

July 2026

IAB EUROPE'S GUIDE TO CURATION IN DIGITAL ADVERTISING

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Who this guide is for

This guide is for publisher ad sales and revenue teams, advertiser and agency media buying teams, and digital advertising practitioners who want a clear, commercially neutral understanding of curation in programmatic advertising.

It focuses on **curated marketplaces** and **curation as a business and operational function**. It does not provide a vendor landscape, promote a specific trading model, or argue that curation is always beneficial.

Curation can be useful. It can also be over-sold, poorly explained, or used as a new label for familiar trading practices. The aim of this guide is to help practitioners understand what curation is meant to do, where value may be created, and what questions buyers and media sellers should ask before relying on curated marketplaces.

Executive summary

Curation in programmatic advertising is the deliberate selection, organisation and packaging of digital advertising inventory, data and signals to create a more useful buying or selling opportunity.

In simple terms, curation is about making programmatic supply easier to understand, evaluate and activate. A curated marketplace may combine selected media, data signals, quality controls, contextual rules, audience logic, supply-path preferences or optimisation criteria into a package that a buyer can activate through programmatic buying tools.

Curation is not a new channel. It is not the same thing as a private marketplace, although private marketplace mechanics and Deal IDs are often used to activate curated supply. It is also not automatically premium, transparent, privacy-safe or more efficient. Those outcomes depend on how the curated marketplace is built, governed, priced, measured and reported.

For buyers, curation is meant to help answer questions such as:

- How do I find relevant, high-quality supply more efficiently?
- How do I use data and signals without adding unnecessary complexity?

- How do I reduce waste in the bidstream?
- How do I improve transparency over the inventory and partners involved?
- How do I align media buying more closely with campaign objectives?

For media sellers, curation is meant to help answer questions such as:

- How do I make my inventory, data and context more valuable to buyers?
- How do I protect control over how my supply is packaged and represented?
- How do I participate in more strategic programmatic demand?
- How do I improve yield without losing visibility or commercial control?
- How do I make first-party and contextual assets easier for buyers to activate?

Curation changes the way value is organised across the programmatic supply chain. It can move value closer to the media seller by allowing publisher data, context and quality signals to be packaged more deliberately. It can also create value for buyers by simplifying access to supply that better matches their objectives and preventing spend on waste (i.e. low quality placements that do not return on campaign objectives).

However, curation can also fail to deliver value when packages are opaque, when fees are unclear, when inventory is not differentiated, when data provenance is weak, when sellers lose control, or when buyers cannot verify what they bought.

The best way to evaluate curation is through asking questions like:

- What has been selected?
- Who selected it?
- What data or logic was used?
- What value has been added?
- Who is being paid?
- What can be measured?
- What can be audited?
- Is the curator independent of the parties whose inventory or data is being packaged, or are they the same entity?
- Does the curator have a commercial incentive to favour particular supply paths, sellers or data sources?
- What would the buyer or seller have achieved without this curated route?

Curation is an evolving practice. Static curated packages activated through Deal IDs remain the dominant model, but the introduction of programmatic protocols for agentic advertising, dynamic deal discovery, and containerisation is beginning to change how

curated supply is created, queried and activated. This guide refers to these developments where relevant, but practitioners should treat the underlying principles (purpose, differentiation, transparency, control, measurement) as more stable than the activation mechanics.

1. What is curation?

Curation is the process of selecting, organising, enriching or optimising programmatic advertising opportunities using defined criteria, data and technology.

A simple working definition:

Curation is the packaging of programmatic supply, using data and signals, via static or real-time operations, with the aim of creating a buying or selling opportunity that is more relevant, controlled or valuable than undifferentiated open-market access.

Curation may involve:

- selecting particular publishers, apps, content types or media environments;
- applying contextual, audience, quality or suitability signals;
- filtering supply based on viewability, fraud risk, format, device, geography or other criteria;
- using publisher first-party data or declared content data;
- optimising supply towards performance, attention, reach, sustainability or other outcomes;
- creating a deal or marketplace that can be activated by buyers through existing programmatic systems.

A curated marketplace is usually the commercial or operational expression of this process. It is a programmatic buying environment where selected supply and signals are made available under defined conditions.

What curation is not

Curation is not simply a new name for a private marketplace. A private marketplace may be curated, but only if meaningful selection, data, rules or optimisation have been applied.

Curation is not a guarantee of quality. Low-quality inventory, as defined by each advertiser, can still appear in a curated package if controls are weak.

