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ABSTRACT

Digital platforms, thanks to their intermediary position, can act as gatekeepers and restrict the access to groups of users or to some goods. They constitute powerful market players thanks to this ability. What is the specificity of their membership, when they join a meta-organization (MO)? In this article, we answer these questions through a case study that documents the rise of online ad-blocking and the emergence of a MO in response to this phenomenon. Ad-blocking represents a major threat to the online advertising market, as it conceals almost a third of its potential audience and generates a corresponding shortfall in revenue for operators. To address this issue, a group of firms – the Coalition for Better Ads – has emerged to enforce online ad formats quality standards across the industry. By this in-depth qualitative case study, we show that the collective problem could be solved thanks to a technical capability brought by several digital gatekeepers. To this end, the MO delegates the access to several organizational elements to this firm (i.e. sanction and monitoring). Providing such delegation might reinforce the power of these members and contribute to alter the organization of the whole market at their advantage. Reciprocally, establishing a MO brings legitimacy in this process, which is required to make these changes acceptable, and eventually supports the action of gatekeepers.

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INTRODUCTION

Despite their power over digital markets, major tech firms subsidize and participate to numerous meta-organizations. A recent press article revealed that leading tech platforms spent large amounts in trade bodies. As mentioned in this article, “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”.¹ This significant interest for trade associations, from global and prominent firms of the digital economy, underlines the strategic role of such collective initiatives.

When facing an issue that partially or totally concerns an industry, its actors can implement strategies to collectively solve the problem (Astley & Fombrun, 1983). As the most common type of inter-firm organization in such situations, trade associations are of particular interest (Lawton et al., 2018). These organizations gather, on a voluntary basis, rival firms as well as firms in a customer/supplier relationship. They can also host other trade associations or even qualified personalities. As such, they represent a heterogeneous type of organization, defined as a “meta-organization” (MO) by Ahrne & Brunsson (2005, 2008). MOs constitute a “decided social order” and possess, totally or partially, elements that characterize a formal organization: membership, rules, monitoring, sanctions and hierarchy (Ahrne et al., 2016; Berkowitz & Dumez, 2015). The MO concept encompasses hybrid types of organizations, characterized by different forms of membership, decision-making processes, goals and rules, and is thus a helpful theoretical framework for studying the activities of trade associations (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 over external stakeholders and to tackle common problems.

¹ Ryan Tracy, Chad Day & Anthony DeBarros, “Facebook, Amazon Lead in Lobbying”, *Wall Street Journal*, 25.01.2021.

However, a longitudinal analysis by (Barnett, 2013) has demonstrated that trade associations tend to favor the voice of leading firms among an industry, especially as they have a greater ability to push for their own agenda. This trend reveals the importance that members can exert within a meta-organization, especially if they exert a form of domination over a market.

Increasingly, digital markets are affected by the prominence of platforms that are defined by Gawer and Cusumano (2014) as products, services or technologies organized in a common structure, from which outside firms can develop their own complementary products, technologies or services. The counterpart of this central position as platforms is their capacity to foreclose other actors, competitors or downstream operators, by controlling accesses to crucial components of the market such as users, data or advertising spaces. In the antitrust language, they are ‘digital 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 Stree, 2020). Tech firms like Google, Facebook or Amazon constitute striking examples of digital platform of this kind, dominating several markets, such as online advertising, both in terms of market shares² and grip over the technological infrastructure as intermediaries.³

How this type of platforms, characterized as digital gatekeepers, act as MO members? What is their influence over the functioning of a meta-organization?

Meta-organizations are usually characterized as strong and efficient, yet relying on soft law and consensus (Berkowitz & Dumez, 2016). However, MOs are considered as structurally weak, as conflicts easily arise when the meta-organization itself competes with its own members, thus revealing that MOs are highly dependent from them (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008). In this context, meta-organizations often use only partially the elements that characterize a formal organization (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2011, 2019). These organizational elements correspond to concrete and decided roles and

² Google and Facebook constitute a duopoly over the online advertising market, both on ‘search’ and ‘display’ advertising. In terms of market share, they earned approximately 60 % of the US market in 2018. Sheila Dang, “Google, Facebook have tight grip on growing U.S. online ad market: report”, *Reuters.com*, 05.06.2019. Similar estimations of market shares are mentioned for European countries. See, for instance, in the case of France: Christophe Alix, “La pub hexagonale, un duopole Google-Facebook”, *Liberation.fr*, 26.01.2018.

³ Recent antitrust cases mentioned this notion of ‘gatekeeper’ in their developments. See for instance the lawsuit from the US Department of Justice concerning Google as “monopoly gatekeeper” regarding to its power over the search advertising market. The US DoJ, “Justice Department Sues Monopolist Google For Violating Antitrust Laws”, press release, 20.10.2020. Available at : <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/justice-department-sues-monopolist-google-violating-antitrust-laws>

capabilities. In certain situations, the abilities generated by the leadership of certain members of the MO can thus exceed the capabilities of the MO itself and these roles could be potentially shared with or totally delegated to the members of the meta-organization, for more efficiency or out of necessity. Platforms, when acting as digital gatekeepers, might benefit from this delegation and, as such, influence the performance of the MO. This might also have crucial consequences over the market organization itself and its level of competition.

