Urban One and Sounder prove equitable AI/MEL brand safety & Suitability creates scale in black creator content

Sounder's AI/ML models are committed to creating a more equitable podcasting landscape by providing equal opportunities for all creators, regardless of their **race** or **ethnicity.**

Summary Points:

- Sounder and Urban One prove that innovative AI/ML-based brand safety and suitability solutions vastly increase the opportunities considered suitable for brand alignment and directly challenge the long-held-and highly inaccurate-belief that Black-owned and targeted audiences lack the scale for agencies and brands.

- Sounder's AI/ML dynamically address Black and minority creator voices to create fair monetization opportunities, thereby supporting all voices in podcasting.

- By utilizing legacy keyword-based solutions of any kind, an overwhelming 92% of all Urban One episodes are removed from the available inventory. When applying a semantically and contextually focused AI/ML-based model to classify brand safety and suitability, only 10% of episodes are potentially unavailable for monetization.

- Inequitable brand safety and suitability solutions prevent advertisers from tapping into valuable markets. Black weekly listeners are at least 8% more likely to act on podcast sponsorships or promotions compared to 49% of U.S. weekly listeners1. Additionally, brands seeking alignment with informative social activism can find high-quality content aligned with their audience's values from Black and underrepresented creators.

- Transcription quality is important for accurately classifying content. If Black English {AAVE) is transcribed incorrectly, this can lead to misclassifications and further marginalization of Black creators.

Sounder and Urban One are paving the way for advertisers and Black content creators operating in a diverse and dynamic marketplace to grow their partnerships.

Urban One is the largest diversified Black-owned media organization and the country's largest distributor of urban content. Urban One reaches an estimated 51M people and an estimated 80% of all Black Americans monthly through its combination of audio, digital, and linear assets and/or properties.

Podcasting has existed for years, but the medium has recently enjoyed significant market expansion. Its dramatic growth (more than half of digital audio listeners now tune in to podcasts, according to Podcast Industry Report) is expected to continue to increase. In fact, 43% of the Black 18+ population in the U.S. has listened to a podcast in the last month, over-indexing compared to the 38% of the overall 18+ population that reported listening to a podcast in the last month[1].

It is becoming a mainstream buy for advertisers and an opportunity to tap into multicultural and diverse markets. Considering Black weekly listeners are at least 8% more likely to act on podcast sponsorships or promotions compared to 49% of U.S. weekly listeners1 , it is a highly engaged audience that agencies and brands need to lean into further. It also reaffirms the need for agencies and media planners to properly evaluate podcast shows for brand safety and suitability before adding them to their media plans.

LEADING THE WAY FOR DIVERSE CREATORS

As podcast shows grow in listenership and popularity, Sounder is leading the way to ensure diverse and minority podcasters disproportionately marginalized in the advertising community due to what some call "conversational themes"-are at the forefront of media plans. Ad buyers lack the tools with insights to buy inventory in those communities, leading them to target more generalized markets.

AI-based tools and solutions are coming to market as interest in podcasting grows. As we see these two entities coming together, it is more critical than ever that AI/ML-driven technology supports not just podcasting at large but equitably represents minority voices in podcasting.

Of the rapidly growing Black listenership, 75% of Black monthly podcast listeners demonstrate a strong desire for content focusing on Black stories and perspectives[1]. There has never been a more critical time for bias toward action to correctly classify and represent the content Black audiences are asking for.

Sounder has launched an initiative to assist minority voices to thrive in podcasting, ensuring greater equality regardless of conversational themes.

Concerns of Black Creators

**As we continued shaping our technology,
we spoke with publishers of diverse creator voices, particularly Black creators.**

We heard three primary concerns about AI/ML-based brand safety and suitability solutions for podcasting:

- The "one-size-fits-all" approach does not truly support all diverse voices because it potentially lacks the ability to capture cultural nuances.

- Transcription quality is important not only to reflect various vernaculars accurately but also to classify content correctly.

- Content categories frequently discussed by marginalized voices are often over-blocked by legacy solutions and disproportionately under-monetize these creators.