Curation is not inherently transparent. A curated marketplace can still be opaque if the buyer or seller cannot see what is included, who is involved, what data is used, or how fees are applied.

Curation is not automatically privacy-safe. Privacy and data protection depend on lawful data use, consent where required, appropriate contracts and operational controls.

Curation is not necessarily more efficient. It may reduce waste, but it may also introduce extra fees or duplicate supply paths if not properly managed.

2. Why curation has become more important

Buyers have access to very large volumes of supply, but not all supply is equally relevant, transparent or valuable. Media sellers have valuable inventory, content, data and audience relationships, but these assets can be difficult to represent clearly in open programmatic trading.

At the same time, the market is dealing with several pressures:

- query per second (qps) limits arising from the cost incurred by demand-side platforms when processing large volumes of supply;
- increased focus on media quality and supply-chain transparency;
- reduced reliance on some forms of third-party identity;
- growth in publisher first-party data, commerce data and contextual signals;
- greater scrutiny of fees, reselling and supply paths;
- increased interest in outcome-based planning;
- the need for more privacy-conscious ways to activate relevant media.

Curation has emerged as one response to these pressures, powered by advances in technology that enable more sophisticated sell-side and pre-bid business logic. While traditional Deal IDs relied on static, pre-packaged inventory that could not adapt quickly to changing conditions, technology now allows for dynamic, real-time decisioning on the sell-side. With advances in infrastructure, metadata, and AI, this approach allows impression opportunities to be evaluated and optimised in milliseconds before they

enter the programmatic bidstream. Curation attempts to make programmatic buying less dependent on raw bidstream scale and more dependent on structured packages of supply, data and decisioning. It can help improve access to higher-quality inventory, enable more efficient scaling of data targeting, and support dynamic campaign optimisation.

In practice, this means moving from the question:

“How do I bid across as much supply as possible?”

towards:

“Which supply, signals and partners are most relevant to this objective, and how can they be activated efficiently?”

For media sellers, the equivalent shift is from:

“How do I access as much media demand as possible?”

towards:

“How do I package inventory, data, context and quality in a way that buyers can understand, value and activate?”

3. How curated marketplaces work in practice

A curated marketplace usually involves several steps.

3.1 Define the objective

The starting point should be a clear set of objectives. For example:

- reach a particular audience;
- access high-quality publisher environments;
- improve contextual relevance;
- avoid unsuitable content;
- reduce low-value bid requests;
- improve attention or viewability;

- support a sustainability goal;
- use publisher or commerce data;
- simplify buying across multiple sellers;
- improve campaign outcomes.

Without defined objectives, curation risks becoming a vague label rather than a meaningful trading approach.

3.2 Select the supply

The curator, media seller or platform identifies which supply should be included. This may involve specific publishers, apps, content categories, formats, devices, geographies or inventory types.

Supply selection may be broad or narrow. A curated marketplace might contain a small set of premium publishers, a larger pool of contextually relevant supply, a CTV-focused package, or a multi-seller package built around a particular campaign objective.

3.3 Apply data and signals

Curation may use one or more signals to decide what is included or prioritised. These signals might relate to audience, content, quality, suitability, performance, sustainability or supply path.

The signals should be appropriate to the objective. For example, a campaign focused on brand suitability may need different curation logic from a campaign focused on sales outcomes or attention.

3.4 Package the marketplace

The selected supply and signals are packaged into a programmatic deal or marketplace. This is often made available through a Deal ID or similar activation mechanism.

The package should define:

- what inventory is included;
- what data or logic is applied;
- who is involved in packaging and selling it;
- what commercial terms apply;

- what controls the buyer and seller have;
- what reporting will be provided.

3.5 Activate through buying tools

The buyer activates the curated marketplace through their buying platform. From the buyer’s perspective, the curated marketplace may appear as a deal, package or supply source within their usual workflow.

This operational simplicity is one reason curation can be attractive. However, simplicity at the point of activation should not mean lack of transparency behind the package.

3.6 Optimise and report

Curation is a continuous process. The package needs to be monitored and optimised based on delivery, quality, cost, performance and suitability.

Reporting should show whether the curated marketplace is achieving the defined set of objectives. This may include delivery by seller, domain, app, format, environment, signal, cost and outcome, depending on the use case and what has been agreed.

4. What signals can curation use?

Curated marketplaces can integrate many types of signals. The value of curation depends less on the number of signals used and more on whether those signals are relevant, permissioned, reliable and useful.