So far, the specificities of platforms as MO members have been documented in a limited way. The case of sharing economy platforms had been analyzed by [Berkowitz and Souchaud \(2019\)](#), specifically through the emergence of a sectoral self-regulation initiative. More frequently, platforms have been described as meta-organizations themselves (Ciborra, 1996; Kretschmer et al., 2020). Yet, the specificities of platforms or digital gatekeepers as MO members and their action over other members, the MO itself or even the market, remain limitedly analyzed.

In this article, we study a meta-organization, the Coalition for Better Ads (abbreviated as CBA, hereafter), designed to solve the issue of ad-blocking in the online advertising market. The MO's goal is to enforce better business practices in terms of ad formats and make sure that the advertising experience will be satisfying enough for web users to stop blocking ads.

This MO relies on the enforcement ability from several - and especially one (Google), due to its gatekeeping position - of their members to solve a collective problem, thus delegating to these members the access to two organizational elements: monitoring and sanction.

We document chronologically and extensively the rise of the ad-blocking phenomenon and how the MO we focus on – the CBA – emerged and imposed minimum quality standards on the whole industry, internationally, in this context. We investigate this case where a single firm, Google, joint afterwards by two other platforms operating web and mobile browsers, Microsoft and Naver, provides decisive elements to a meta-organization it contributed to create: enforce and monitor the compliance to the CBA standards, thanks to their gatekeeper position in the advertising value chain.

Our case study reveals three main results regarding the specificities of the membership of digital gatekeepers to a meta-organization. First, their central position in the value chain as technical intermediaries provide these members the ability to manage the monitoring and sanctioning role of the MO in a particularly efficient way. In the case of the CBA, the standard enforcement scope goes even beyond the boundaries of the meta-organization and affects potentially all publishers worldwide, even when they are non-members. Then, this process driven by the MO alters the whole market organization as the decided rules apply industrywide. This reinforces the market power of the platforms that act as gatekeepers, as it creates barriers to entry and raises rivals' costs. This underlines, for platforms, the interest of participating to meta-organization. Eventually, we analyze that the meta-organization remains a crucial structure as it brings a form of collegiality and, by the same token, legitimacy in this process. This appears to be fundamental for platforms when using their gatekeeping position to change the organization of the market.

After introducing our theoretical background, we explain our methodology. Then, we provide contextual details and we document precisely the emergence of the CBA, which we analyze in the discussion section to answer our research questions. We conclude by describing the limits of our work and propose further research paths.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

ORGANIZING MARKETS

Since several decades, markets have been regarded as processes in the making rather than ready-made structures (Latour, 1987). Rather than abstract and spontaneous orders, markets are increasingly conceptualized as social constructs shaped by their actors. Stepping aside from conceptualizations in terms of networks or institutions, recent works in organization studies have analyzed markets as resulting from decided orders like formal organizations.

The article by Ahrne et al. (2015) reveals that markets can be studied with the same five elements that constitute a formal organization (i.e. membership, hierarchy, rules, monitoring and sanctions), even if they can be present in totality or only partially (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2011). *Membership* refers to the

ability to restrict the participation to a market, for buyers or sellers. *Hierarchy* can be found when decision 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, boycott) – can be used towards market actors.

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

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

The actions of platforms over the organization of markets might be analyzed and connected to the literature on meta-organizations. Platforms have the capacity to affect the organization of the whole market. Their intermediary position grant them the capacity to impose rules to downstream operators and complementors, as they must comply to them to get access to the market. This process is reinforced when platforms have a technical capacity, like in digital markets, of access controlling. This influence over the market organization can be fostered by the participation to meta-organizations and raises questions about the effects over competition in this very market.

THE ROLE OF META-ORGANIZATIONS IN THE ORGANIZATION OF MARKETS AND COMPETITION

Meta-organizations like trade associations appear to be crucial in the process of market organization and reorganization. As recalled by Brunsson & Jutterstrom (2018), “market reorganization typically involves attempts at reorganizing formal organizations [...] The market reorganizer must induce one or more individuals or organizations to change, whether directly or indirectly, and more often than not it is organizations that must change their behavior” (p. 6). Either when gathering sellers, buyers or both or when advising them, meta-organizations like trade associations are often involved in collective processes designed to alter market organizations.

Meta-organizations can have a direct impact on firms’ practices, for instance when enacting formal (e.g. standards) or informal rules (e.g. better business practices), among other organizational elements (Rasche et al., 2013). Their action is often directed toward addressing collective concerns, either these issues are detrimental or promising for the society as underlined by Marques (2017). Therefore, meta-organizations, at various levels, are the relevant unit of analysis for studying self-regulation initiatives (Berkowitz et al., 2017; Berkowitz & Souchaud, 2019). Their actions, when combining organizational elements with the goal 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 significant effects on competition, which can itself be analyzed as organized (Arora-Jonsson et al., 2020). Such competition matters have been a subject of the law and business literatures for decades, the issue is still relevant as these structures proliferate and are often considered as legitimate representatives of an industry or complementary sources of regulation, even if voluntary (Boddewyn, 1985), such as in the European Union (Finck, 2017).

