



PR IN THE POST-TRUTH ERA

5 RULES TO SURVIVING
POST-TRUTH PR

[WHITE PAPER]



THE TRUTH - A MOVEABLE GOALPOST



The truth has always been somewhat of a movable goalpost. Regardless of whether it has been sensationalised and twisted by a journalist or deflected and spun-out by a PR professional, there have always been multiple versions of the truth.

The fact is, facts have never got in the way of a good story because facts change depending on how they have been observed, analysed and reported. Therefore, you could argue that we have always lived in a “post-truth” era.

While news hasn’t changed, the way it is reported and consumed has. The media landscape has transformed almost beyond recognition. Familiar news organisations, struggling to make ends meet in the new digital economy, battle it out with online start-ups in the largely unregulated world of social media and the web.

Today’s post-truth era news industry delivers its individual version of the truth to a highly connected but none-the-less fractured society who actively seek out the voices they want to hear and trust and either ignore or ridicule everything else.

And while national and international news stories (often coloured with a liberal sprinkle of opinion) dominate the front pages, rolling TV news schedules and social media feeds, journalism at grassroots level (in the regions) is largely in decline, leaving the “truth” in the hands of local government and other public bodies who some media pundits would argue are [relishing the demise of the local news services.](#)



DEFINING THE POST-TRUTH ERA



Before we can address the challenges and opportunities for the PR industry in this post-truth era, we need to define exactly what “post-truth” actually means.

The post-truth era can best be defined by political (or other) debate built around emotions rather than facts. Post-truth news bypasses experts, fact-checking, reporting and editorial best-practices and even common decency. In many respects, post-truth news goes beyond acceptable levels of “spin” and attempt to displace facts with outright lies.

You might argue that post-truth news is straight off the pages of a George Orwell novel but in this era dominated by Brexit, the Trump presidency, a re-emerging Russian superpower and the rise of the far right and (equally) far left, post-truth news is very much (and rather ironically) fact rather than fiction.

So how will the post-truth era impact on the PR industry? This white paper explores how PRs should engage with media in this new age, the opportunities and the threats in the post-truth landscape; and how to survive the pitfalls of post-truth.



A DYSTOPIAN VIEW OF THE PR INDUSTRY IN 2017



OK, time for some unpalatable truths.

The general public's perception of the PR industry is not good.

For many people outside of the industry, PR conjures up images of Max Clifford, Spun-out Politics and a dreadful set of media types staggering from one party to the next and never leaving the confines of the M25.



This hasn't gone unnoticed in the industry. A number of PR heavyweights, including Marshall Manson who heads up Ogilvy PR, have recognised a populist backlash against PR and [urged the industry to re-invent itself](#).

There is little doubt, for an industry committed to maintaining its clients' reputations, the PR industry could do with a little housekeeping itself.

As any layperson will tell you, the PR industry and the truth have never been perfect bedfellows. And who can blame the general public for being so cynical? The PR industry has always had a rather unique view of "the truth".

A HISTORY OF POST-TRUTH IN PR



In the harmless world of entertainment, PR teams have long fed journalists with salacious gossip and urban myths surrounding celebrity. The Hollywood studio system of movie stars was factory farmed by publicists and countless other celebrity careers have been built on the back of appearing at the right parties with the right people and the occasional “kiss and tell” story.

But PR isn't just about glitz and glamour. PR professionals have also fed the public “dodgy dossiers” and hidden numerous unpalatable truths using spin, deflection and (occasionally) outright lies to protect their paying clients' reputations and force through certain (equally unpalatable) agendas.

As the world of celebrity and politics collide (largely on social media), the influence and power yielded by PR professionals becomes more obvious to those tuned into the industry.

From “illegal” wars to celebrity sex scandals, corporate tax evasion and general sleaze - and let's not forget the huge swathes of misinformation and fear sold by both parties in the run up to Brexit - certain sections of the PR industry have lined their pockets by adjusting the public's perception of the truth.

With a reputation formed on this basis - it's easy to see why there is so little trust.



THIS IS FAKE: FIVE EXAMPLES OF WIDELY BELIEVED FAKE NEWS



1. Donald Trump Cancels Whitehouse Press Credentials: The Donald's relationship with the media is at best shaky, but recent reports published by TheLastLineofDefence.org and widely circulated on Facebook were completely false.