Signal type	Examples
Publisher first-party data	Logged-in status, subscriptions, declared interests, on-site behaviour, content engagement

Contextual and semantic signals	Page topic, content category, sentiment, keywords, video genre, CTV content type
Audience signals	Interest groups, behavioural segments, commerce audiences, demographic proxies
Identity and addressability signals	Deterministic IDs, platform IDs, clean-room outputs, household or device-level signals where lawful
Quality signals	Viewability, fraud risk, invalid traffic, ad clutter, completion rate, attention proxies
Brand safety and suitability signals	Sensitive content exclusions, inclusion lists, suitability tiers, category controls
Supply-path signals	Directness, reseller path, seller identity, domain or app transparency
Commercial signals	Floors, pricing rules, win rate, delivery priority
Performance signals	Conversion likelihood, engagement, historical campaign outcomes
Sustainability signals	Carbon estimates, supply-path efficiency, data-transfer reduction
Consent and transparency signals	Consent status, privacy choices, ad transparency information

Not every curated marketplace needs every signal. A simpler curated package may be more useful than a complex one if it is easier to understand, activate and measure.

5. What curated marketplaces are meant to provide

Curated marketplaces are meant to create a more intentional connection between buyer demand and seller supply.

5.1 For advertisers and agencies

For buyers, curation can provide:

More relevant supply and easier buying

A curated marketplace can reduce the need to search across a large volume of undifferentiated bid requests by pre-selecting supply that is more relevant to the campaign.

Easier activation of data

Curation can make certain data signals easier to activate, particularly when signals are closer to the supply source or when data owners want more control over how data is used.

Better operational efficiency

Instead of negotiating many separate deals or building complex inclusion and exclusion logic in every campaign, buyers may use curated marketplaces to simplify activation.

More controlled quality

A curated package can apply quality, suitability or supply-path criteria before the buyer bids. This may help reduce wasted spend, although it does not remove the need for verification.

Improved alignment to outcomes

Where curation is dynamic, packages may be adjusted based on performance, delivery, attention, cost or other agreed outcomes.

5.2 For media sellers

For media sellers, curation can provide:

Better packaging of value

Curation allows media sellers to package more than impressions. They can bring together inventory, content, audience understanding, format quality and commercial context.

Stronger differentiation

In open programmatic environments, media sellers can struggle to distinguish their inventory from other supply. Curation can help make publisher value more visible.

Greater influence over demand

If sellers are actively involved in curation, they may have more control over how their inventory is represented, which buyers can access it, and how data is used.

Potential yield improvement

If buyers value the curated package, curation may support stronger pricing. This depends on whether the package is genuinely differentiated and on the share of the value the seller receives.

Better data protection

When designed well, curation can allow media sellers to make data useful and leverage it as a differentiator without exposing it to downstream partners.

6. How curation changes value flow

Curation changes value flow because it changes where selection, data use and decisioning happen.

In traditional open-market programmatic buying, much of the filtering and decisioning may sit with the buyer, agency or DSP. Supply is made available at scale, and the buyer decides what to bid on.

In curated marketplaces, some of that selection and decisioning can happen earlier in the chain, closer to the supply source or through a specialist curator. This can affect three types of value.

6.1 Data value

Publisher data, contextual data and supply metadata can become part of the traded value, rather than being treated as background signals.

This can benefit sellers where their data and context are recognised and priced. It can benefit buyers where those signals improve relevance, quality or outcomes.

The risk is that data value becomes unclear. Buyers may not know what data is used, sellers may not know how their data is packaged, and both sides may struggle to understand who captures the value.

6.2 Decisioning value

Curation can move some decisioning from the demand side to the supply side or to a curator. This may reduce waste, i.e. bought impressions that do not perform well in terms of campaign objectives, by filtering supply before it reaches the buyer's campaign. Curation can facilitate access to quality impressions and scalable data targeting, rather than allowing performing inventory to be lost within the programmatic bidstream or to be constrained by qps limits.

For example, a curated marketplace might prioritise inventory that meets agreed quality, contextual or sustainability criteria before the buyer bids.

The risk is that decisioning becomes a black box. If the buyer cannot understand the logic, and the seller cannot see how their supply is selected or excluded, trust is weakened.

6.3 Financial value

Curation can create commercial value by improving quality, performance, access or efficiency. It can also introduce additional fees.

A curated marketplace should therefore be assessed by net value, not just by headline CPM.

Important questions include:

- Does the buyer get better outcomes for the total cost?
- Does the seller receive a fair share of the value created?
- Are curation fees visible?
- Is the inventory available through a simpler or cheaper path?
- Does the package reduce waste or simply repackage existing supply?

