

Marketing in the age of outrage

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We live in an era of perpetual outrage. Some estimate 68% of all *Daily Mail* headlines begin "Outrage as..."*, and it's done wonders for the newspaper commercially: from its Hitler-backing days right up to its recent vilification of judges as "enemies of the people", it has been cashing in on rancour.

Making hay from outrage isn't new, but the paradigm we're in now is; audiences are more polarised than ever and quicker to take offence – and, thanks to the web, they can act on it at once. This presents opportunities for brands willing to take creative risks and threatens those that play it too safe, in an environment where extreme messages cut through.

One form of the commercialisation of outrage is described in *Hypernormalisation*, filmmaker Adam Curtis' recent documentary. He points out how anti-corporate, "right-on" outrage is actually funding the multi-national, tax-avoiding social networks that are being railed against. The accumulated outrage, in the form of "views" and "shares", is worth billions to Mark Zuckerberg. This could lead cynical critics to predict that Facebook is unlikely to do enough about all that highly engaging "fake news".

Global blanding

Ad-blockers, fake views and issues with the programmatic free-for-all have caused brands to waste more than \$6bn-worth of budget, according to the *Financial Times*. Pumping money into paid media is the obvious thing to do if your content is bland and unchallenging. Ultimately, though, it is creating empty, branded noise, which is pushed incessantly at people through algorithms racking up fake views and ad-blocker downloads.

We need to stop pulling the wool over brands' eyes and focus on the real metrics that show whether or not people engage with content. It's very hard to get anyone to share, comment on or "like" something that prompts no opinion. Earned media is more important than ever, but agencies have been slow to formulate strategies and tactics that enable clients to benefit from this angry new world. In fact, fear of being called out on social media and then pilloried in one of those news articles where they screenshot the tweets of the outrage has led brands to play it even safer. Brands should use the polarised public to their advantage: being offensive pays. We need to create conversations, and that's almost impossible if you're dribbling out blandness. We need to build content that makes waves and divides opinion.

The brain is built to ignore the old and focus on the new. Novelty is one of the most powerful signals to determine what we pay attention to in the world. In fact, researchers have found that novelty causes a number of brain **systems to become activated** (<http://bit.ly/NoveltyBrain>), which is why the bland and inoffensive creative peddled by many brands doesn't work.

Veteran UK creative Dave Trott recently quantified the problem: "Last year, around £18.3bn was spent on all forms of advertising and marketing in the UK. Of that, 4% was remembered positively, 7% was remembered negatively [and] 89% wasn't noticed or remembered."

The power of polarisation

Sometimes brands fuel outrage by accident, but then decide to reap the benefits. The now infamous "Beach body ready" campaign by Protein World led to protests on social media and the streets of London and New York, and more column inches than Protein World could have hoped for. The tiny, previously unheard-of supplements business made about £1m in four days after being unintentionally boosted by the enormous backlash from anti-"body-shaming" campaigners over its ad. Protein World spent only £250,000 on the billboards, but it worked. The company has used the same formula for its latest campaign, featuring Khloe Kardashian – and gets free PR every time.

This year's Super Bowl ads went political. Budweiser sent a pro-immigration message to US viewers; Coke declared that "Together is beautiful" with a multicultural singalong; and Audi's ad promoted its commitment to equal pay for equal work. All this prompted right-wing outrage. Calls for a boycott of Budweiser (some preferred #BoycottBudwiser) described the brand as a "snowflake", the term that has gained currency online as an insult, usually used by those on the right against more liberal people. A Fox News commentator accused the advertisers of "marring" the "otherwise classic game", while YouTuber, author and conspiracy theorist Mark Dice called the ads "puke-inducing propaganda".

Unruly's white paper on the Super Bowl ads shows that 20% of the general audience felt worse about the brand after its "Kickstart: Puppymonkeybaby" spot aired

Deliberately deploying outrage used to be easier. Donald Trump isn't the first to capitalise on outrage – or, indeed, the power of being orange. Trevor Robinson's legendary "Orange man" ad for Tango embodied the strapline "You know when you've been Tango'd" with a slap on the cheeks.

Mimicking the ad quickly became a fad in playgrounds across the UK, and the campaign was eventually pulled by the brand after one too many damaged eardrums. Nonetheless, by then it had done what it needed to: sell the drinks and establish the tone of the brand in contrast to safer, Coca-Cola-owned alternatives. Earning a complaint to the ASA used to be quite an accolade, ultimately benefiting the brand.

If agencies had a better understanding of digital audiences, how they are likely to respond and how that feeds the mainstream media, they would be able to predict and shape the outrage to their benefit, while being better prepared to deal with the initial backlash that can sometimes result.

Creative commitment

Creatively risky ads may offend some people, but that is better than not being noticed. If your target audience loves it but some of the non-targeted are offended, it's still job done. But you have to truly understand your audience to make sure you're saying the right things to the right people. Soft-drink brand Mountain Dew is a case in point. Unruly's white paper on the Super Bowl ads shows that 20% of the general audience felt worse about the brand after its "Kickstart: Puppymonkeybaby" spot aired, but close to 50% of its target audience (millennial men) loved it.

Hilarity is the most difficult and subjective psychological result to achieve, but it's hard to be funny without treading on toes. Unruly's white paper also showed that while many Super Bowl ads tried to be humorous, only 10% of viewers thought they were. They lacked outrage. The definition of satire is to "ridicule to expose and criticise people's stupidity or vices". We love using it to offend the offensive (see Melissa McCarthy and Alec Baldwin on *Saturday Night Live*), and brands can do the same. But you can't go halfway; you have to commit.

That said, it's not something that's appropriate for everyone. Challenger brands can take more creative risks than incumbents. Traditionally "safe" brands normally have a market position that's safe, and a safe audience. For commercial success, you have to think about what works for your customers, and not worry about pleasing everyone – that's the point.

But there's another customer in this equation: the client. In our industry it feels like everyone knows how to say "no", but comparatively few have the balls to say "yes".

If your outrageous idea is rejected, even if the grounds for doing so are flawed, that's usually the end of it. And that is the chief cause of death for so many good ideas: that it wasn't recognised as such.

We all want our clients to be "brave", but that needs to mean not simply creating challenging work, but standing firm when a *Mail* article appears (with the screengrabbed tweets) and realising the outrage will soon pass. If the idea is sound and has a strong appeal to your target market, it will have all been worth it in terms of the PR coverage and shares on social.

Outrage is the currency of our times. Brands need to start cashing in.

Real Housewives of ISIS (Parody)



Real Housewives of ISIS (Parody)

Anatomy of an outrage

- We developed more audience and media insight into outrage due to a controversial sketch we released to promote *Revolting*, a comedy show that I co-created for BBC Two. The sketch is called "Real Housewives of ISIS".
- The time span of an "outrage" is often 72 hours. A global outrage that kicks off in the UK is best because you have a day before it takes off in the US.
- In the case of the "Real Housewives" sketch, the *Daily Mail* was the first media outlet to participate in the backlash, stating that it was a travesty. The backlash continued apace, with left-wing, politically correct campaigners weighing into the debate, damning the sketch for being sexist.
- Then the "backlash against the backlash" began with *The Telegraph* claiming the sketch represented the "rebirth of satire". The trend continued with favourable coverage in the US, in *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times* and *The Washington Post*.
- The clip became the eighth-most-watched in BBC history and with some geo-located retargeting we drove audiences to watch the show online.

***Fake stat**

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