Porter (1980) described 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 modify the way markets are fashioned, function and evolve: they intentionally change the organization of markets (Ahrne et al., 2015), especially through one organizational element: rules (Rasche & Seidl, 2019).

MOs, when establishing standards, can change the cost structure through the imposition of norms. This strategy can be described as the process of “raising rivals’ costs” (RRC), which, according to Salop and Scheffman (1983: 267), takes place when “some nonprice predatory conduct can best be understood as action that raises competitors’ costs”. Previous works revealed the use of regulations for RRC purposes (McWilliams et al., 2002). When trade associations take on the role of industry self-regulation, the actions led by the trade associations can create barriers to entry and enable collusion for coordinated price-setting or product uniformity (Garvin, 1983; Maitland, 1985). Hemphill (1992) highlighted that US antitrust authorities have considered codes of conduct with caution, especially regarding the construction and the enforcement of their clauses. The production of private standards, in particular, can have potential anti-competitive effects in the way they are chosen, set and enforced, potentially favoring the leaders to the detriment of challengers, especially by controlling innovation (Foray, 1993). 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 that produce standards must be investigated.

RESEARCH METHOD

This paper takes the form of a single case study. This choice of research design 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 a 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, leading to the emergence of the Coalition for Better Ads. 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: 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 that 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. Following Dumez and Jeunemaître (2006: 38), 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 account of 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 the attempt to recreate a stable environment.

This detailed narrative has an exploratory motivation and relies on multi-level (industry, organization, firms and stakeholders) data and heterogeneous sources that we bring together in a general hypothesis. This is a way to organize and present data compiled from several sources and which helps to expose meaningful events (Czarniawska, 2004; Myers, 2019). Langley (1999) 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” (p.695). 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 a 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 various types 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 French, but also from the United States, Germany or United Kingdom) involved in this global issue (ad-blockers, trade associations, ad tech intermediaries, non-governmental organizations 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 of the CBA, which is the MO we are studying.

Table 1. List of interviews conducted for this research

N°	Title	Firm	Type of organization
I1	CEO & Co-founder	Multinational	Ad-blocker
I2	Chief Communication Officer	Multinational	Ad-blocker
I3	General Secretary	National	Trade Association

I4	Co-founder	Multinational	Ad-blocker
I5	General Secretary	National	Trade Association
I6	Head of Office	National	Ministry
I7	Head of Commission	National	Trade Association
I8	CEO & Founder	National	Ad Tech company
I9	Head of Unit	Multinational	European Commission
I10	Advocacy Officer	National	Non-governmental 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
<i>N.B. The verbatim was translated by the author when the interview was conducted in French</i>			

It was not easy 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: 64-65), we coded the interviews, starting with open and descriptive labels (e.g. actors, technologies). Then, we identified recurring patterns (e.g. actors’ strategies) and finally we renamed our labels accordingly.

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 & 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.

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

N°	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
CBA-19	Coalition for Better Ads – Better Ad Standards	2019	Resources	https://cdn2.hubspot.net/hubfs/4231068/Better_Ads_August2018/PDF/CBA_OnePager_Better_AdsStandards.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	<i>sent by mail</i>

Finally, we gathered 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 & Huberman (2003), we were able to 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, this trend slowed down in the mid-2000s, particularly in the field of display⁴ advertising, for several reasons. First, the major difference between offline and online advertising is the incapacity of online advertising to exploit space scarcity, as the web offers almost infinite advertising spaces in comparison with offline media. In addition, there was a decrease in the amount of attention paid by users to online ads, defined early on as “banner blindness” (Benway, 1998). This lack of efficiency led to a decline in prices for ad impressions⁵ and incentivized publishers to increase their advertising volume to generate higher revenues (Turow, 2012: 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., 2016) and user engagement (eMarketer, 2014). However, these formats are intended to disrupt the content where they are inserted to trigger interaction and can generate “advertising avoidance” (Li et al., 2002), i.e. “all actions by media users that differentially reduce their exposure to ad content” (Speck & Elliott, 1997). Research on advertising has shown that it is the format that determines the consumer’s behavior towards online ads (Burns & Lutz, 2006).

The first ad-blocking software emerged in 2002 and, since then, several versions have 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.⁶ Ad-blocking extensions for desktops are available on main browsers. On mobiles, ad-blocking can be found in the form of specific applications that can be

⁴ “Display” advertising defines online advertisements using graphic elements or video technologies, such as banners.

