20th century, the industry has produced 'soft law' on better business practices through trade bodies (Ginosar, 2011).

> 'A market-based standard was needed. The IAB has its own standards (…) but the only tool we needed to have to say 'here is what we must do, what we must not do' is the work done by the CBA (…). The WFA [the French UDA is one of their members] was very active in this Coalition'. (Interview 112)

Gathering resources and support

Major advertisers (e.g., Unilever and Procter&Gamble), advertising agencies (e.g., GroupM and Publicis), advertising platforms (e.g., Google, Facebook, Criteo, AppNexus, BounceX, and Microsoft), publishers (e.g., NY Times and Axel Springer), and major US trade bodies (e.g., IAB, WFA, and Association of National Advertisers) are current members of the MO (CBA-21). The main purpose of this new trade association is to pull together global organizations in a cross-sectoral way in order to address the ad-blocking issue (I14). Significantly, we found that two leading platforms, Google and Facebook, which compete in these segments, were board members. These firms and organizations are strong members in terms of their market power and influence as advertisers or standard-setters in a broader context. Their participation is crucial for fostering a global response to the ad-blocking problem and helping the MO to gain resources and legitimacy in its actions.

The membership fee for being part of the steering committee is $100,000 dollars per year, and it costs $20,000 to be an observer member (I1). The creation of this MO was boosted by the support of major trade bodies, particularly those representing advertisers. The initiative's launch was applauded by the French equivalent of the WFA – the Union des Annonceurs – which relies on the CBA standards in one of its own initiatives (Digital Ad Trust).

To identify the most annoying desktop and mobile ad formats, the CBA carried out a survey of the preferences of a panel of 25,000 US and European web users recruited on Amazon Mechanical Turk, as described in their methodology manifesto (CBA-3), bringing an element of expertise and credibility. The survey report identified and described various desktop and mobile ad formats in a web environment. Based on this research, the CBA listed a number of ad formats which they considered to be less-preferred formats and which should be discontinued due to their level of annoyance (see Figure 2 and a detailed list in the Appendix). It emphasized that 'the process laid out […] allows a Better Ads standard to change or be re-confirmed as consumer preferences change or as more data is collected. As a hypothetical example, an ad experience that is borderline but allowed under the current standard could become less tolerated by consumers as the most intolerable ad formats begin to disappear' (CBA-3, p. 23). The Better Ads standards are, thus, open and subject to further modification and development of new formats such as in-app advertising (CBA-10). Discussions are currently ongoing in the subcommittee responsible for the research methodology to elaborate short-form video and in-app standards for advertising (I14).

> '[About the CBA standardization] A sacrifice for [publishers], is to agree to reduce their range of ad formats that were of poorer quality and were what I call intrusive formats. Agreeing to that means, first of all, agreeing to reduce your revenues before thinking about how you can grow, so you have to make sacrifices before you can earn again (…)'. (Interview 112)

Enforcing standards

Publishers can apply to become certified companies when they comply with the CBA standards. Their ad spaces are

Prestitial Ads with Countdown

Prestitial "countdown" ads appear before the content of the page has loaded, forcing the user to wait a number of seconds before they can dismiss the ad, or the ad closes on its own.

These ads can disrupt users in a way that dissuades them from waiting for the countdown to finish and continuing onto their content.

In desktop environments, prestitial ads that can be dismissed immediately did not fall beneath the initial Better Ads Standard for desktop.

Figure 2. An example of a format banned by the Coalition for Better Ads

assessed and scrutinized by 'implementation entities' (i.e., web browsers: originally Google Chrome and recently Microsoft Edge and Naver's Whale – CB-16). Compliant publishers receive CBA certification if they agree to make a payment to the Better Ads Experience Program and are registered (CBA-18). A dispute resolution mechanism using formal procedures can be triggered, with formal procedures being implemented by the Advertising Self-Regulatory Council if there is disagreement with the CBA's decision (CBA-6). The whole standardization process is summed up in Figure 3.