2. Man Charged for Driving Under The Influence of Coffee: OK, this sounds ridiculous but it was picked up by a number of "reputable" news sources who probably should have known better. Coffee lovers are free to chug a mug or two before getting behind the wheel.

3. Nutella Gives You Cancer: OK, the nut-based chocolate spread isn't exactly a health food but when eaten as part of a balanced diet, it won't give you cancer.

4. Rawhide Bones Are Toxic to Dogs: False health claims are a fairly common occurrence on the social web but it's not just humans that are targeted. A recent claim on Facebook that rawhide bones are toxic to dogs wasn't true.



5. Muslims Avoid Bedroom Tax: A rumour that sparked mass hysteria on Facebook after a number of far right groups suggested Muslims could avoid paying bedroom tax by declaring their spare rooms as prayer rooms. Islamophobic – yes. True – nope.

WHO DO YOU TRUST?



In the post-truth era, the general public are constantly being reminded who they can and cannot trust.

2016 was a year we were told not to trust experts, “facts” were pulled out of the air and already divided societies were further fragmented by religion, geography and class. In this post-truth era everything and everyone is at one extreme or the other with no middle ground (are you a “stupid racist” or part of the “liberal elite?”).

While it is possible to point accusing fingers at the PR industry for their role in creating this post-truth era, the media is far from blameless.

While PR delivered dodgy dossiers and painted misleading slogans on the sides of buses, the media largely got behind the stories and poured fuel on the fires of misinformation.



NO SUCH THING AS BAD PRESS



2016 was also a year when bad press didn't matter. Allegations of racism, sexual misconduct and cronyism which would have previously killed a career, were swept aside as "fake news" (even when reported by a reputable source) or just ignored while remaining in plain sight, while "PR attack dogs" looked to exploit the competition's (alleged) weaknesses – again not letting the facts get in the way of a good story.

**Yes I did say that.
I have never seen a
thin person drinking
Diet Coke.**



Perhaps, most worryingly, the news agenda can be manipulated by a single post on a social media account, bypassing communication departments and any editorial filters, reaching and influencing an audience beyond the scope of a traditional media outlet.

The post-truth era doesn't take prisoners. It's black and white. You're either with us or against us.

NEW YEAR, NEW FEAR



2017 will be the year the general public finally understands what “post-truth” actually means. Or will they?

Sadly, 2017 also promises to see the continued decline of the newspaper industry (particularly in the local and regional sectors). With print titles closing and sweeping editorial cuts in newsrooms, it’s hard to see who will hold the government, business and everyone else to account.



As “old school” publishing houses are swept away in the torrent of digital disruption, they are increasingly replaced by more socially-savvy, alternative media organisations, unregulated, unrepentant and able to reach millions of followers who want to believe their version of “the truth” without letting the facts get in the way of a good story.

We should never underestimate the power and influence of the new breed of social media news publishers because they have the power to bite back and are not afraid to bite the hands that feed them. This was clearly demonstrated when the alt-right news site Breitbart turned on its former advertiser Kellogg's and let social media [rip the brand apart](#), essentially leaving Kellogg's' PR team cowering in the corner.

SHARK INFESTED WATERS



Remember: As PR professionals we are swimming in the same waters as other media professionals (journalists) where trust is at an all-time low. A recent post on the Vuelio blog highlighted the fact that only 11 percent of the British public trusted journalists at mid-market newspapers and seven percent actively described journalists using derogatory language like “scum”.

It’s a pretty bleak picture and, let’s face facts (while we can still recognise them), it’s one the PR industry has helped create. It’s also a path that is completely unsustainable. If we travel too far down it, as PR professionals our reputations (along with the media) will be torn beyond credibility.

This isn’t a good place to be.

In times of decline, it is often possible to reinvent yourself. In this post-truth era the PR industry has the opportunity to re-define its role and build a better, more positive reputation for itself and the industry’s future.

Now is the time to change perceptions, build trust and raise the profile of the PR industry and in doing so create a new, more solid relationship with the truth.

This is because post-truth PR has a very limited lifespan.



NO FUTURE IN POST-TRUTH PR



Post-truth PR works in the here and now for two very specific reasons:

1. Disaffected (often angry) people will choose to believe any message if it promises to deliver a simple answer to their problems.
2. Largely unregulated social media channels make it very easy to distribute false truths to targeted audiences without the editorial and legal filters the traditional media must adhere to.