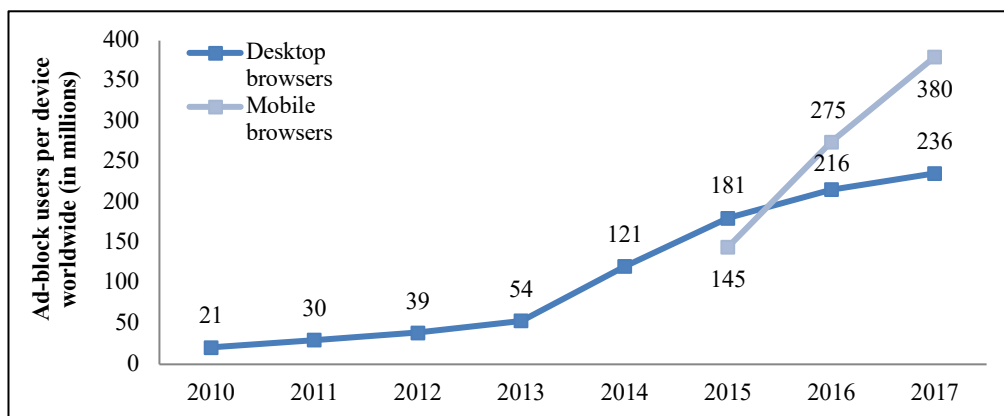
⁵ Display ads can be billed by CPM (cost per thousand impressions).

⁶ Aymeric Marolleau, Tim Schumacher (Eyeo): “Nous allons relancer Acceptable Ads Platform dans les prochains mois”, *mindnews.fr*, 22.09.2017.

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 account of the ad-blocking phenomenon. This is because of the technical difficulty of building a reliable tool to measure ad-blocking. The first measures that were taken were imperfect and could not help to give a broad picture of the ad-blocking phenomenon.⁷ Since then, publishers have succeeded in finding effective methods for measuring ad-blocking rates on their websites, but these statistics still 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 (PageFair, 2013; IAB & VisionCritical, 2014) and since then the number of surveys has increased and produce a largely mediatized quantification of the phenomenon (Sourcepoint & comScore, 2015; PageFair, 2017) and its evolution over time, as in Chart 1. This quantification helped to raise the awareness of the operators in the issue of ad-blocking by the business associations, thanks to the provision of statistics.

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



After 2013, firms in the advertising sector started to formulate strategic responses to deal with this issue. Two main approaches were considered. One approach – adopted mainly by publishers – considered the use of ad-blocking as a moral fault or a breach in a tacit contract between readers and publishers, as illustrated in Figure 1. Several defense tactics were used to counter ad-blocking directly

⁷ Interview I3.

(IAB, 2016), such as legal action (Butler, 2016; Lu, 2017) and counter-blocking solutions (Nithyanand et al., 2016). However, in the European Union, legal action did not result in the prosecution of ad-block developers.⁸ 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.

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



Implicitly accepting the argument developed by advocates of “acceptable” advertising, business associations started progressively to revise their methods and their discourse to counter the phenomenon. “We messed up”⁹ said Scott Cunningham, vice-president of the Interactive Advertising Bureau, in 2015. The firms that use “display” advertising failed to maintain a satisfactory level of quality in their consumers’ “user experience” expectations.

From 2013 to 2016, a significant change in the perception of ad-blocking occurred. Ad-blocking was no longer seen as a type of marginal protest by users against online campaigns, but 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 leading to the creation of a meta-organization, the Coalition for Better Ads.

⁸ David Meyer, “Adblock Plus wins again: New court ruling backs ad blocker against media firms”, *zdnet.com*, 18.08.2017.

⁹ Christopher Heine, “The IAB Pivots on Ad Blocking and Issues a Mea Culpa: ‘We Messed Up’”, *adweek.com*, 15.10.2015.

FINDINGS: THE EMERGENCE OF THE COALITION FOR BETTER ADS

Established in September 2016,¹⁰ the Coalition for Better Ads (CBA) is a trade association created by leading actors in the industry to solve the ad-blocking problem by determining the quality of online advertising formats. Originally, several US trade bodies, the Association of National Advertisers (ANA), the American Association of Advertising Agencies (4A) and the Interactive Advertising Bureau (IAB) started to discuss with other self-regulation initiatives and trade associations like the World Federation of Advertisers (WFA), the IAB Europe and the Network Advertising Initiative (NAI). They contacted leading platforms (e.g. Google, Facebook, Microsoft) and publishers (e.g. NewsCorp) so they can take actions and pave the way for establishing a coalition (I14). Yet, the details of the creation of this Coalition remain blurry, as it was only described in press releases as a spontaneous and collective efforts from trade bodies and major firms of the advertising industry.

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 (Hansen & Law, 2008). 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 I12.

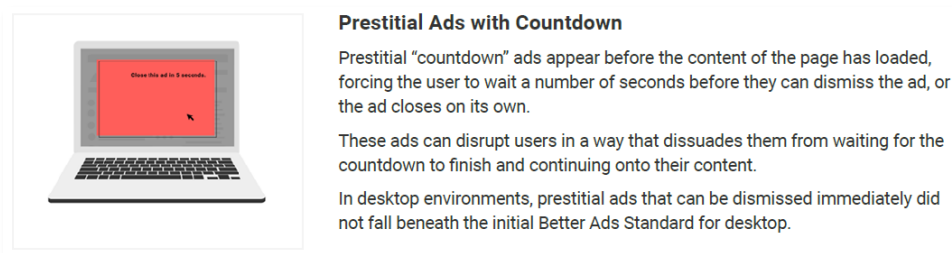
Gathering resources and support. Major advertisers (e.g. Unilever, Procter&Gamble), advertising agencies (e.g. GroupM, Publicis), advertising platforms (e.g. Google, Facebook, Criteo, AppNexus, BounceX, Microsoft), publishers (e.g. NY Times, Axel Springer) and major US trade bodies (e.g. Interactive Advertising Bureau, World Federation of Advertisers, Association of National Advertisers) are current members of the group (CBA-21). The main purpose of this new trade association is to pull together organizations in a cross-sectoral way in order to address the ad-blocking issue (I14).