As Google's vice-president announced in 2017, 'in dialogue with the Coalition and other industry groups, we plan to have Chrome stop showing ads (including those owned or served by Google) on websites that are not compliant with the Better Ads Standards starting in early 2018' (Ramaswamy, 2017). In addition, since 15 February 2018, in most European and North American countries, the ad formats identified as annoying are filtered by default through an in-built feature of the Google Chrome browser. This feature also affects publishers who have not applied for certification (Grimm, 2018). In January 2019, Google announced that this initiative was to be extended worldwide (Galbraith, 2019). It should be noted that Google Chrome is the world's leading browser (desktop and mobile), with more than 63% of the market.[4] Before the launch of this blocking feature, Google sent warnings and formal notices to noncompliant publishers (less than 1% of the 100,000 websites analyzed) to urge them to change their ad formats (Galbraith, 2019). Online newspapers in the United States such as *Forbes* and the *Los Angeles Times* were identified as 'failing' (Moses, 2017). French newspapers *Le Progrès* and *L'Equipe* were notified and urged to comply in order to not be blocked (Mindmedia, 2019). Google offers a web tool – the Ad Experience Report – for web developers who are willing to assess the status of their websites.[5] In January 2019, Google also announced that, for safety reasons, Chrome would be changing its technical conditions for extension developers: this decision could prevent ad-blocking extensions (except AdBlock Plus) from being available on Chrome (ArsTechnica, 2019).

> 'The good news is that Google decided to set up and impose [the Better Ads standards] in February, in Chrome. […] I could make a lot of comments about Google, but comments about them being wrong in banning 12 ad formats – some of them were not really used any more. But it does not matter. It is really good and the fact that they've done this helps us to convert the [publishers] who are a bit reluctant'. (Interview I12)

[4] https://gs.statcounter.com/browser-market-share (Update: December 2020).

[5] 'About the Ad Experience Report', https://support.google.com/webtools/topic/7073612?hl=en&ref_topic=7566613.

Google: A driving force?

We identified Google as the main driving force of this consortium. As Google has invested more in this initiative than other members, there were several clues that led us to this conclusion. First, Google was one of the cofounders and a steering committee member of the CBA (CBA-11), in which it invested substantial resources. Also, press sources showed that the research methodology used by the CBA for the assessment of advertising formats originated from Google (Slefo, 2018). In addition, Google's executives were 'amongst the most influential voices' on the CBA's committees (MacMillan, 2018). Finally, Google was originally the only member in charge of the detection and implementation of the standards via its browser, although it was later joined by two other members (Microsoft and Naver). It offers a specific web tool – the Ad Experience Report – for web developers and filters all 'annoying' ads worldwide, based on the CBA standards. 'Google has invested a huge amount of money and time in the Coalition' (Interview I1).

In the timeline in Figure 4, we can observe the progressive development of the CBA and the expansion of Chrome's ad-filtering alongside the development of the coalition.

Google has no additional voting rights or specific influence on the Board of the CBA (I14). However, we can see that Google allocates more resources to the running of the project than other members of the MO. This initiative has, therefore, raised concerns among and been criticized by European advertising executives (Shields, 2017).

CBA: A success?

The creation and development of the CBA is a direct response to the previous critical phases of change. It rejects once and for all the idea of blaming web users and going after the ad-block adopters. It declares the 'original sin' of the online advertising industry to be its creation of intrusive formats. By initiating self-regulation, the CBA aims to bring stability back to the whole industry through the promotion of better practices. The main incentive for this change is economic as a better ad experience is expected to drive growth in revenues. A case study of a shift in Germany's Burda Media's digital advertising model is revelatory: by following the CBA standards on annoying ads and cutting the number of its ad impressions, the publisher improved its user engagement scores (+22.2% page impressions and +58.3% click rate) and realized 26% in additional revenues (CBA-24).

This stability has been made possible by distinguishing between good and bad advertising, as 'ad-blocking is a blunt tool used by consumers against a problem which is limited to only some publishers. Developing an industry line helps address the externality of ad experiences on one site impacting

