

THE
NETWORKED
AGE_

ISSUE 5

NERDOGRAM

NOVEMBER 2021

ENGINE
mhp *mischief*

THE NETWORKED AGED NERDOGRAM

This month is a little different. The aim of the Nerdogram was always to share things that were preoccupying me (in a professional capacity), often rooted in behavioural science and data.

But over the last month, I have become increasingly aware that discussion of polarisation is on the rise, whether you think polarisation itself is, or not. From [this](#) Guardian article, discussing whether it is as much of a challenge as we think, to [this](#) FT article debating the impact of polarisation on the success of Covid treatments, to [this](#) LSE study, highlighting relationships between polarisation and Brexit (which our [Polarisation Tracker](#) shows remains the UK's most polarising issue, 5 years on), it is increasingly cited (and challenged) as a casual factor in almost everything we do.

But is this right? And if so, what does it mean for communicators? Does it change

our understanding of audience? Or more fundamentally politicise our role? At MHP, polarisation has been central to our thinking for several years (in fact, we have produced [this](#) handy guide to Communicating in a Polarised World), but as this is now such a hot topic, and such a challenging one to address, I wanted to spend some time going back to basics, to consider some of these questions.

Luckily, I didn't have to answer them alone (or indeed, at all), but instead turned to [Ali Goldsworthy](#) for information and advice. Ali is a long-term friend of MHP, a specialist in depolarisation and a campaigner, philanthropist, entrepreneur and now [author](#), focussed on depolarising politics, who claims "the most rebellious thing you can do is suggest people get on."

She kindly spent half an hour on Zoom with me, answering some big and small questions, some of which I want to share with you.