¹⁰ Lara O’Reilly, “Google and 16 other companies have formed a coalition that wants to police ads on the web”, *businessinsider.sg*, 15.09.2016.

Significantly, we found that two leading platforms, Google and Facebook, who compete in these segments, were board members.

The CBA gathers firms that can be, at the same time, competitors and suppliers/customers in a global industrial market, linking advertisers to publishers. 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 (interview I1). The creation of this meta-organization was boosted by the support of major trade bodies, particularly those representing advertisers.¹¹ The initiative's launch was applauded by the French equivalent of the World Federation of Advertisers, the Union des Annonceurs, which relies on the CBA standards in one of its own initiatives (Digital Ad Trust).

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



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). This 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

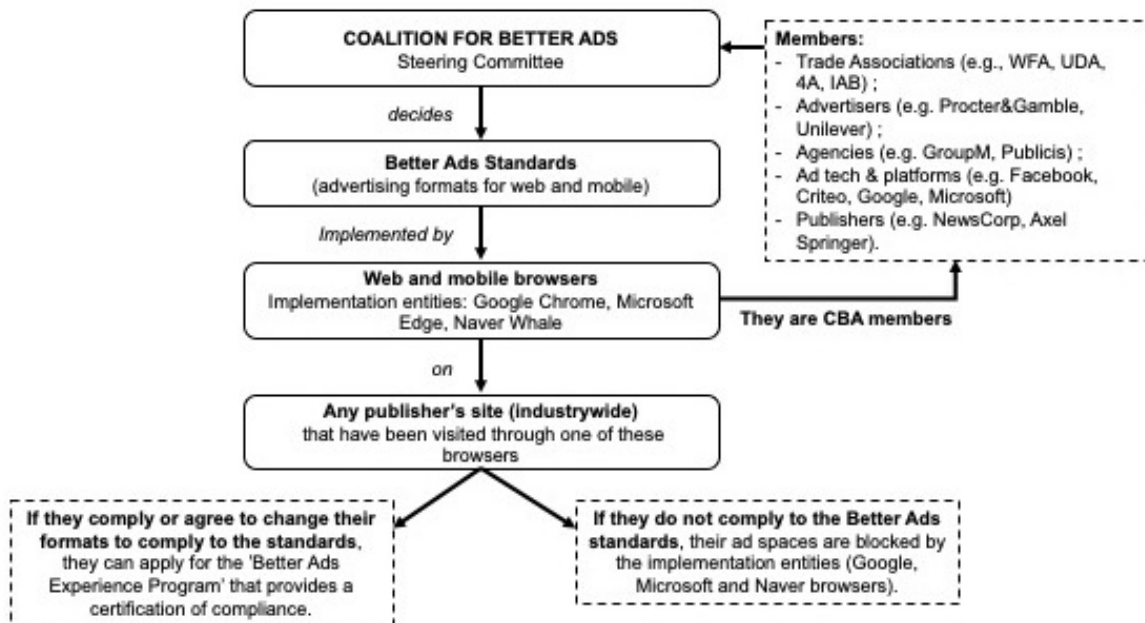
¹¹ In October 2017, a letter cosigned by CEOs of the Association of National Advertisers (ANA), the Interactive Advertising Bureau (IAB) and the American Association of Advertising Agencies (4A), backed the project. The letter is available here: https://www.iab.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/CBA_Letter.pdf

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 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 I12.

Enforcing standards. Publishers can apply to become certified companies when they comply with the CBA standards. Their ad spaces are assessed and scrutinized by “implementation entities” (i.e. web browsers: originally Google Chrome, and since recently Microsoft Edge and Naver’s Whale – CB-16). Compliant publishers receive CBA certification as long as 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 decision (CBA-6). The whole standardization process is summed up in Figure 3.

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



As announced in 2017 by Google’s vice-president, “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”.¹² In addition, since 15 February 2018, the ad formats identified as annoying are filtered by default through an in-built feature of the Google Chrome browser in most European and North American countries. This feature also affects publishers who have not applied for certification¹³. In January 2019, Google announced that this initiative was to be extended worldwide.¹⁴ It must be noted that Google Chrome is the leading browser worldwide (desktop and mobile), with more than 53.9% of the market share.¹⁵ Before the launch of this blocking feature, Google sent warnings and formal notices to uncompliant publishers (less than 1% of the 100,000 websites analyzed)¹⁶ to urge them to change their ad specifications¹⁷ Online newspapers in the US such as *Forbes* and the *Los Angeles Times* have been identified as “failing”.¹⁸ French newspapers *Le Progrès* or *L’Equipe* have been notified and have been urged to comply in order to not be blocked.¹⁹ Google offers a web tool – the Ad Experience Report – for web developers who are willing to assess the status of their websites.²⁰ 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) to be available on Chrome.²¹

“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

¹² Sridhar Ramaswamy, “Building a better web for everyone”, *blog.google*, 01.06.2017.