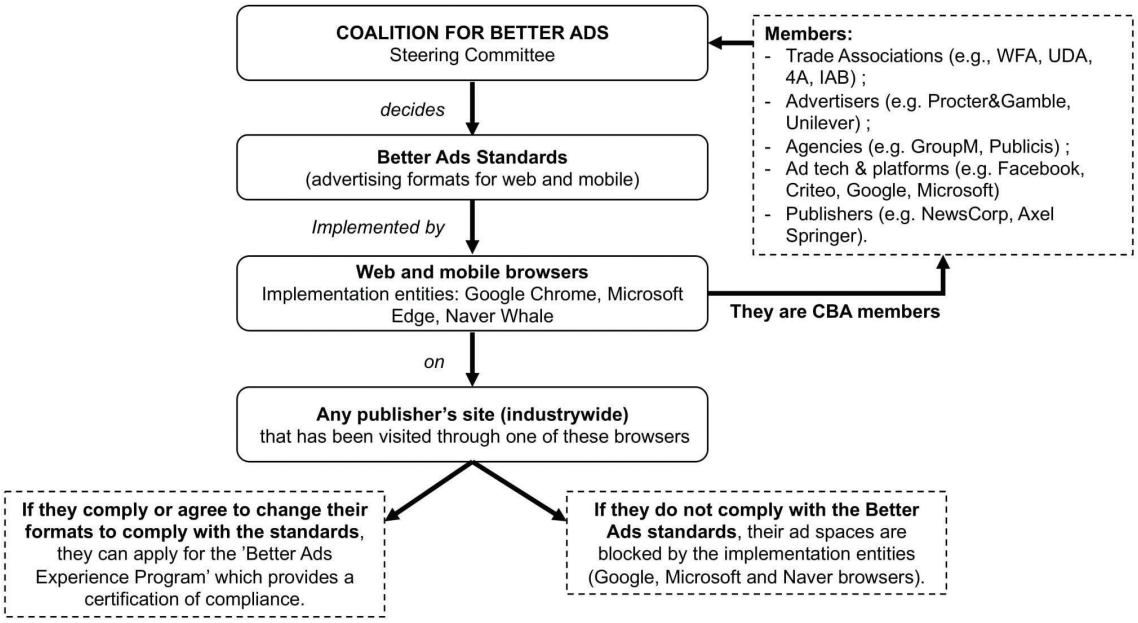

Figure 3. The Coalition for Better Ads membership and standardization process

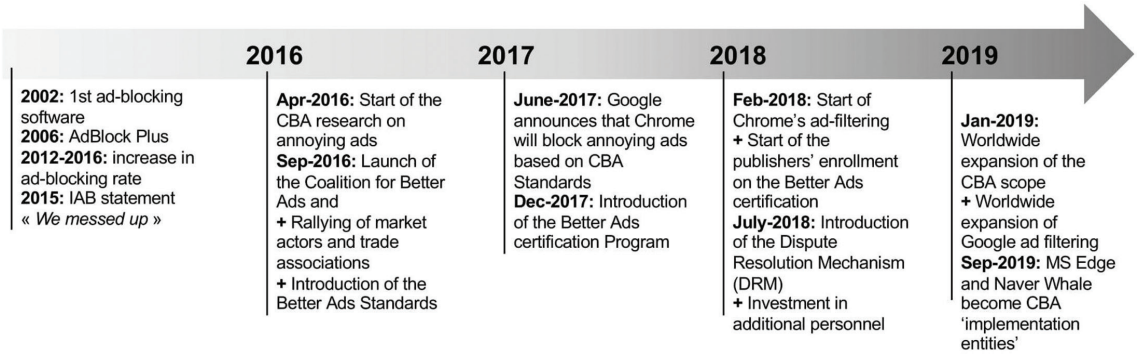

Figure 4. Chronological development of the ad-blocking phenomenon and emergence of the CBA

others' (CBA-3). Influenced by leaders in the online advertising market and by landmark trade associations, the CBA, in turn, influences market actors, but accurately measuring the level of this influence is a near-impossible task. We observed a global decline in the ad-blocking rate in North America and Europe (−12%) since 2017 as well as a decrease in the downloading of ad-blocking devices (−62%) on Google Chrome since 2016 (CBA-24). These statistics show that the CBA has been successful in achieving the common goal of its members: slowing down, or even reducing, the usage of ad-blocking. However, it is difficult to disentangle the effects of the coalition on the ad-blocking rate from Google's ad-filtering operations.

Discussion

Delegation of the organizational role

As explained in our detailed narrative, the CBA is successfully serving a collective goal: to fight the rise of ad-blocking. By participating in this MO, member firms are implementing a collective strategy, which relies on the ability of market players to understand consumers' claims about the declining quality of advertising rather than sanctioning them for their use of ad-blockers.

As an MO, the CBA has a combination of organizational elements that are characteristic of a formal organization. The

membership element is twofold. First, joining the steering committee enables firms and other trade bodies to get involved in various committees and, thus, contribute to the design of the CBA standards. This is the most advanced form of membership, as it allows the members to design the standards. A lower level of membership follows, through participation in the Better Ads Experience Program. This allows publishers who have been assessed to publicize their compliance (certification) and get access to the dispute resolution mechanism.