Kate Gomes, Head of Strategy, ENGINE MHP

NERDOGRAM

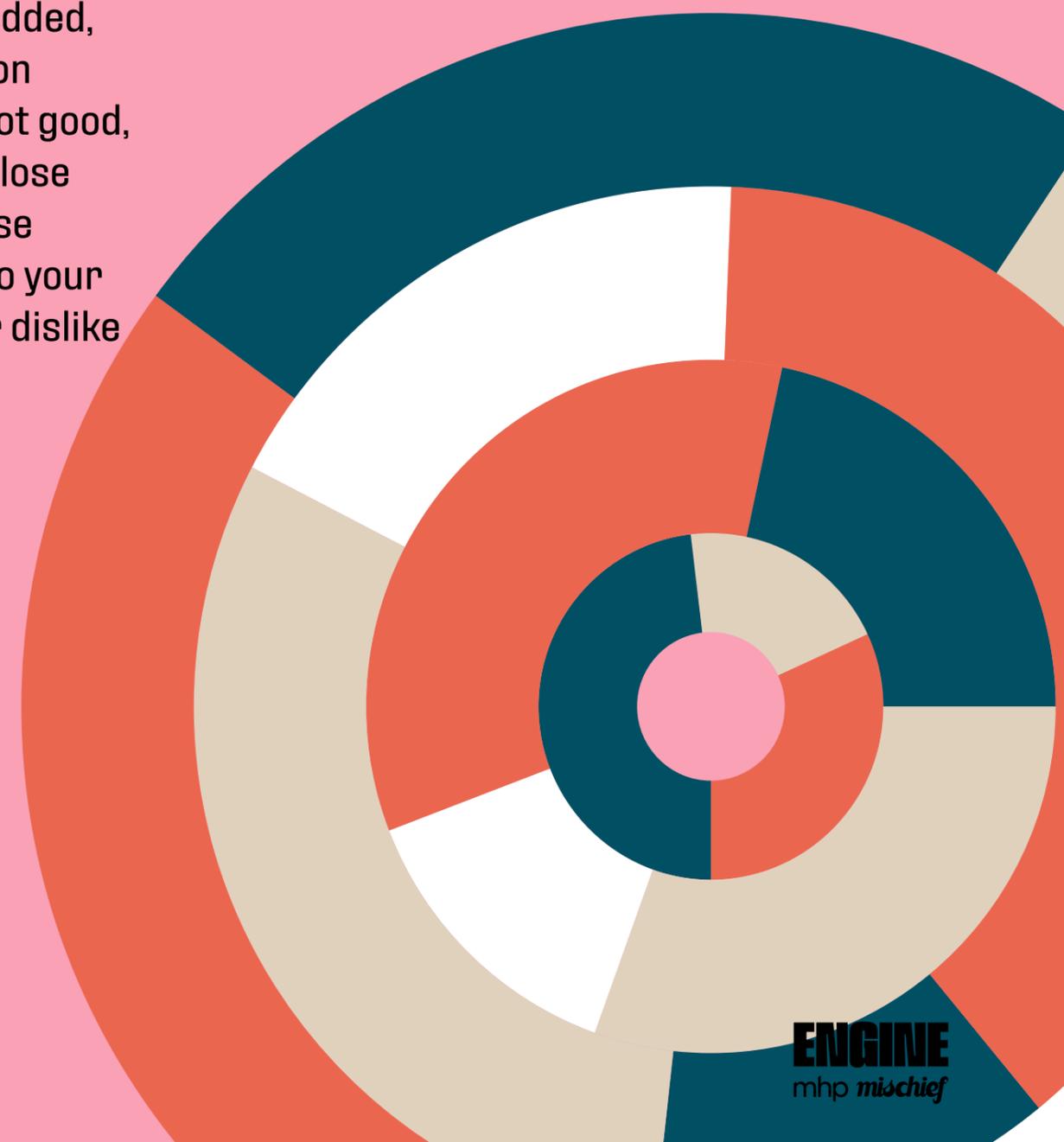
NEED TO KNOWS

We talk a lot about polarisation, but I don't think we really define it as frequently. How do you define it?

There are two types of polarisation that people generally talk about. One is issue polarisation, where people disagree on an issue – should there be a monarchy? Should abortion be legal or illegal? Should a certain drug be legalised?

Then there is the sort of polarisation which is much more pernicious: affective polarisation. This is largely based on an identity. In the UK, someone might say “I am a Remainder” – that is their identity. They don't say “I believe in”, they say “I am”. And if I told you someone ate quinoa, you might say “I bet they're a Remainder.”

These identities can become quite embedded, and people base a lot of their decisions on tribal views of who is good, and who is not good, on the basis of those. You can be quite close to agreeing on a lot of issues, but because someone comes from a different tribe to your own, you can be quite passionate in your dislike of them.



What does polarisation mean for communicators?

Polarisation will happen. We need to prepare for it.

But in business in particular a lot of people don't think about polarisation at all. And they need to, to understand the staff they have and to understand people from a broad range backgrounds, particularly if they are in B2C. We need to think as we are building teams about political diversity, on top of other forms of diversity. Public Affairs teams are a rare example of this already happening – its so explicit so it can't be subconscious.

And as human beings, we need to be much more mindful of how we trigger tribal identities. When we say "why do you think that?" what we mean is "... because you're wrong and I'm right". Instead, ask "how did you come to that opinion?" – it helps them explain their story. It encourages mechanistic reasoning – a step by step understanding of how they arrived at a decision – which helps them see why something doesn't quite fit.

And what does polarisation mean for brands?

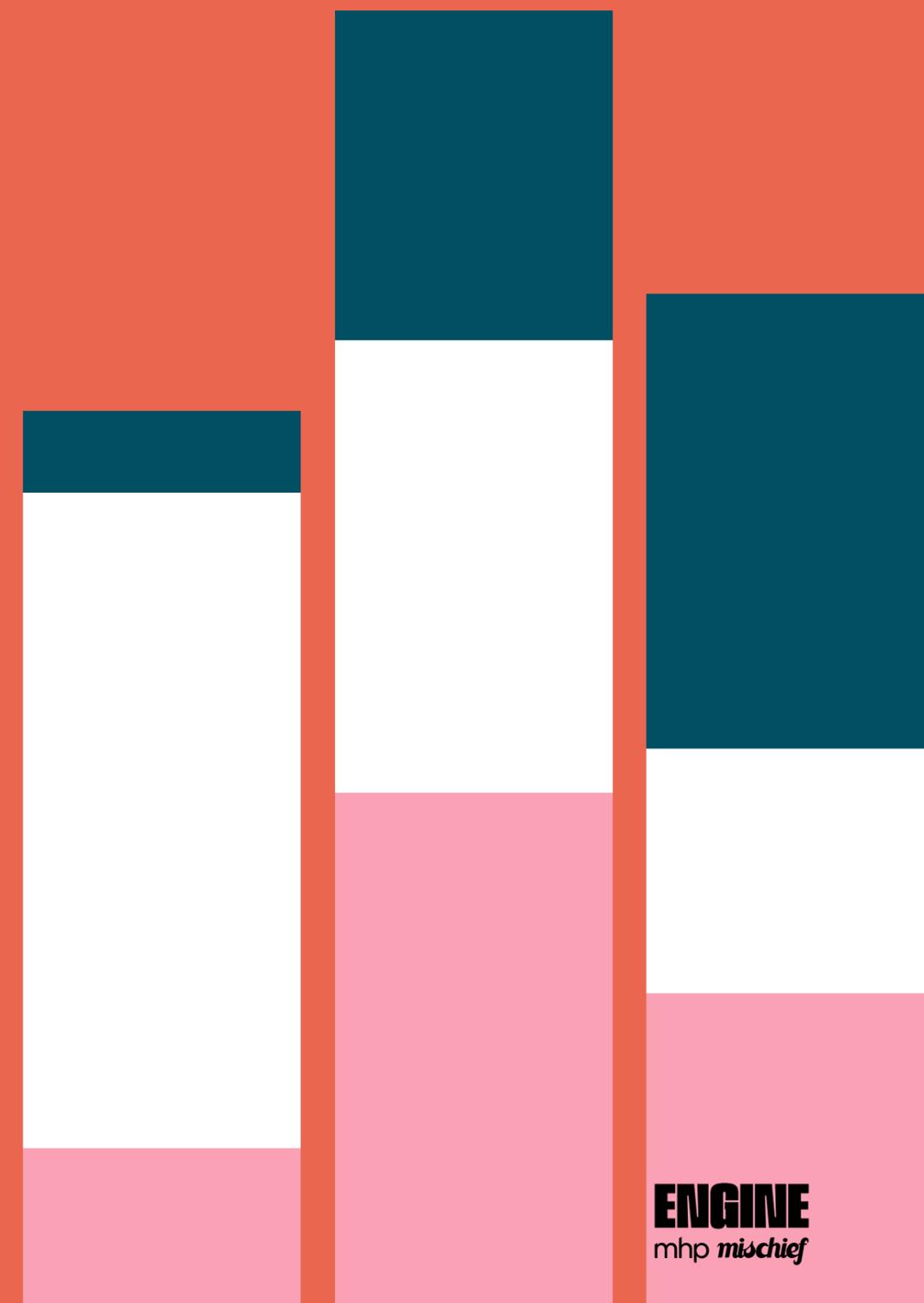
Some brands – like Patagonia – driven by employees and founders, polarise as part of their view that business should improve society. Patagonia will tell you it supports the Democrats because of their views on green issues. There can be good reasons to take polarising stances. If you go back to the '70's quite a few brands took strong stances on apartheid in South Africa.