Post-truth PR will fail in the long term because:

1. Disaffected (often angry) people will change their opinions very quickly if promises are not kept and no solutions to their problems are forthcoming.
2. Largely unregulated social media channels (which employ large numbers of educated, liberal-minded professionals) do not want to tarnish themselves with the politics and reputation of the post truth era and will adapt their algorithms and business practices to filter out fake or misleading news.

NO FUTURE IN POST-TRUTH PR



Google and Facebook (amongst others) are actively working on weeding out fake, false and misleading content. This will essentially limit the platform for less than reliable news sources and actively highlight false, misleading and even illegal stories. The first step in this process is to cut off advertising revenues – [as previously reported on the Vuelio blog](#).

Google and Facebook's efforts to clean up the media landscape have not gone unnoticed by news publishers who blame the search and social media giants for the continued financial problems blighting traditional publishers. Even major news brands like The Daily Mail have [gone after the fact checkers](#), digging up dirt on individuals within organisations and highlighting political loyalties.

Note: While Google and Facebook say they will shoulder a lot of the responsibility for cleaning up the way news is reported online, they have a long way to go. Technology and algorithms are not infallible as clearly demonstrated by Facebook's [censoring of iconic news images](#) such as the photograph of nine-year old Phan Thi Kim Phuc (often referred to as the Napalm Girl) fleeing a US napalm attack during the Vietnam War.



5 RULES TO SURVIVING POST TRUTH PR



No PR pro or journalist wishes to have their content flagged as “false” or simply removed from the web because they have been economical with the truth – so perhaps now is the time to ensure we get our facts straight.

To help PR pros stay on the right side of the truth we’ve compiled the following 5 rules to surviving and thriving in the post truth era.

- 1. You Cannot Fake Authenticity:** You might get away with it for a while but as Jeremy Corbyn found out when he returned to his seat after filming a piece to camera sitting on the floor of a train, there are CCTV cameras everywhere ready to catch you out.
- 2. People will Forgive a Mistake Far Quicker than they will Forgive a Lie:** As long as you are seen to make amends and ensure that mistake doesn’t happen again, relationships can be saved and even made stronger.
- 3. Don’t Bury Your Head in the Sand:** Problems don’t go away by ignoring them. In fact in this social age, a spark can quickly set off a wildfire, so be sure to be on guard at all times and ready to react with the appropriate response. Be quick with the truth (see #2).
- 4. Stop Playing Games:** Some might argue Boris Johnson took a calculated risk in backing Brexit in the hope of becoming the next Prime Minister – it backfired and he lost the game.
- 5. Solve Problems, Don’t Spin Plates:** Real problems need real solutions. The problem with just spinning plates (as is common in the post-truth era) is you have to keep spinning but eventually one will fall, hit the ground and smash.

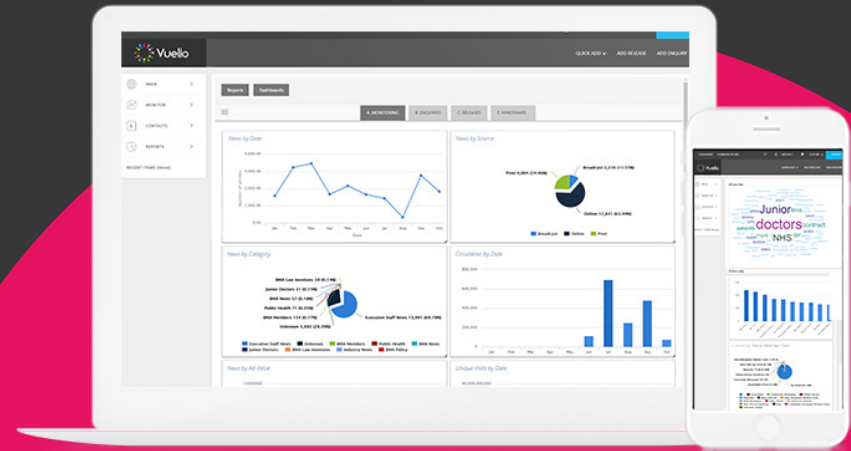
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