A useful distinction is between **value-adding curation** and **value-extracting curation**.

Value-adding curation	Value-extracting curation
Clear objective	Vague proposition
Differentiated supply or data	Same inventory available elsewhere
Transparent role of curator	Unclear intermediary role
Visible fee structure and economics	Hidden or hard-to-reconcile fees
Measurable improvement	No meaningful benchmark
Seller understands and benefits	Seller has little control or visibility

Buyer can verify delivery	Buyer relies on claims
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7. Main challenges

Curation can fail when it does not deliver meaningful improvement over existing buying routes.

7.1 Loose terminology

The word “curation” is used in different ways across the market. In some cases it refers to high-quality, data-rich, carefully managed marketplaces. In others, it may simply describe a list of inventory sources bundled under a new deal name.

This makes it important to ask what curation means in each specific case.

7.2 Opaque packages

A curated marketplace may be easy to activate but difficult to inspect. Buyers may not know which publishers, apps, sellers or supply paths are included. Media sellers may not know whether or how their inventory is being packaged.

Opaque packages make it difficult to evaluate quality, cost, suitability and value.

7.3 Unclear economics

Curation may involve additional fees or changed revenue shares. This is not inherently negative if value is being added. The issue is whether the economics are transparent and proportionate.

Buyers should understand what they pay for. Sellers should understand how curated demand affects revenue.

7.4 Weak data provenance

Curation often depends on data. If the origin, recency, consent status or methodology of that data is unclear, the curated package may create legal, operational or performance risk.

Data should not be treated as valuable simply because it is included. Its value depends on quality, relevance and permissioned use.

7.5 Duplicated supply paths

A curated marketplace may include inventory that is also available through other deals, resellers or open-market routes. This can create duplication and make it harder to understand whether curation has improved access or merely added another layer.

Supply-path analysis remains important.

7.6 Misaligned incentives

Different parties may have different objectives. A buyer may want efficiency and outcomes. A seller may want yield and control. A curator may be paid based on spend volume. A platform may benefit from routing spend through particular paths.

Successful curation requires these incentives to be understood and managed.

7.7 Over-claiming

Curation should not be used as a shortcut for claims such as “premium”, “privacy-safe”, “sustainable”, “high attention” or “brand safe” unless the package has the evidence, controls and reporting to support those claims.

8. Pointers for successful curation

Curation is most likely to succeed when the following criteria are met.

8.1 Clear purpose

The curated marketplace should be built for a defined objective. The objective may be performance, quality, reach, suitability, data activation, supply-path efficiency, sustainability or another goal.

If the objective is unclear, measurement will also be unclear.

8.2 Meaningful differentiation

The package should offer something that is not easily achieved through standard open-market buying or an existing direct deal.

Differentiation may come from:

- unique media seller participation;
- first-party data;
- contextual intelligence;
- quality controls;
- supply-path structure;
- performance optimisation, e.g., for conversions;
- operational simplicity;
- commercial terms.

8.3 Transparent inventory

Buyers should understand what supply is included. Media sellers should understand how their inventory is being used and represented.

The level of transparency may vary by use case, but there should be enough visibility to evaluate quality, suitability and commercial value.

8.4 Transparent data

The parties should understand what data is used, where it comes from, how recent it is, what permissions apply, and whether it can be used for the intended purpose.

8.5 Transparent economics

Curation fee structures, revenue shares and commercial roles should be clear enough for buyers and sellers to understand who is paid for what.

This does not mean every commercial agreement must be public. It does mean that participants should be able to evaluate whether the economics are reasonable and aligned with value delivered.

8.6 Operational control

Buyers and sellers should have appropriate controls. These may include:

- inclusion and exclusion controls;
- advertiser category controls;
- publisher or domain controls;
- data-use restrictions;
- pricing controls;
- frequency or reach controls;
- audit and reporting rights.

8.7 Privacy and legal governance

Curation must operate within applicable privacy, data protection and advertising transparency requirements.

This includes considering:

- lawful basis for data use;
- consent and user choice where required;
- data minimisation;
- contractual permissions;
- restrictions on sensitive data;
- publisher controls and restrictions;

- vendor participation and accountability;
- ad transparency requirements;
- data leakage controls.

Where personal data is processed, or where information is accessed or stored on a user's device, buyers and media sellers should understand how consent, transparency and user choice are captured and communicated through the supply chain. In Europe, this may include use of the IAB Europe Transparency & Consent Framework (TCF), where relevant.

