

Oliver Dowden speech to RESET 2021

Welcome to RESET, and thank you for inviting me to join you at the very first conference of this kind.

It's great to see the sector coming together in this way to talk about how we can rebuild and recover from coronavirus.

But before we get into COVID, I'd just like to pay tribute to the industry as it was before this terrible pandemic shook the world – and how it will be, I am confident again once this crisis is over.

The advertising industry is really one of our creative giants.

It contributed £17 billion to our economy in 2019, employing more than 190,000 people across the country. It's a vital cornerstone of our wider, world-leading creative culture – supporting the artists who transition to film and TV, and all the lighting technicians, make-up artists and other people who make up our creative army.

That's the economic bottom line.

But then of course there's the artistry of the sector – which I think is something too many people tend to overlook.

Just like the James Bond film or Sally Rooney novel, things like the John Lewis Christmas ads are now cultural events in their own right. Across the Atlantic, the commercial breaks for the Super Bowl are a reflection of the state of the nation, and of the values of American society at that moment in time.

We look to art for a commentary on history, and on our collective values and experiences and today, ads do just that.

I also think too many people forget the raw power of the sector in terms of the impact it has on every part of our lives.

A well-crafted advert or campaign can influence the way we look. What we eat and drink. How we vote, and the way we behave during a global pandemic.

Never have people been more interested in the power of messaging to change people's behaviour – and never has that task been more urgent – than in the past year.

A few simple phrases – for example “Stay home. Protect the NHS. Save Lives” – may have been the difference that protected thousands of people from coronavirus.

So can I express my gratitude on behalf of the government for the way the industry has teamed up with us to promote our public health messaging during coronavirus, and for all the advertising space it has given over to us for

free, even as you are struggling as the sector itself comes under incredible strain from COVID.

Of course I know that ad spend fell by more than 14% as a result of COVID – though I'm glad to see that during this latest phase it is now holding up better than before.

Yet even with this turbulence, in 2020, the advertising industry harnessed its immense power and directed it against coronavirus for the national good.

While we're on the theme of COVID, I'd like to briefly address an issue I know is of significant interest to the sector.

COVID has been a stark reminder of course to us all of the importance of physical health – and one of our most urgent tasks as a government is reducing obesity and getting the nation strong and fit for the future.

I know that this is a major priority for the Prime Minister, who is on his own personal health mission. And in turn it's his priority for the entire country.

A central part of this is making sure the information and media children are exposed to – and that includes adverts – promotes a healthy, balanced diet.

With that in mind, we have announced our intention to ban adverts for products that are high in fat, sugar and salt being shown on TV before 9pm. We are also committed to addressing this online, crucially in parallel with broadcast, and are currently considering the introduction of a total HFSS advertising restriction on the internet.

This decision was taken against the specific and, as I hope you'll appreciate, exceptional backdrop of a health emergency. I believe it's the right one, given all that COVID has taught us.

However, I do genuinely appreciate it will have a really significant impact at what is already a very difficult time for the sector.

I understand those concerns, and I will continue to listen to the industry to make sure we get this right, and enable the shift to advertising healthier products.

And I will fight your corner in the coming months and years, making sure you have a strong and clear voice in government.

Of course, if COVID wasn't enough, the industry is also having to grapple with some deep structural changes that were brewing long before the pandemic.

The internet has been a huge force for good in our lives, but it has also disrupted almost every single sector – and of course advertising is no exception to that.

Online advertising now accounts for over half of all UK advertising spend, with companies increasingly shifting away from more traditional forms, like

newspapers and television.

The rise of online advertising has brought huge benefits, particularly for smaller companies. It has made things cheaper, and more direct – enabling advertisers to target their messages straight onto the Facebook page or browsers of the people they most want to reach.

But it has also brought a number of challenges. There are growing concerns about brand safety, about transparency and accountability; around content standards, and harm.

Most of all, the rise of online advertising has created a fundamental imbalance: between publishers, advertisers and the online platforms upon which they increasingly rely.

It's time to even the playing field.

At the end of last year, we announced that we are establishing a new, pro-competition regime for digital markets as part of that strategy.

I am unashamedly pro-tech, and am proud as Digital Secretary to help oversee one of the strongest tech sectors, not only in Europe but in the world.

But we want to make sure big tech cannot exploit its dominance to crowd out competition and innovation, and expose people to unfair or exploitative practices – with businesses and consumers in turn paying the price.

So we are establishing a Digital Markets Unit, housed in the Competition and Markets Authority, to enforce a new code of conduct for tech giants.

And we are going to tackle the devastating knock-on effects that anti-competitive practices have had on our newspaper industry, which were outlined in the Cairncross Review.

However, given the speed and scale of all this change, now is a good time to step back and consider the impact of online advertising much more generally.

I want to see advertising that is fair, accountable and ethical. That is why, last year, as part of the Online Advertising Programme, we opened a call for evidence asking for views on the extent to which consumers are exposed to harmful or misleading advertising online, and whether the scale and speed of online transactions is creating challenges for the existing regulatory system.

We are considering responses to this call for evidence and will follow up, I can assure you, later this year.

Thankfully though, the industry has been incredibly proactive at recognising and addressing many of these challenges off your own back – an effort that began back in the 60s, when the introduction of the Advertising Standards Authority set a gold standard for the rest of the world to follow. Great progress is being made across a range of initiatives, such as the work through Project Origin to deliver more transparent measurement of advertising

online. And I'll be watching with particular interest the progress the ASA is making on its "More Impact Online" strategy – including its work to introduce a set of new Online Gatekeeper Standards. This is a central task in ensuring all online players are bound into the regulation of advertising, and in finding a sufficient and reliable funding solution. Given this is a key area where progress is long overdue, my department is willing to consider other ways of solving this problem as part of our upcoming work, should this and other voluntary approaches fail. With that in mind, it's a good moment to use my final remarks to call on every player in the online advertising market – many of whom I know are represented here today – to work with the ASA to ensure the industry is fit for the digital age. That task is just one of many challenges facing advertising today – which now includes the unprecedented backdrop of a global health pandemic.

I know its going to be a long road back, but I also see the glimmer of a real opportunity here.

In the coming months, if the vaccine rollout maintains its current pace, the government will be able to start reopening the economy. With any luck, the Euro 2020 and the Tokyo Olympics will finally make it onto our screens – complete with the usual carnival of colourful adverts from world-famous brands like Adidas and Nike.

And we will be getting ready to launch our own huge tourism campaign, to broadcast to the rest of the world that Britain is back open for business. This crescendo will build all the way to the showstopper events of 2022 to which I'm looking forward enormously – the Platinum Jubilee, the Commonwealth Games, Festival UK 2022 – all of which represent huge opportunities for the industry.

As we regroup and begin to recover, advertising will be there every step of the way – heralding the return of all the things that make life worth living and for which we're all yearning.

And it will also be absolutely pivotal in rebuilding our economy back to full strength. A strong market economy needs advertisers, and your immense creativity, to help consumers make choices.

You, almost more than any other sector, can turbocharge our recovery.

And the government will be here to support you through that post-COVID transition – making sure you have an environment in which you can thrive during the coming months and years.

It's one of the reasons we felt it was so important to secure work permit exemptions for advertising and other industries in our deal with the EU – and why we extended essential support packages like the furlough scheme through to the end of April.

Most of all, though, this pandemic represents a genuine opportunity to stop, and to take a moment to think about how we can do things differently.

To reset, as this conference asks us to, and build back better.

As we exit this pandemic, we have the chance to leave a stronger, more equitable, more resilient advertising sector in its wake. I look forward to building it with you.

Thank you.