¹³ Jerrid Grimm, “Google’s Chrome Ad Blocker Will Not Harm the Advertising Industry”, *mediapost.com*, 11.04.2018.

¹⁴ “Today, the Coalition for Better Ads announced that it is expanding their initial Better Ads Standards beyond North America and Europe to cover all countries, worldwide. Following the Coalition’s lead, beginning July 9, 2019, Chrome will expand its user protections and stop showing all ads on sites in any country that repeatedly displays these disruptive ads” in Ben Galbraith, “Building a Better World Wide Web”, *blog.chromium.org*, 09.01.2019.

¹⁵ Felix Richter, “Chrome is the Number 1 Browser in the World”, *statista.com*, 24.07.2017.

¹⁶ Ben Galbraith, “Building a Better World Wide Web”, *blog.chromium.org*, 09.01.2019.

¹⁷ Ad specifications (abbreviated) are the technical requirements for advertising formats.

¹⁸ Lucia Moses, “Google reveals sites with ‘failing’ ads, including Forbes, LA Times”, *digiday.com*, 08.08.2017.

¹⁹ “Comment les éditeurs peuvent échapper au blocage dans Google Chrome”, *mindnews.fr*, 15.02.2018.

²⁰ “About the Ad Experience Report”, https://support.google.com/webtools/topic/7073612?hl=en&ref_topic=7566613

²¹ Peter Bright, “Google planning changes to Chrome that could break ad blockers”, *arstechnica.com*, 23.01.2019.

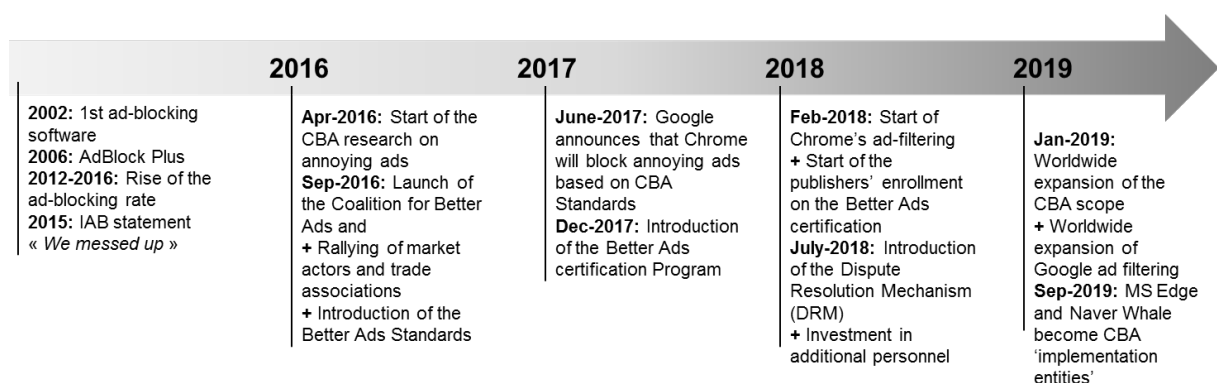
fact that they've done this helps us to convert the [publishers] who are a bit reluctant"
– Interview I12.

Google: a driving force? Google can be identified as the main driving force of this consortium. As Google has invested more in this initiative than other members, there are several clues that led us to this conclusion. First, Google was one of the co-founders and a steering committee member of the CBA (CBA-11), where 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.²² In addition, Google's executives were "amongst the most influential voices" on the CBA's committees.²³ Finally, Google was originally the only member in charge of the detection and implementation of the standards via its browser and was joined by two other members (Microsoft and Naver) afterwards. 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.

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



²² George Slefo, "An Industry Effort to Block 'Annoying' Ads Was Quietly Funded by Google Data", *adage.com*, 14.02.2018.

²³ Douglas MacMillan, "Google Will Block Spammy Ads (Just Not Many of Its Own)", *wsj.com*, 14.02.2018.

Google has no additional voting rights or specific influence in 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 Coalition. This initiative has therefore raised concerns among and been criticized by European advertising executives.²⁴

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 by promoting 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 Burda Media’s digital advertising model²⁵ is revelatory: by following CBA standards on annoying ads and cutting the number of its ad impressions, the publisher improved its user engagement scores (+22.2% page impressions, +58.3% click rate) and realized 26% in additional revenues (CBA-24).

This stability is made possible by distinguishing between good and bad advertising, as “ad blocking is a blunt tool used by consumers against a problem limited to only some publishers. Developing an industry line helps address the externality of ad experiences on one site impacting others” (CBA-3). Influenced by leaders in the online advertising market and 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, and, in particular, 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, ad-block usage. However, the effects of the Coalition on the ad-blocking rate are hard to disentangle from Google’s ad-filtering operations.

²⁴ Mike Shields, “Google’s plan to block certain ads in Chrome is making ad executives nervous and fueling conspiracy talk”, *uk.businessinsider.com*, 27.10.2017.