Research and Hypothesis

This paper details publishers' concerns about AI/ML driven brand safety and suitability models and their downstream implications if not addressed. We demonstrate how Sounder and the podcasting industry can address these concerns to ensure equal monetization opportunities for all voices in podcasting.

To understand and address these concerns, we partnered with **Urban One** to analyze their podcast content. We thoroughly analyzed the following podcast cohorts:

- **Cohort 1** = Urban One's owned and operated podcast network.
- **Cohort 2** = A specific selection of podcasts by Black creators outside Urban One's network and not included in Cohort 3 or Cohort 4.
- **Cohort 3** = A randomized selection of top podcasts by Black creators outside of Urban One's network.
- **Cohort 4** = A randomized selection of podcasts without any indication of background and representative of the general podcasting population.

Before researching the selected podcast content, we hypothesized **several outcomes**:

- Cultural nuances will cause Black creator content to be classified at higher brand safety and suitability risk levels.
- Black English, also known as African American Vernacular English (AAVE), will likely be transcribed incorrectly, causing inaccurate brand safety and suitability risk levels.
- AI/ML technology may have biases in evaluating the content of diverse and minority voices.

Effect on Advertisers and Buyers: We Don't Understand

The unique perspectives and experiences of the Black community are problems for existing advertising buyer tools. According to GARM's Brand Safety & Suitability Framework, the conversation topics that the Black community regularly experiences or engages in are often categorized as Debated Sensitive Social Issues (DSSI) and Hate Speech & Acts of Aggression. Sounder's AI/ML-based brand safety and suitability models determine the level of risk for these conversation topics based on the context of the broader discussion. Within Urban One's network, we frequently observed sensitive, DSSI-classified conversations occurring within a medium to high-risk context due to their Op-Ed style or partisan lens.

Of Urban One's network, approximately 11% of episodes discussed high-risk DSSI topics in an assertive and potentially offensive tone, compared to 1% for the general population of podcast content Sounder analyzed.

In contrast, 50% of Urban One's episodes discussed low or medium-risk DSSI topics in an informative or editorialized format. The remaining 50% of episodes were entirely unrelated to DSSI topics. In those episodes that contained high-risk instances of DSSI, the often-debated topic of racial divide is best understood by this excerpt from Urban One's The Carl Nelson Show:

Cultural Nuances

When analyzing Urban One's podcasting content, we observed several cultural nuances that had a noticeable impact on its brand safety and suitability compared to a general sample of podcasting. Black creator content often contains unique perspectives, experiences, and vernacular that may create misclassifications by AI/ML-based models, resulting in advertisers' discomfort when planning media buys and purchasing ad inventory.

Our analysis of Black creator content was compared to the general podcasting population. In the former, we saw increased discussions on sensitive topics such as race, social justice, systemic racism, and police brutality. These conversations are not inherently negative but rather a reflection of the unique perspectives and lived experiences of the Black community.

> « …The issue is that black people are being destroyed in Africa. Black people are being destroyed in North America. Black people are being destroyed destroyed in the Caribbean by the same government, and they use violence. So again, we've had too many instances where our amazing communities have been bombed and lynched and burned down to talk about **why don't black folks in America do better?** We've always done better. The fact that we're still here and have never surrendered or never gave up. It's a testament not to a failure, but a **willingness to fight**, regardless of how outnumbered we are… »

Sounder Flips the Script

As a result of its application of its core values of research, data collection, and modeling, Sounder has greater accuracy regarding the diversity and inclusiveness of content assessment. We-and, therefore, our tools-recognize that racism, and similar topics, are highly debated with passion and intertwined with actions resulting from such passionate conversations. We identify healthy discussions of these topics as low and medium-risk based on their informational intent.

This results in increased accuracy and inclusivity of diverse podcast content that traditional brand safety and suitability methods would classify as Hate Speech & Acts of Aggression.

Sounder's interpretation of GARM's Hate Speech & Acts of Aggression generates increased accuracy and inclusivity of Black creator content. Compared to traditional brand safety and suitability methods, Sounder's AI/ML model identified the majority of discussions about hate speech and related acts of aggression as a more low-to-medium risk while also recognizing the safe nature and nuances of many DSSI discussions in Black creator content. Simply put, advertisers and agencies can confidently target their marketing to effective and safe content.