Rules are found in the ways in which the membership and governance are organized (e.g., dispute resolution mechanism and access to decision-making process), but, above all, they lie in the standards established by the CBA. Significantly, we observed that this has internal and external effects on members and nonmembers, which makes its purpose and modes of action ambiguous. However, traditionally, *de jure* standard-setting in a self-regulation context is voluntary by definition and is often enforced through a sanction mechanism among firms involved in the initiative (Brunsson et al., 2012). Here, the unusual element is that the Better Ads standards are enforced 'industry wide' by browsers' ad-filtering processes, even among firms that have not applied to join the CBA. If this sounds logical for efficiency purposes, it implies that standardization has a normative power that goes beyond the boundaries of firms, which give their consent to this process.

The specific role of platforms (Google as the main standard enforcer, joined more recently by the Microsoft and Naver browsers) in this MO should be underlined, as it performs a *sanctioning* role by controlling the implementation of Better Ads standards through the Chrome's ad-filtering process. This sanctioning role first applies to MO members: to publisher members of the steering committee and to publisher members of the Better Ads Experience Program. The specificity here is that this ability to enforce standards goes beyond the boundaries of the MO and affects all publishers across the industry, meaning that it is able to sanction the whole market.

This is reinforced by the fact that it is Google that grants this ability based on its market power over other web browsers. Members can, therefore, rely on Google to ensure the effectiveness of the MO in meeting its goals. Web browsers also provide a *monitoring* element. The blocking of noncompliant ad formats in publishers' websites is automatic because of the inscription of this feature in the coding of the software. This recalls the famous catchphrase 'code is law', implying that the architecture of cyberspace is built to implement specific values decided by code writers (Lessig, 2000). In this context, delegation of the roles for sanctioning and monitoring – of the other members and beyond – to digital platforms, which act as gatekeepers in the technical infrastructure of the online advertising market, appears to have been agreed because it makes the self-regulation process efficient.

The gatekeeper position of web browsers within the digital economy carries the efficiency needed to solve the common problem. In this context, the sanctioning and monitoring roles are delegated to the MO members that have the technical ability to ensure the success of the self-regulation process, thereby reinforcing the legitimacy of the MO in its actions. This delegation is implicit but results from a decision, as the MO supports the action of its delegate members in this context. However, decisions related to monitoring and sanctioning are implemented by the digital platforms rather than by the MO. We analyze this configuration as a voluntary transfer of action capacity from the MO to one or several of its members, for the sake of efficiency.

The impact on market organization and competition

The actions of the CBA have a direct impact on the organization of the online advertising market. The ad formats rules established by the CBA directly affect all actors in the market through the global implementation enforced by web browsers. These rules are automatically enforced as the web browser coding contains the standards, and the browsers monitor how publishers configure their pages. This process creates a form of hierarchy where Google and other platforms (Microsoft and Naver), which also sell advertising space,[6] are in a prominent position. Finally, the MO provides a membership opportunity for compliant publishers through the certification process.

Even if this delegation of the monitoring and sanctioning role within the MO focuses on one specific aspect of the advertising sector (i.e., advertising formats), this case demonstrates how, through technical devices, digital platforms can have a direct influence on the whole industry. *De facto*, Google – along with Microsoft and Naver, to a lesser extent – enforces the CBA standards to a larger population of firms without having been mandated to do so. The MO has a spill-over effect on firms beyond its boundaries. In our case, the MO's enforcement ability strengthens its credibility in pursuing its collective strategy. It also provides reciprocal strength for Google to use its market power to filter publishers' 'annoying ads'.

This raises concerns about the MO's effects on competition dynamics. First, the CBA is composed of firms in every segment of the online advertising market: platforms, advertisers, agencies, ad tech intermediaries, ad sales, publishers, and trade associations. Members of the MO can be suppliers/customers as well as competitors, and they all converge around the setting of a single definition of a minimum standard for advertising formats. This collective strategy helps to weaken the intensity

[6] In addition to Google, Microsoft and Naver also run search engine advertising platforms. 'Search' advertising is defined as online advertisements composed of sponsored links in search engines.

of competition among firms in order to stabilize their environment (Bresser & Harl, 1986). It also has an impact on nonmembers as it creates uniformity in the available advertising formats, which can otherwise differentiate their advertising offer. Thus, over time, the MO can limit the formats that can be used, which may deter new entrants to the market (Grimm et al., 2006). These effects increase as the changes to the ad features that are imposed on noncompliant publishers generate additional costs for them. These costs are tempered by the certification process and the potential for additional revenues from having a range of better-quality ads.