For curated marketplaces, privacy governance should be addressed before activation, not after delivery. Buyers and sellers should ask whether the curated package uses personal data, whether the relevant permissions are in place, whether publisher restrictions are respected, and whether all participating vendors are authorised for the intended processing.

8.8 Measurement against a baseline

A curated marketplace should be compared with a realistic alternative, such as open-market buying, a direct PMP, an existing supply path, or a previous campaign setup.

Without a baseline, it is difficult to know whether curation has improved anything.

9. What media sellers should keep in mind

Media sellers should approach curation as both a commercial opportunity and a control issue.

Curation can help sellers make their inventory and data more valuable. But it can also create risks if third parties package seller supply without appropriate visibility, approval or revenue alignment.

9.1 Internal questions for media sellers

Media sellers should ask:

- Which inventory, formats and environments are appropriate for curated marketplaces?
- Which data assets can we use, and under what legal and contractual conditions?
- Do we want to curate ourselves, work with partners, or both?
- How will curation interact with direct sales, PMPs, open auction and existing packages?
- What controls do we need over advertiser categories, buyers and use cases?
- How will pricing and floors be managed?
- Could curation create channel conflict with our direct sales strategy?
- How will we prevent unauthorised use or resale of our data?
- How will we know whether curation improves yield?
- Who internally owns curation: sales, revenue operations, data, programmatic, legal or product?

9.2 Questions for partners

Media sellers should ask partners:

- Are you acting as seller, reseller, curator, packager, data provider or technology provider?
- Which of our inventory will be included?
- Can we approve, restrict or remove inventory from packages?
- Which buyers will be able to access the curated marketplace?
- What data will be used?
- Will our data be combined with third-party data?
- How will data leakage be prevented?
- How are fees calculated?
- What revenue share applies?
- What reporting will we receive?
- Will we be able to see buyer, deal, domain/app, format and outcome reporting?
- How are consent, privacy and ad transparency obligations handled?
- Can we audit delivery or economics?
- What kind of examples, data, or third-party reports can you share to show that the curated marketplace is likely to align with our needs?

9.3 Seller watch-outs

Media sellers should be especially careful where:

- their inventory is included in packages without their knowledge;
 - their data is used without clear restrictions;
 - the same inventory is sold through multiple routes with different pricing;
 - reporting is too aggregated to assess value;
 - curation competes with direct sales without coordination;
 - partners cannot explain their role clearly;
 - the seller's share of incremental value is unclear.
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10. What advertisers and agencies should keep in mind

Buyers should approach curation as a possible solution to a defined media problem, not as a default upgrade.

A curated marketplace may be useful where it provides better access, relevance, quality, control or efficiency. But it should be tested against alternatives.

10.1 Internal questions for buyers and agencies

Buyers should ask:

- What problem are we trying to solve?
- Is the objective quality, performance, reach, attention, sustainability, addressability, operational simplicity or supply-path control?
- Could the same objective be achieved through existing PMPs, direct deals, open-market controls or supply-path optimisation?
- What is our baseline for comparison?
- Which KPIs matter most?
- Are we optimising for lowest CPM, best outcome, highest quality, or a balance?
- Who needs to be involved internally: media, programmatic, data, measurement, legal, procurement or sustainability?
- What level of transparency do we require before spending?
- What reporting do we need after delivery?
- How will we decide whether to continue, scale or stop?

10.2 Questions for partners

Buyers should ask partners:

- What exactly is inside the curated marketplace?
- Which publishers, apps, formats and environments are included?
- Are we buying direct seller supply, reseller supply, or a mixture?
- Who created the package?
- What role does each partner play?
- What data is applied?
- What is the source, recency and methodology of that data?
- Which identity solutions do you support?
- Can we onboard and activate first-party data?
- Can we create custom audience packages?
- How do you support clean room integrations?
- How are privacy and user choice handled?
- What fees apply?
- Are fees included in the media cost or charged separately?
- Is the same inventory available through another route?
- Can we see reporting by seller, domain/app, deal, format and supply path?
- Can we use third-party verification?
- How is audience accuracy validated?
- Can the package be changed during the campaign?
- What happens if the curated marketplace does not deliver as expected?
- What kind of examples, data, or third-party reports can you share to show that the curated marketplace is likely to align with our needs?

