



Protecting consumers from intrusive new advertising on the internet

Plenary sessions

Consumers should be warned about intrusive and misleading new advertising techniques such as internet ads tailored to fit individuals, says a resolution passed by Parliament on Wednesday. It also calls for better protection of vulnerable consumers and emphasizes the role of advertising in challenging stereotypes.

"We must reflect upon some very simple values: respect for privacy, protection of the most vulnerable, because we know very well that children are among the most vulnerable to "behavioural" advertising, i.e. that which targets their habits. These children do not understand that this advertising is not a simple advert that reaches them by chance", said rapporteur Philippe Juvin (EPP, FR), in the debate preceding the vote.

While the Unfair Commercial Practices Directive (UCPD) of 2005 does provide an essential legal framework for combating misleading and aggressive advertising, several difficulties are already apparent, notably with new, more pervasive forms of advertising arising from the development of new advertising practices and technologies on the internet, notes the own-initiative resolution.

Ads tailored to individuals

The resolution voices concern about "the routine use of behavioural advertising and the development of intrusive advertising practices", such as third parties who read private emails or use social networks and geolocation techniques to tailor advertising to individual consumers' interests.

It also calls for the insertion of "the clearly readable words 'behavioural advertisement' into the relevant online advertisements", along with a window containing a basic explanation of this practice.

Data privacy concerns

Behavioural advertising can constitute "an attack on the protection of privacy when it involves tracking individuals", e.g. through cookies or profiling, says the resolution. It stresses that consumers must receive clear, accessible and comprehensive information about how their data are collected and used. It adds that this information should be kept and used "only by explicit agreement by the consumer".

To improve consumer safety and transparency, the report calls on the Commission to develop an EU web site labelling system, modelled on the European Privacy Seal, that certifies a site's standard of data protection.

Transparency and education

To protect vulnerable consumers such as children, the Commission is urged to develop an EU advertising literacy programme modelled on the UK's "Media Smart" initiative. Media are encouraged "to restrict TV advertising addressed at children during TV programmes.

Challenging stereotypes

Press release

Reliable advertising and the promotion of healthy role models "may have a positive influence on society's perceptions of issues such as gender roles, and the human body image and normality", says the resolution, adding that the use of "extremely skinny models (men or women) should be reconsidered in order to avoid harmful messages about appearance".

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