The competitiveness of Google's advertising offer is further strengthened by its ability to have a significant impact on enforcement of the CBA's standards. Through the filtering of bad ads, Google benefits from its gatekeeping position as a leading browser. Thanks to this ad-filtering feature, Google is also able to increase the technical advantages of its own browser: it makes Google Chrome more competitive at the user experience level without having to advocate for the legitimacy of such an ad-filtering device. Larry Page, CEO of Alphabet Inc. and cofounder of Google, concluded in 2015 that 'part of it is the industry needs to do better at producing ads that are less annoying and that are quicker to load' (O'Reilly, 2015). This 'focus on the user' has been an important feature of Google's business and innovation from its beginnings (Leeder & Heneghan, 2014). To a large extent, the CBA's definition of good online advertising is in line with Google's vision. This suggests that Google may be taking advantage of the organization to extend its 'soft power' and be one step ahead of its competitors. This helps Google to drive the organization of the market by creating new competitor preferences (Jaworski et al., 2000), thereby consolidating its leading position.

Bringing legitimacy

The outcomes of the CBA have significantly changed the organization of the online advertising market. Through the imposition of new rules, enacted by a specific MO, publishers have had to adapt their advertising offer. This has helped to reduce the need for consumers to use ad-blocking devices. But, as we saw in the last paragraph, the most concrete part of the self-regulation work is conducted by the platforms, who implement the rules, thanks to their gatekeeping position and their market power. However, they could have acted alone to produce the same result without giving resources to an MO. We consider this to be a strategic move as the MO gives legitimacy to these digital platforms, especially Google.

The need for legitimacy is crucial both within and outside the MO, as shown by Laurent et al. (2019). Reciprocally, the fact that the MO gives legitimacy to the operation is useful to its members. In our case, addressing a common problem through the blocking of advertisements requires an emphasis on collegiality. If it had acted alone, Google would have faced the direct opposition of publishers and, potentially, of antitrust authorities. The imposition of standards and, consequently, the blocking of noncompliant publishers could have led to complaints from these publishers and official investigations. For instance, recent developments about the blocking of third-party cookies by Google (on its own) for the sake of users' privacy raised antitrust concerns in EU institutions (Schiff, 2021).

The establishment of a dedicated MO to lead the enforcement of standards and the provision of membership through certification have enabled a smoother process within the industry and for external stakeholders. When acting on behalf of the MO, Google and the other platforms have legitimacy as they can claim to be working in the collective interests of the industry.

Moreover, the CBA's strength lies in the status of its members, which can be classed as major actors in their market segments. By joining the CBA, they contribute to the promotion of the MO, showing that these major actors have trust in its ability to solve the ad-blocking problem. The significant fees for joining the CBA show that this MO was not necessarily designed to expand to have a larger number of members. However, smaller publishers are invited to participate in the certification program, thus support the initiative. By collectively agreeing that the rise of ad-blocking was caused by a decline in ad quality, members of the CBA have demonstrated that they are taking serious action, particularly against advertisers, to solve the issue, which is the aim of the MO. In addition, the legitimacy of the CBA is ensured by the support of major trade associations from every segment of the industry's value chain, making the MO a cross-sectoral initiative backed by 'traditionally' self-regulated organizations.

Providing legitimacy is particularly useful as the new market organization implies a revaluation of products. The CBA 'regulates' the diffusion of ad formats that are considered to harm the user experience, and thus generate negative externality. This definition of what types of advertising are good or bad can fluctuate, depending on the outcomes of the coalition's research. By backing these decisions with scientific discourse (Brunsson & Jacobsson, 2000) – that is, using a large survey of web users' preferences – the MO has been able to develop its vision for and definition of advertising quality. In the redefinition of what is 'good' or 'bad', advertising could not succeed if it were not based on the consensus of a large part of the industry. Again, the collegiality of the MO is a strength in this process, especially as the CBA board members are powerful as advertisers or as trade bodies. In this regard, the involvement of the MO is essential as it brings legitimacy to this process, affecting the organization of the market.

Conclusion and further research

This article presents a case study of how online advertising has tackled the ad-blocking phenomenon internationally over the past few years. We revealed how an MO, the CBA, created ad format standards and implemented them across the industry.

We studied how the MO has delegated organizational roles to several of its members that operate browsers, with the aim of gaining efficiency and credibility. This delegation is directly linked to the ability of these digital platforms to act as gatekeepers, by monitoring and sanctioning the compliance of publishers with regard to the CBA standards, thanks to their position as technical intermediaries. This self-regulation is enforced through the coding of web and mobile browsers and is particularly efficient, as one of the 'implementation entities' of the CBA, Google Chrome, is the leader in the browser market.