10.3 Buyer watch-outs

Buyers should be especially careful where:

- the marketplace is described as curated but the selection logic is unclear;
- inventory sources are not disclosed;
- curation fees are not visible;
- reporting is limited to high-level delivery;
- performance claims are not benchmarked;
- quality claims cannot be independently verified;
- packages contain supply that appears available through cheaper routes;

- the partner cannot explain how the package differs from a standard PMP.
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11. How to test a curated marketplace

A pilot should be designed to answer one question:

Does this curated marketplace create measurable value compared with a realistic alternative?

1. Define the use case

Choose a specific use case, such as:

- contextual relevance;
- high-quality publisher supply;
- CTV supply quality;
- first-party data activation;
- attention improvement;
- lower invalid traffic risk;
- sustainability-focused supply-path optimisation;
- lower operational cost, e.g., time saved setting up a campaign, streamlined campaign optimisation;
- performance against a conversion or engagement goal.

2. Define the baseline

Agree what the curated marketplace will be compared against. This might be:

- an open-market campaign;
- an existing PMP;
- public deals;
- a direct publisher deal;
- a previous campaign;
- a control group using standard buying settings.

3. Agree the package details

Before launch, document:

- included supply;
- applied data;
- selection criteria;
- excluded supply;
- fees;
- roles of each partner;
- reporting requirements;
- optimisation process;
- timeframe;
- success metrics.

4. Run the test

Where possible, use comparable budgets, dates, formats, geographies and KPIs. Avoid comparing unlike-for-like campaign conditions. Adjust the timeframe of your test depending on your objectives and the criteria of the curated deal.

5. Evaluate results

Evaluate performance against your set objectives and expectations, depending on the curated deal, assessing factors such as how bought media and business outcomes compare to expectations and whether there is adequate transparency over these and other factors.

6. Decide what to do next

After the pilot, decide whether to:

- scale the curated marketplace;
 - adjust the package;
 - change the fee model;
 - improve reporting;
 - narrow or broaden supply;
 - move to a more direct route;
 - stop using the package.
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12. Practical checklist

12.1 Minimum information buyers should request

Before activating a curated marketplace, buyers should request:

- objective of the package;
- included supply types;
- included sellers or publishers, where available;
- data signals used;
- data provenance and permissions;
- curation logic or selection criteria;
- supply-path information;
- fee structure;
- reporting scope;
- optimisation process;
- verification options;
- privacy and legal controls.

12.2 Minimum information media sellers should request

Before allowing inventory or data to be used in curated marketplaces, media sellers should request:

- partner role and responsibilities;
- package description;
- buyer access rules;
- inventory inclusion rules;
- data-use restrictions;
- pricing and revenue share;
- reporting commitments;
- controls over onward use;
- audit rights;
- process for removing inventory or data;
- privacy and compliance responsibilities.

12.3 Signs of a stronger curated marketplace

A stronger curated marketplace is likely to have:

- a clear use case;
- differentiated supply or data;
- transparent roles;
- understandable economics;
- visible inventory and signal logic;
- seller involvement or approval;
- buyer reporting;
- privacy governance;
- measurement against a baseline;
- ongoing optimisation, e.g., using real-time operations.

12.4 Signs of a weaker curated marketplace

A weaker curated marketplace may have:

- vague claims;
- little explanation of what is curated;
- limited reporting;
- unclear fees;
- unknown data sources;
- no seller visibility;
- no benchmark;
- static supply lists;
- unverifiable quality claims;
- no clear reason to exist beyond convenience.

13. The future of curation

Curation is closely connected to where and how decisioning is deployed in the programmatic supply chain. Today, much of the curator's role is executed through marketplaces, Deal IDs, supply packages, audience overlays, contextual segments,

quality filters, and commercial rules. These tools define which supply, signals, or conditions are made available to a buyer.

A number of developments can affect how this logic is applied:

- **Containerised deployment of business logic**, where a curator, agency, data provider, optimization vendor, or model provider packages its logic as a portable software module and deploys it inside a media supply chain partner's infrastructure.
- **Standardised real-time execution frameworks**, such as IAB Tech Lab's ARTF, which may provide a common way for controlled third-party logic to operate within auction infrastructure.
- **More capable sell-side and demand-side decisioning systems**, where SSPs, exchanges, publisher platforms, retail media networks, and DSPs apply real-time logic to evaluate supply, activate signals, express buyer preferences, and optimise transaction outcomes.
- **Richer supply-side signals**, including publisher data, commerce data, page-level or app-level context, content metadata, attention signals, sustainability signals, and quality indicators.
- **Privacy-preserving data collaboration**, where data owners and media platforms enable decisioning without broadly distributing raw user-level data across the ecosystem.
- **Advances in machine learning and optimisation**, which allow specialized models to assess impression value, predicted outcomes, suitability, supply path efficiency, or campaign fit in real time.
- **Improved standardisation and interoperability**, which reduces the cost of deploying, governing, and measuring decisioning logic across multiple supply chain partners.

