



PR IN FOCUS | The Invisible Puppet Master – Where do we draw the line?

Insights Paper
Corporate
Communications
2018

In the late 18th century, English philosopher and social theorist Jeremy Bentham developed an architectural form named the Panopticon. The design allowed inmates of an institution to be observed by a single person without the inmates being able to tell whether or not they are being watched. Bentham described the Panopticon as “a new mode of obtaining power of mind over mind, in a quantity hitherto without example”.

More than two centuries later, we are facing a situation where consumers are questioning whether we live in an invisible structure similar to a Panopticon. Everywhere we turn, we are being watched, tracked and analysed, and that data is being sold without us knowing.

You only have to look to the Cambridge Analytica Facebook data breach scandal and CASA's recent public consultation on the use of drones to know that people are becoming increasingly concerned

about their privacy, identity and individual sovereignty.

In observing commentary, it appears concerns are focused in two main areas:

Infiltration: the extent to which our lives are being monitored. Consumers are asking: Who has stored my image or photos of my children? Do they know where I shop? Who has my address?

Manipulation: the curation of our media consumption and the influences on our buying behaviour. Consumers are asking: How have I been profiled? What are companies trying to sell to me? Is this fake news?

In this convergence of PR, communication, marketing, digital and social, it is important that we, as professionals, understand and respect our audiences' concerns. We are at a crucial point where misuse of data or perceived manipulation of facts can leave us exposed as individuals and as an industry.



Four reminders for practitioners:

Protect and manage data properly

International regulations in Europe and the US now mandate how organisations need to handle consumer data, and this has particular impact for us if we use the Cloud or offsite storage for consumer data. Due to a spate of data breaches, consumers have a heightened awareness and interest in knowing who has access to their data and how it is being used. But digital privacy can be about more than data. Take for example the #planebae situation. While this happened between individuals, it's easy to see how a brand could do something similar, seeking to capitalise on an unexpected situation.

For practitioners working in the consultation field, who are gatherers of data about community members, there is an added level around privacy of the data. Often the stored information can be sensitive, such as recording the times of day that people aren't home and how their property can be accessed.

Check your sources and facts

Whether you are crafting a campaign or managing a reputational issue, fact and source checking is crucial. We undermine our reputation and integrity if we use a hastily assembled stable of facts, without checking their legitimacy. A few years ago, there were several hoax ASX announcements – the most notable of these being the Whitehaven fake press release. The speed with which media outlets picked up the press release and published the “news” had an immediate impact on Whitehaven's share price.

“Fake news” was the Macquarie Dictionary's word of the year in 2016 and recent reports show that consumers do not trust the news they see on social media. As story-tellers, we have to be hyper-vigilant in checking our facts and sources and not sharing content we cannot verify.

Understand the policies and politics of your chosen channels and partners

It is not enough that we, and our organisations, are squeaky clean when it comes to respecting consumer rights. Many campaigns are now multi-layered and using a mix of paid, earned, shared and owned channels. It is important to know the data policies of your channels and whether any data breach on their end could affect your brand and consumers.

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Likewise, in these days of influencer marketing, it's important to understand how your brand aligns with the values of your partners and the other brands they are engaged with. Consumers are quick to react when there is a misalignment of a brand and an influencer's behaviour. One key example was Disney-owned Maker Studios firing YouTuber PewDiePie after he posted a video with anti-Semitic content.

Check your ethics

In the end, it boils down to ethics and our personal values. From the types of companies we are willing to represent through to the nature of the campaigns we develop, we use our own moral compass to tell us what is right and wrong. If you are not comfortable telling family and friends about what you are doing, then it's likely to be unethical.

In these days of fake news, data breaches and decreasing consumer trust, this code of ethics is more important than ever. As curators and creators of content, as the story-tellers, as the narrative-owners, we have to hold ourselves to the highest standards to protect consumer rights and our reputations.



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