In return, this situation enables these members, particularly Google, to reinforce their position in the market and change its organization. The MO's efficiency is directly linked to the fact that every publisher in the world must comply with the CBA standards or be subject to ad-blocking by Google, Microsoft, and Naver. In that sense, the MO has spill-over effects beyond its own boundaries and has changed the organization of the whole market. This demonstrates the ability of digital gatekeepers to be unusual MO members. In this meta-organizational configuration, the notion of consensus as a driving force for acceptance and efficiency of the self-regulation process is replaced by a code-based regulation implemented by prominent MO members.

Finally, we analyzed the MO's role in respect of the quasi-autonomous action of its platform members. We showed that the MO is essential for giving legitimacy to the 'implementation entities' in their actions. The MO offers a form of collegiality over the standard-making process, which helps the platforms to impose the CBA standards industrywide. The fact that leading actors in the market (e.g., publishers, advertisers, and trade associations) are members of this MO reinforces this legitimation process. Reciprocally, the MO is essential for platforms as members, as it prevents conflicts with external stakeholders, which might arise if acting alone. As strong as they may be, digital platforms can find MOs to be crucial vehicles for their visions and to provide useful collegiality when reorganizing markets. This helps to explain the durability of MOs like the CBA, even in the presence of very strong members.

However, this whole process directly questions the ability of nonmembers to deviate from private rules, which they have not been involved in deciding. This increases antitrust concerns as it can be considered as a barrier to entry for competitors who do not agree to comply with the CBA standards. It also raises questions about the nature of this MO, which established a social order beyond its boundaries. In this context, the membership of powerful platforms, and their actions as gatekeepers, could weaken the very founding principles of MOs and change their outcome to their own advantage. This result is in line with the analysis by Barnett (2013): it extends and applies it to the specific case of leading platforms.

A main limitation of our work, however, is that these conclusions are drawn from our specific case, and additional cases will need to be analyzed before they can be generalized. The case of the CBA is specific in terms of the design and task of the MO, particularly regarding the very large scope of its standards and the market power of the digital platforms described above. However, we posit that some features of these platforms can be found in other cases, and this article, therefore, calls for further research into how MOs deal with digital platforms as members and share or delegate organizational roles to them.

The article also enriches the empirical literature on the online advertising market, an industrial market with a fast pace of innovation. Another limitation of this work is that the long-term outcomes of the CBA cannot be assessed yet. However, it may encourage further research on the strategic use of joint initiatives by leading firms such as Google in this case. Finally, it contributes to the research on the potential anti-competitive effects of MOs.

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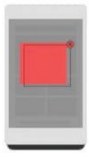
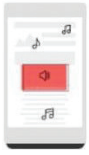
Appendix

Appendix 1. Ad formats falling beneath the Better Ads Standards (CBA-23)

Discarded formats	Mobile web	Desktop web	Description
Pop-up Ads			Pop-up ads are a type of interstitial ad that do exactly what they say — pop up and block the main content of the page. They appear after content on the page begins to load and are among the most commonly cited annoyances for visitors to a website. (...)
Prestitial Ads		 *(with a countdown only)*	Prestitial ads appear on a mobile page before content has loaded, blocking the user from continuing on to the content they have sought out. (...) Prestitial with "Countdown" ads appear before the content of the page has loaded, forcing the user to wait a number of seconds before they can dismiss the ad, or the ad closes on its own.
Auto-playing Video Ads with Sound			Auto-playing video ads with sound automatically play with sound, without any user interaction.
Large Sticky Ads			Large sticky ads stick to the bottom edge of a page, regardless of a user's efforts to scroll. As the user browses the page, this static, immobile sticky ad takes up more than 30% of the screen's real estate.
Ad Density Higher Than 30%			Ads that take up more than 30% of the vertical height of a page.
Flashing Animated Ads			Ads that animate and "flash" with rapidly changing background, text or colors are highly aggravating for consumers, and serve to create a severe distraction for them as they attempt to read the content on a given page.
Postitial Ads with Countdown			Postitial ads with countdown timers appear after the user follows a link. These ads force the user to wait a number of seconds before they can dismiss the ad, or for the ad to close or redirect them to another page.
Full-screen Scrollover Ad			Full-screen scrollover ads force a user to scroll through an ad that appears on top of content. These ads take up more than 30% of the page and float on top of the page's main content, obstructing it from view.