Containerisation is a particularly important enabler because it changes how business logic can be deployed. In this model, the module runs inside a controlled environment operated by an SSP, exchange, publisher platform, retail media network, or other ad tech partner. The host platform defines what data the module can access, what actions it can take, and what privacy, latency, security, and governance rules it must follow.

This means that curation logic can run closer to the impression opportunity, rather than requiring large volumes of bidstream data to be sent to external systems for evaluation. The output may inform whether an impression is included in a curated deal, prioritised, enriched, priced differently, routed differently, made eligible for a specific buyer, or

aligned with buyer-defined preferences before the opportunity is evaluated downstream.

This moves curation beyond a primarily packaging-led model and towards a more programmable decisioning layer. Curated marketplaces and Deal IDs remain important, but the value of the deal can increasingly be shaped by live logic operating within the supply chain.

1. Real-time, impression-level decisioning

As sell-side infrastructure becomes more capable, curation logic can operate on each eligible impression as it becomes available. Instead of relying only on pre-built inventory lists, audience segments, or static deal rules, a curator can apply live scoring, filtering, ranking, or qualification logic.

This enables curated deals to become more dynamic. A module or sell-side decisioning layer could assess whether an impression matches a campaign objective, audience model, contextual signal, quality threshold, sustainability requirement, or expected outcome before deciding whether it should be included in a curated opportunity.

2. Lower latency and less bidstream waste

When decisioning happens inside the infrastructure where supply is already being processed, the market can reduce the need to send large volumes of bidstream data to external systems. This reduces integration overhead, limits unnecessary data movement, and helps avoid wasted processing of impressions that are unlikely to be relevant.

For curation, this matters because the curator's value can be applied earlier in the transaction. Rather than passing broad supply downstream and relying on buyers to filter it later, the supply can be evaluated and refined before it reaches the buyer. It may also reduce reliance on slower file-based or batch-based workflows, as audience, contextual, and buyer-preference signals can be activated through lower-latency cached or real-time mechanisms closer to the transaction.

3. More controlled data collaboration

More advanced sell-side decisioning allows media owners, data owners, curators, and buyers to collaborate in a more controlled way. The infrastructure owner can define

which signals are available for decisioning, how they can be used, and what outputs can be returned.

This is particularly relevant where curation depends on first-party data, publisher signals, commerce data, contextual intelligence, identity signals, or other commercially sensitive inputs. The logic can be brought closer to the data, rather than requiring the data to be moved more widely across the ecosystem.

4. More specialised optimisation models

New deployment models and execution frameworks lower the operational barrier for specialist decisioning logic to participate in programmatic transactions. A company does not necessarily need to operate a full buying platform or supply platform to contribute useful logic, provided that its role, permissions, data access, and outputs are governed by the infrastructure in which it runs. It can provide focused logic for bidding, ranking, quality assessment, outcome prediction, identity, context, sustainability, or supply path optimization.

This broadens the role of curation. Curators can differentiate not only through access to supply or data, but through the quality of the decisioning logic they apply. Agencies, data providers, AI model providers, commerce media networks, publishers, and specialist optimization vendors can all participate as providers of intelligence within curated transactions.

The result is that curation becomes a more active layer of the market. It is not only a way to assemble media and data into a transactable package; it is also a way to deploy trusted intelligence into the infrastructure where supply is evaluated. This creates new sources of value through better matching between buyers and impressions, more efficient use of bidstream data, safer activation of sensitive signals, and more differentiated optimisation models.

As this model develops, transparency will become increasingly important. Buyers will need to understand which curator or model provider contributed to a transaction, what function the logic performed, what data categories it relied on, and how it affected the deal. More sophisticated supply-side and demand-side decisioning can make curation more powerful, but it also increases the need for clear standards around disclosure, permissions, auditability, measurement, and accountability.

14. Conclusion

Curation is best understood as a way to organise programmatic supply, data and decisioning around a clearer objective.

It can help buyers find more relevant and controlled media opportunities. It can help media sellers better represent the value of their inventory, data and context. It can also help the supply chain move beyond purely volume-based programmatic trading.

But curation only works when it adds value that can be explained, measured and fairly shared.