Eliminating Bias in Measurement While Expanding Advertising Opportunities

To review: Sounder's AI/ML-based brand safety and suitability models avoid bias and support Black creators and diverse voices. Using Sounder's technology, the excerpt from The Carl Nelson Show above was classified as low risk for Hate Speech & Acts of Aggression given the show's journalistic intent-the opposite of conventional content brand safety tools.

In fact, in Urban One's total network, we observed topics related to the Hate Speech category occurring in a low-risk, informational discussion in nearly 23% of episodes compared to 3% of episodes from the general population of podcasting, meaning that Black creators are having informative conversations on divisive issues with greater frequency than the general podcasting community. The podcast advertising community and listeners are on a pivotal journey.

Podcast listeners are highly engaged, and brands seeking alignment with informative social activism should seek content from Black and minority creators. Identifying the right conversations that seemingly push the envelope can help drive more listeners to action on branded sites.

Transcription Accuracy

Foundational to any AI/ML-based model's accuracy for brand safety and suitability is transcription quality. We recognize that languages are as diverse as the communities that speak them. As such, it is critical that Black English is accurately captured within transcriptions to:

- Ensure that the vernacular and culture of this community are represented and not erased in the media.
- Show a commitment to recognizing and respecting linguistic diversity and cultural differences.
- Ensure that the words and expressions used in a podcast are accurately represented, which is important for preserving the cultural context of the conversation.

By transcribing Black English accurately, we can celebrate and honor the unique dialect and culture of the Black community while promoting inclusivity and accessibility in the medium. Through representation, inclusion, and accuracy, we enable culturally diverse voices and conversations to be recognized as safe and suitable for advertising. In testing the quality of Sounder's proprietary Automatic Speech Recognition (ASR) model on two popular shows that represent Black English within the genres of sports and pop culture, our Word Error Rate (WER) on average is lower than 21%, which is more accurate than most major transcription providers.

Inaccurate Transcription

We did, however, observe several incidences of Black English transcribed incorrectly in our research, and one incidence elicited a noticeably higher risk assessment than it would have received had the word been transcribed correctly. This example is showcased in the excerpt below with an error in the spoken word "that" transcribed to "dead, » ultimately causing the segment to be classified as medium risk for Death, Injury & Military Conflict.

« *...because I used to hear the stories about the brothers beating up this brother and beating up dead [that] brother because this and because of that, that's not what the minister taught and teaching and teaching us... »*

A phonetic feature of Black English is pronouncing the "th" sound at the beginning of words as a "d."2 In the example above, the "th" sound at the beginning of the word "that" resulted in the pronunciation as "dat, » which the transcriber understood as "dead."

Our research uncovered the critical need for Black English to be legitimized through transcription that supports diverse creator voices. As any other language is trained with its own unique dictionary, so too should Black English and other minority creator dialects. Doing so makes transcription and resulting brand safety and suitability data more accurate, reflective, and inclusive of diverse vernacular languages.

AI/ML-Based Technologies

Sounder has always advocated for AI/ML-based solutions to serve as the foundation for brand safety and suitability and other insights drawn from podcasts, such as contextual targeting.

We have found that keyword-based solutions strongly suppress content from diverse and minority creators, creating a monetization gap with mainstream podcast creators. In building our model, we studied the impact of keyword-based solutions compared to AI/ML-based solutions applied to our podcast cohorts and uncovered another advantage of Sounder's approach. The standard solutions are not effective for a diverse and inclusive community. When applying a standard keyword blocklist solution to Urban One's podcast content, an overwhelming 92% of all episodes are removed from the available inventory. That same keyword blocklist applied to the general podcast cohort blocks only 63% of inventory.

A keyword blocklist is unequivocally easily utilized by simply blocking any episode or show that contains a single word on the list. However, even if a threshold of any kind is applied, the results are the same: minority content is removed from monetization opportunities because of the words used to discuss their experiences.

Brand safety and suitability solutions that rely on similar methods rooted in keywords, keyword counting, and thresholding also result in the same demonetization. Even when a solution utilizes the frequency of keywords to determine brand safety and suitability without regard to the contextual and cultural nuances of the words, diverse creators are demonetized.