²⁵ Jessica Davies, “How Burda increased ad revenue by cutting ad clutter”, *digiday.com*, 01.10.2019

DISCUSSION

The delegation of organizational role. As explained in our detailed narrative, the CBA successfully serves a collective goal: fighting the rise of ad-blocking. By participating in this trade association, 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 a MO, the CBA combines organizational elements that characterize a formal organization. The *membership* element is twofold. First, joining the steering committee enable firms and other trade bodies to rally the various committees and thus contribute to the conception of the CBA standards. This represents the most advanced form of membership, as it provides the ability to conceive the standards. Then, a degraded form of membership could be found in the participation to the Better Ads Experience Program which authorizes publishers who have been assessed to publicize their compliance (certification) and get access to the dispute resolution mechanism.

Rules are found in the way membership and governance are organized (e.g. dispute resolution mechanism, access to decision-making process) but, above all, lie in the standards enacted by the CBA. Significantly, we observe that it has internal and external effects on members and non-members that make 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 "industrywide" by browsers' ad-filtering processes, even among firms who 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 who give their consent to this process.

The specific role of platforms (Google as the main standard enforcer, joined more recently by two other browsers, Microsoft and Naver) in this trade association should be underlined, as it provides a *sanction* role by controlling the implementation of Better Ads standards through Chrome's ad-filtering

process. This sanction role applies to MO members at first: towards publishers members of the steering committee, but also towards publishers members of the Better Ads Experience Program. The specificity here is that this standard enforcement ability spills over the boundaries of the MO and affects all publishers industrywide. This sanction capacity within the MO becomes a sanction capacity over the whole market.

This is reinforced by the fact that this ability is granted by Google, based on its market power over other web browsers. Members can thus rely on Google to ensure the effectiveness of the MO in meeting its goals. Web browsers also provide a *monitoring* element. The blocking of uncompliant ad formats in publishers' websites is automatic due to the inscription of this feature within the coding of these softwares. This recalls the famous catchphrase "code is law", implying that the architecture of the cyberspace is built to implement specific values decided by code writers (Lessig, 2000). In this context, delegating the sanctioning and monitoring roles - over the other members and beyond - to digital gatekeepers appears to be decided as it grants the efficiency of the self-regulation process.

The gatekeeper position of web browsers within the digital economy carries the efficiency needed to solve the common problem. In this context, sanctioning and monitoring roles are delegated to the MO members who have a technical ability to grant the success of the self-regulation process. This delegation is decided but implicit, as the MO supports the action of its delegate members in this context. Yet, the concrete implementation of the monitoring and the sanction decisions are not operated by the MO itself but by 'implementation entities'. We analyze this configuration as a voluntary transfer of decision over organizational role from the meta-organization to one or several of its members, for the sake of efficiency.

The impact on market organization and competition. The action of the Coalition for Better Ads has a direct impact on the online advertising market organization. The rules on ad formats that have been enacted within the CBA are directly affecting all the market actors through the global implementation enforced by web browsers. These rules are automatically sanctioned as the coding of the web browsers contains the standards and as the browsers monitor how publishers are configuring their pages. This process creates a form of hierarchy where Google and other web browsers, which are also firms

involved in selling advertising spaces²⁶, are in a prominent position. Eventually, the meta-organization provides a membership opportunity through the certification process for compliant publishers.

Even if this organizational decision remains focused on one specific aspect of the advertising sector (i.e. the advertising formats), this case illustrates how digital gatekeepers can exert a direct influence over the whole industry through technical devices. *De facto*, Google - alongside with Microsoft and Naver, to a lesser extent - enforces 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 enforcement capability strengthens the credibility of the MO in pursuing its collective strategy. It also provides reciprocal strength for Google to use its market power to filter “annoying ads” from publishers.

This raises concerns about the effects the MO has on competition dynamics. According to Garvin (1983), whereas self-regulation should result in a public good that benefits the whole industry, some measures may have restrictive effects on competition.

First, the CBA is composed of firms that are positioned 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 quality for advertising formats. This collective strategy helps to lower the intensity of competition among firms in order to stabilize their environment (Bresser & Harl, 1986). It also has an impact on non-members, as it sets uniformity in the nature of advertising formats available, which are potential means of differentiation in their advertising offer. Thus, over time, the MO can restrict the formats that can be used, which may deter new entrants to the market (Grimm et al., 2006). These effects become greater as the changes to the ad specs that are imposed on non-compliant publishers generate additional costs for them. These

²⁶ Beyond Google, Microsoft and Naver are also running search engine advertising platforms. “Search” advertising is defined as online advertisements composed of sponsored links in search engines.

costs are tempered by the certification process and the potential for the additional revenues provided 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 the CBA's standards enforcement. 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 co-founder 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, and all those things. [...] we need to do a better job of that as an industry".²⁷ 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 accordance with Google's vision. This suggests that Google may be taking advantage of this organization to extend its "soft power" and be one step ahead of its competitors. This helps Google to drive the market organization by creating new competitor preferences (Jaworski et al., 2000) and thus consolidate its leading position.

