

# The Analyst: Ethics, triumvirates and social media disruptions

**WE'RE HEARING** a lot about social media, and how it's the flavour of the month, year or decade. And it's true - Australians are highly engaged with this technology, more so than most countries. Marketers are taking this fact on board and are increasingly inventive in how they engage with consumers through this space.

What is less obvious is how social media is changing the mechanics of the advertising equation. In a very direct way, we are seeing the engagement process with consumers migrating away from a single model based on the triumvirate (advertiser - agency - publisher) to include a direct business-to-consumer (B2C) model where the advertiser has the ability to bypass the other players in the chain.

Previously those "others", particularly the publisher, played the role of gatekeeper with the mass media audience. Not only did publishers decide format but, at times, also judged the appropriateness of the message on behalf of their audiences. In addition, they held responsibility for the ethics of engagement.

While some publishers may push the boundaries, most are very clear on the division between "church and state" (i.e. editorial and commercial) which is why we see explicit labelling on publisher sites or publication of sponsored content, or advertorial or

"special promotion". It is the publisher's responsibility to make clear to the audience when a particular piece of content has commercial drivers behind it, so that the audience isn't misled.

Media agencies will push for even more integrated opportunities, and the editorial offices of any publisher are littered with supplied product samples. However, this "church and state" differentiation protects the brands of both advertisers and publishers from damaging repercussions.

Where the publishing media, especially news-based reporting, is known as The Fourth Estate, the rise of social media as a mass engagement channel has been described by some as The Fifth Estate.

What is different between these two entities is the level of self-regulation and professional repercussions if boundaries are crossed. Traditional publishers (online and offline) negotiate ethical issues daily. Advertisers have traditionally left it to publishers to be concerned with ethics. Participants in social media are less likely to have these issues explicitly highlighted.

Social media is changing this landscape through a direct discourse between advertisers and social media consumers. While bloggers and tweeters are entirely responsible for opinions they produce, advertisers are now also finding themselves in the ethical firing line.



In the US, semi-professional bloggers have been at the forefront of these discussions, and the Federal Trade Commission has established explicit guidelines for social media disclosure practices; investigating and applying injunctions against companies that breach the guidelines.

Other companies, such as Mars and Ford, have very explicit policies about social media outreach practices and the nature of disclosure in those communities. Look on Twitter and you'll see the adoption of hashtags such as #spon and #ad that identify a commercial engagement at the root of the message.

The challenge for advertisers and agencies in this market is to be aware of the implications of these changes, take onboard the need for up-skilling in these areas and implement best practice guidelines before they are forced to. ●

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