The most important question is not whether a marketplace is labelled as curated. The most important question is whether the curation improves the buying or selling outcome in a transparent and accountable way.

A curated marketplace should therefore be judged by:

- what it includes;
- what it excludes;
- what data is used;
- what role each partner plays;
- what fees apply;
- what controls exist;
- what reporting is available;
- what outcome it improves;
- whether both buyer and seller understand the value flow.

When those conditions are met, curation can be a useful tool for more strategic programmatic trading. When they are not met, curation risks becoming another layer of complexity in a supply chain that already has enough of it.

15. Glossary, standards and further reading

This section is intended as a practical reference point for readers who want to understand the technical standards, transparency mechanisms and operational concepts that may support curated marketplaces.

Glossary

Curation

The deliberate selection, organisation, enrichment or optimisation of programmatic supply, data and signals to create a more relevant, controlled or valuable buying or selling opportunity.

Curated marketplace

A programmatic marketplace where selected inventory, data or decisioning logic is packaged for activation by buyers.

Curated deal

A programmatic deal that represents a curated package of supply, data or rules. It is often activated through a Deal ID.

Private marketplace

A cordoned programmatic transaction environment. A private marketplace may be curated, but it is not automatically curated.

Deal ID

A transaction identifier used to activate agreed programmatic deal terms between buyers and sellers or their technology partners.

Curator

The party applying selection, data, rules or optimisation to create a curated package. This may be a media seller, SSP, agency, data provider, technology platform or specialist intermediary.

Packager

The party assembling the commercial or operational package. The packager may or may not be the same as the curator.

Media seller

A publisher, broadcaster, retail media owner, app owner or other party selling advertising inventory.

Supply path

The route through which an impression opportunity passes from media seller to buyer, including any intermediaries.

Data provenance

Information about where data comes from, how it was collected, how recent it is, and what permissions apply.

Supply-path transparency

The ability to understand which parties are involved in selling, reselling or enabling access to inventory.

Working media

The portion of advertiser spend that reaches the media seller as payment for inventory, excluding technology, data, service or other intermediary fees.

Consent Management Platform

A system used to present transparency and choice information to users and to capture and communicate user choices, where required.

Transparency and consent signal

A signal used to communicate information about transparency, consent, legitimate interest or other user-choice status through the digital advertising supply chain, where applicable.

Relevant standards and frameworks

[Transparency & Consent Framework — IAB Europe](#)

The TCF is relevant where curated marketplaces involve personal data processing, access to or storage of information on a user's device, vendor participation, publisher restrictions or downstream signalling of user choice.

[OpenRTB 2.x](#)

OpenRTB is the protocol commonly used for real-time programmatic bid requests and responses. It supports the communication of many signals that may be relevant to curated marketplaces, including inventory, content, user, device, deal and supply-path information.

For curation, OpenRTB matters because curated packages often need to be activated and recognised inside existing buying and selling systems.

[Deals API](#)

The Deals API is relevant where parties want more structured communication of deal information. It can help reduce manual setup and improve clarity around deal terms, participating parties and deal metadata.

[ads.txt](#)

ads.txt allows web publishers to declare which advertising systems are authorised to sell their inventory.

[app-ads.txt](#)

app-ads.txt extends the authorised-seller concept to app environments, including mobile apps and other app-store distributed environments.

[sellers.json](#)

sellers.json helps buyers identify the entities that are direct sellers or intermediaries in the sale of digital advertising inventory.

SupplyChain object

The SupplyChain object is used to communicate the chain of parties involved in a programmatic transaction.

For curation, it helps buyers understand who is selling or reselling a bid request and whether the supply path is consistent with the curated marketplace proposition.

Data Transparency Standard

The Data Transparency Standard is relevant where audience or data segments are used. It supports clearer disclosure of data provenance, recency, segmentation criteria and other information that can help buyers assess data quality and applicability.

For curation, this matters because data should not be treated as valuable simply because it is included in a package. Buyers and media sellers should understand what data is used, where it came from, how recent it is and what permissions apply.

Content Taxonomy

The Content Taxonomy provides a common language for describing content.

For curation, it is relevant to contextual targeting, content classification, brand suitability and packaging inventory around content themes.

Audience Taxonomy

The Audience Taxonomy provides common naming for audience segment types.

For curation, it is relevant where audience segments are used or described as part of a curated marketplace. It should be used carefully, with attention to data provenance, privacy, permissions and whether the segment is appropriate for the intended use.

15. Contributors

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