AI/ML-Based Technologies

On the other hand, when applying a semantically and contextually focused AI/ML-based model to classify brand safety and suitability, nearly 82% more episodes from Urban One become available to monetize. This vastly increases the opportunities considered suitable for brand alignment and directly challenges the long-held-and highly inaccurate-belief that Black-owned and targeted audiences lack the scale for agencies and brands.

In our solution, AI/ML-based brand safety and suitability determine the contextual relevance of topics discussed and enable advertisers to align with meaningful and powerful conversations. The alternative using keyword-based solutions can potentially silence communities deeply impacted by social injustices.

Comparison: Percent of Content Blocked by Assessment Type

Legend: ■ Sounder Model ■ Conventional Keyword
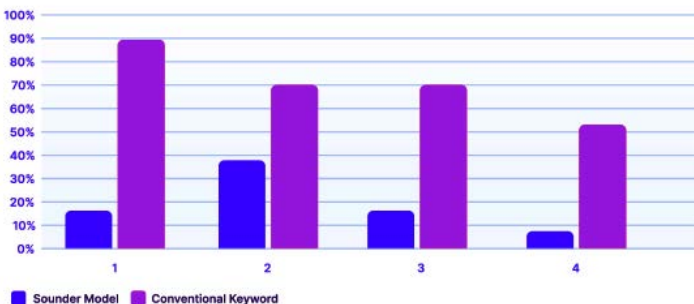
Cultural Nuances

It is critical that AI/ML-based solutions are developed without bias and maintain fluidity to evolve with conversations. As Sounder developed its models, we reviewed its ability to classify Black creator content relative to four critical strengths:

1. Preventing over-indexing on safety-ensures the models enable creators to speak authentically about their subjects of interest. By evaluating the context-topics, intention, tone, and more-and not the keywords, Sounder AI/ML delivers a more nuanced and accurate risk assessment.

2. Dynamic scoring that evolves with culture-ensures the models detect changes in content risk and adapt to the culture. Risk perception of topics changes over time (e.g., marijuana), but counting keywords is binary.

3. Capturing new risks early-ensures the models can identify new terms being used in risky contexts or with negative intent and classify them correctly. Conversations evolve with cultural nuances, and new risks arise from those evolutions (e.g., new obscenities).

4 .Accurately classify high-risk content-ensures the models are trained to accurately identify high-risk content when it arises while maintaining equitable evaluations across inventory. Podcasting is a largely safe medium,
but it is important to capture risk even if it's surfacing in mainstream shows.

Sounder's AI/ML models support all voices in podcasting and, more importantly, dynamically address Black and minority creator voices to create fair monetization opportunities.

Urban One, Inc. (urban1.com), together with its subsidiaries, is the largest diversified media company that primarily targets Black Americans and urban consumers in the United States. The company owns TV One, LLC (tvone.tv), a television network serving more than 59 million households, offering a broad range of original programming, classic series, and movies designed to entertain, inform and inspire a diverse audience of adult Black viewers. As of June 2023, Urban One currently owns and/or operates 66 independently formatted, revenue-producing broadcast stations (including 55 FM or AM stations, 9 HD stations, and the 2 low-power television stations we operate) branded under the tradename "Radio One » in 13 urban markets in the United States. Through its controlling interest in Reach Media, Inc. (blackamericaweb.com), the Company also operates syndicated programming, including the Rickey Smiley Morning Show, the Russ Parr Morning Show, and the DL Hughley Show.

In addition to its radio and television broadcast assets, Urban One owns iOne Digital (ionedigital.com), our wholly-owned digital platform serving the African American community through social content, news, information, and entertainment websites, including its Cassius, Bossip, HipHopWired, and MadameNoire digital platforms and brands. Through our national multi-media operations, we provide advertisers with a unique and powerful delivery mechanism to African American and urban audiences. Sounder is an industry-leading AI company specializing in podcast content classification.

Its advanced technology enables precise content discovery and recommendations, providing brand safety and suitability solutions, and contextual intelligence to podcast creators and consumers.

Sources:

• Edison Research Black Podcast Listener Report 2023

• University of Hawaii, Jack Sidnell, Language Varieties 2012