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“When did you last change your mind?”

Welcome back from what, for most of us, has been a break. Time spent with family, friends and other loved ones.

Though for the majority, these occasions elicit happiness and positivity, they are not without their friction. In our increasingly polarised age, media and social media commentary abounds with stories of social friction during these much-looked-forward-to times of togetherness. Fractures, small and large, take place in social relationships as differences of opinion take place.

Those of us who work in the communications space have been told, repeatedly, how sticky opinions are. And the tribalism associated with increased polarisation only furthers this stickiness. But just because opinions are hard to shift, doesn't mean they can't be shifted.

This month, I have focussed on studies which highlight empirically successful ways to shift opinion, each with a lesson for us to learn as communicators and simply human beings.

I hope you enjoy it. Do get in touch if you'd like to discuss the below, or anything else.

Thanks, Kate



Kate Gomes, Head of Strategy, ENGINE MHP

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NEED TO KNOWS

ONE: THE COST OF CHANGE

The act of advocacy changes minds

Common consensus (and our modern economy) is based on the fundamental idea that you can pay people to act a certain way, most fundamentally to work. But there has been far less consensus on whether payment changes opinions, as well as actions.

A study in Nature Human Behaviour now argues that this change is not only possible, but uncontrollable. Looking specifically at lawyers, it emphasises that, even for this profession “incentivizing people to advocate altered a range of beliefs about character, guilt and punishment”.

For communications professionals, this could lead to a reconsideration of our relationship with and payment to influencers. Put simply, if we pay them once to advocate for a brand or product, the long tail of that advocacy, influenced by a change in their belief, is likely worth more to the brand than initially suggested. It points to the value of maintaining relationships with influencers, rather than being more ad hoc or scattergun, capitalising on their genuine growing belief in a brand or product.

TWO: REALITY BITES

Reality hits home and changes minds

Dealing in hypotheticals is hard. Many studies over the years have noted how poor we as human beings are in saying how we feel (or would even act) in response to something that might happen in the future. Despite this, we often hold entrenched opinions about how any change might make us feel.

A study in [Psychological Science](#) notes that the likelihood of rationalising and accepting a change to which we had been opposed, increases significantly almost immediately after that change takes place. The author emphasises this trend, even on divisive

issues from Trump's presidency to smoking and plastic bans. She argues that the "psychological realness" rather than new information, drives this change in attitude.

For communicators, this could lead to a change in messaging. Rather than focusing on the potential positive impact of future change, there is a case for showing how close it is to present reality, either for the audience or similar others. Showing that it is, in some way "already real", rather than making a case for a significant shift may provide more positive outcomes in terms of audience opinion.

THREE: SEEN TO BE BELIEVED

Celebrities challenge prejudice and change minds

In recent years the communications industry has seen extensive debates about the impact of diversity in messenger and the impact of influencer and celebrity led activities. Where the “see it to be it” case for diversity, appears largely made, the audience impact of diverse voices is still debated.

A recent study in the American Political Science Review argues that exposure to celebrities from marginalised groups can significantly reduce public prejudice. Looking at the example of Mohamed Salah, a Liverpool F.C. player and Muslim, the study shows that after he joined the team, hate

crimes in Liverpool dropped by 16% and more specifically, Liverpool F.C. fans halved their rates of posting anti-Muslim tweets compared to fans of other top clubs.

This enhances the case for the impact of diverse voices and images on wider audience opinions. For communicators, this means not shying away from celebrity and influencer partnerships where they fear there may be pre-existing audience prejudice, but instead, using these partnerships to combat that prejudice.

FOUR: MOVE CLOSER

Proximity demands reappraisal and changes minds

Tribalism means that we, by nature seek out people that are similar to us. And historically, brands have done the same, with shopping malls being organised by theme (e.g. sportswear) or audience profile (e.g. children).

But a recent study in the Strategic Management Journal indicates that this may be the wrong approach. Running an experiment in advertising, the authors argue that proximity to more high-status brands, provides status for the neighbours, who themselves can engage in more aspirational pricing. Notably,

this has long been Zara's property strategy – this 2012 New York Times article points to the brand trying to place itself as near to Prada as possible.

As communicators, we tend to appeal to the tribal in our audience: who is like them? But we may need to rethink and help them align with what they aspire to, helping them enhance their own status, just as advertisers and stores are seeking to do.

THE RULES OF INFLUENCE

At MHP+Mischief, we apply three simple Rules of Influence - developed with Dr Tali Sharot and UCL's Affective Brain Lab - to think through every challenge. As we go along, we'll show how the Rules play out in the real world. But before we begin, let's quickly recap on what they are:

RULE ONE:

Who you are is as important as what you do.

Audiences are tribal and united around shared narratives and values. To engage people, organisations must show they (and the people who run them) share the same values.

RULE TWO:

Influencers and passions spread ideas

People follow people like themselves and they respond to passionate voices. Passionate storytellers and emotional stories are more effective.

RULE THREE:

Arguments are never won, outcomes are

People will reject challenging arguments, even if they are supported by facts. To persuade people, you can't tell them they're wrong, you have to change the conversation.

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

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