Some use polarisation to sell. Marmite deliberately polarises its audience. And people now identify as marmite lovers or haters. There can be profit in it for brands, and it's an easy way to segment audiences. Financial reward and engagement metrics lead some to lean into it – that may not always be the right thing. They can get caught up in a political whirlwind without ever realising what'd going on.

You rarely see a brand say, "how can I bridge a divide or appeal to more people, do I have

a responsibility to undo polarisation?" Businesses should think about this far more. In this space, the UK supermarket sector is unusual. Because its such a consolidated market, they are able to do that and there's a business case for it. The other places that can do this are really small businesses which have to appeal to mixed local communities.

At MHP we understand that one of the greatest challenges brands face is how their brand can best respond to and engage with an increasingly polarised world. That's why we developed the Purpose Pathfinder, to help brands better understand the available approaches, assess their current activities and develop communications which best suit the needs of their audiences.



What sources should people turn to if they want to better understand polarisation?

Think about when you last changed your mind or tribe on an issue and what caused you to do it. Its very rarely someone saying, “you’re completely wrong.” We need to sit and observe and watch and listen in all sorts of places – watch for peoples’ behaviour as well as what they say.

An answer people often give is to consume a more diverse media diet. But if you don’t do that thoughtfully you can end up reinforcing your views. What you need to do is find places which are more reflective and nuanced. A few people I find useful are [Danny Finkelstein](#), [Sunder Katwala](#), [Suzanne Moore](#), [Dominic Cummings](#) and [Matthew Elliott](#), as well as others on UnHerd.

The MHP [Guide to Communicating in a Polarised World](#) was produced specifically to help communicators navigate today’s – and tomorrow’s – challenges in this space.

And finally, incentivise and praise people for getting on. Along with others, I recently launched the [Civility in Politics Awards](#), which seeks to reward politicians who work across divides. There’s a monetary prize they can give to a non-profit in their constituency of their choice and that non-profit can point to their politicians’ depolarising behaviour as the cause.

SOME HELPFULL LINKS

To learn more about communicating in a polarised world, download our Guide [here](#).

If you want to know more about any of the insights in this email – or talk to us more about how we think about audiences, please email me at kate.gomes@mhpc.com

And don't forget to check out our Networked Age library, including our Guides to 'The New Rules of Influence' and 'Communicating in a Polarised World'.

You can find everything here, including the Nerdogram:
mhpc.com/NetworkedAge

CONTACT

020 3128 8100
contactus@mhpc.com

60 Great Portland Street
London, W1W 7RT

mhpc.com
 [@mhpc](https://twitter.com/mhpc)

mischiefpr.com
 [@mischiefpr](https://twitter.com/mischiefpr)