Bringing legitimacy. The outcomes of the Coalition for Better Ads significantly alter the organization of the online advertising market. Through the imposition of new rules, enacted by a specific MO, publishers had to adapt their advertising offer. This helped to reduce the necessity for consumers to make use of ad-blocking devices. But as we have seen in the last paragraph, the most concrete part of the self-regulation work is done by the platforms, who implemented the rules thanks to their gatekeeping position and their market power. In this context, what is the contribution of the meta-organization built by industry actors in the reorganization of the market? We analyze that the meta-organization provides legitimacy to this process.

²⁷ Lara O'Reilly, "Google's Larry Page was asked whether he was worried about the rise of ad blockers – here's what he said", *businessinsider.fr*, 04.06.2015.

The notion of legitimacy is defined by Suchman (1995) 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” (p. 574). The need for legitimacy is crucial inside an MO and also outside for representative functions, as shown by Laurent, Garaudel, Schmidt, and Eynaud (2019). Reciprocally, the fact that the meta-organization brings legitimacy to the operation is useful to its ‘implementation entities’. In our case, fighting a common problem through the blocking of advertisements requires the emphasis of features of collegiality. Google, if acting alone, would have faced the direct opposition of publishers and, potentially, of antitrust authorities. Thus, the establishment of a dedicated meta-organization, as well as the provision of a membership through certification, help the process to occur smoothly.

Moreover, the CBA’s strength lies in the status of its members, who can be classified as major market actors in their segments. By joining the CBA, they contribute to the promotion of this MO, which shows that these major actors have trust in its ability to solve the ad-blocking problem. The significant fees to join the CBA show that this MO has not necessarily been designed to expand to have a larger number of members. However, smaller publishers are invited to participate in the certification program, and thus support the initiative. This sends a positive sign to advertisers who are concerned about the quality of digital advertising they are paying for. By collectively agreeing that it was a decline in ad quality that caused the rise of ad-blocking, members of the CBA demonstrate that they are taking serious action 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 this MO a cross-sectoral initiative backed by “traditional” self-regulation 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 as harmful to user experience and thus generate negative externality. This definition of what types of advertising format are good or bad can fluctuate, depending on the Coalition’s research outcomes. By backing these decisions with scientific discourse (Brunsson & Jacobsson, 2000) – i.e. using a large survey of web

users' preferences – the MO develops its vision and definition of advertising quality. The redefinition of what is a 'good' or a 'bad' advertising could not succeed if it was not based on the consensus of a large part of the industry. Again, the collegiality of the meta-organization 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 meta-organization is essential as it brings legitimacy in this process affecting the market organization.

CONCLUSION AND FURTHER RESEARCH

This article presents a single case study of how online advertising has tackled the ad-blocking phenomenon over the past few years internationally. We revealed how a meta-organization, the Coalition for Better Ads, created ad format standards and implemented them industrywide.

We studied how this MO has delegated organizational roles to several of its members operating browsers, with the aim to gain efficiency and credibility. This delegation is directly linked to the capacity of these platforms to act as digital gatekeepers, by monitoring and sanctioning the compliance of publishers regarding 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 on the browser market.

In return, this situation makes these members, especially Google, able to reinforce their position over the market and alter its organization. The efficiency of the MO is directly linked to the fact that potentially every publisher worldwide must comply to the CBA standards, or be subject to the ad-blocking from Google, Microsoft and Naver. In that sense, the effects of the meta-organization spills over its own boundaries and alter the whole market organization. This illustrates the ability for digital gatekeepers to be unusual MO members. In this meta-organizational configuration, the very 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.

Eventually, we analyzed the role of this meta-organization regarding to the quasi-autonomous action of its gatekeeper members. We revealed that the MO is essential in providing legitimacy of the process. The meta-organization brings a form of collegiality over the standard-making process that helps the platforms to impose the CBA standards industrywide. The fact that leading actors on the market (e.g. publishers, advertisers, trade associations) are members of this MO is reinforcing this legitimation process.

Yet, this whole process questions directly the capacity for non-members to deviate from private rules they have not decided. This raises antitrust competition as it might be analyzed as a barrier to entry for competitors who would not agree to comply to the CBA standards. It also interrogates the nature of this meta-organization, which decided for a social order beyond its boundaries. In this context, the membership of powerful platforms, and their action as gatekeepers might weaken the very founding principles of meta-organization and deviate their outcome at their own advantage. This result is coherent with the analysis from [Barnett \(2013\)](#): it extends and details it to the specific case of leading platforms.

However, a main limitation of our work is that these conclusions should be replicated through other case studies before being generalized. This article thus calls for further studies on the ways MOs can share or delegate organizational roles to gatekeeper members.

The article also enriches the empirical literature on the online advertising market, an industrial market with a fast pace of innovation. Another main 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 meta-organizations, which may be perceived as legal cartels in some cases.

APPENDIX

Ad formats falling beneath the Better Ads Standards

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. Pop-up ads come in many varieties – they can take up part of the screen, or the entire screen.
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. These pop-ups vary in size from full-screen to part of the screen. They may also appear as a standalone page that prevents users from getting to the main content. 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.

Source: (CBA-23)

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