PLATFORMING PROGRESSIVISM

The role of media providers in and amongst social change

Ipsos

We are living through a moment of real social change. Following the tragic death of George Floyd, we have seen a re-evaluation of social norms taking place across society, manifested through a questioning of who and what we provide a platform to. Whether it's the removal of statues, Katie Hopkins' Twitter account, or comedy shows like Little Britain, we have seen strong action taken in the name of progressivism.

During times of mass demonstration and protest for social change, there is some expectation for brands to have a voice or take a stance. There is often a spotlight on media brands because they have the potential to reach and influence large audiences, and to help: raise awareness, develop empathy and understanding, educate and encourage debate. In doing so, they can be representors of a progressive society. This is a huge responsibility and their actions – or inaction – can have significant consequences.

Here, we explore media provider platforms' approaches to progressivism, the role media providers can play during social change, and the importance of understanding audiences.

What is progressivism and why is it important?

The nuts and bolts of 'progressivism' are that we can't all be individually responsible for the mistakes and actions of the past, but we can take collective action to learn from those mistakes, improve, and lead future generations into a fairer and more equal society for all.

We are currently seeing it manifested through the #MeToo and Black Lives Matter movements. The protests are a direct challenge to the status quo – raising awareness, asking for enduring allyship, calling out virtue signalling, and demanding action.

The role of a progressive platform provider

The sheer scale of recent movements has been astounding; and, in the face of that, we have seen several brands and organisations react. Some have acted introspectively reviewing their internal structures and processes, while others have acted outwardly with overt actions and mission statements.

For some brands it is difficult to communicate a message through the iconic mascots or products they have built. There is little expectation to hear Aunt Bessie's views on racial discrimination in the workplace, just as there is minimal appetite to hear what Mr Pringles thinks about the representation of trans people in broadcast media.

However, this is not the case for many media providers, who have the power to commission and deliver content that not only reflects culture, but can also influence and redirect it.

As people introspect on what they can learn and change, many look to media providers to help curate the debate and discussion to give them a balanced overview of the issues.

This places great responsibility in the

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hands of media and content providers. If they so choose, they can be the unbiased informer, the educator, or they can go further by providing stories that engender empathy or a feeling of being understood.

However, what is appropriate for one may not be appropriate for another. Before acting, it is imperative for media and content providers to truly understand their role and to consider the implications, both intended and unintended, of any action they may take. In doing so, it is integral to consult with audiences to get to the depths of their needs and content desires, as well as their expectations of the brand.

But if you do take action, what action should you take?

Over the past few years we have seen brands making statements, actions, and commitments reflecting the demands for greater social change, from the #MeToo movement, Pride initiatives, and most recently, the Black Lives Matter movement. Within the media environment, some of the actions we have seen include choosing to remove, review or provide warnings

alongside potentially outdated or offensive content that appears on their platforms. It is clear from the public reaction that there is an important debate to be had around which (if any) of these is best.

So, what are the options and considerations given the complexity of the issues at play?

1. The choice to de-platform

HBO Max, BBC iPlayer, Amazon Prime, Netflix, and Sky have all recently removed titles that they feel are no longer acceptable. This clearly signals to their audiences that these brands are striving to do better.

However, this option still inspires debate around whether we should merely accept that this is historical content and reflects the views of that time, or if de-platforming prevents society from learning and progressing, and fails to inform audiences about views that may no longer be acceptable.

In some cases, action to remove

content has been considered 'knee jerk' or criticised as 'attempting to virtue signal'. We have recently seen HBO Max remove **Gone with the Wind** from its US streaming service. HBO Max said the 1939 film was "a product of its time" and depicted "ethnic and racial prejudices [that] were wrong then and are wrong today", but there has been plenty of backlash against the decision and the film is still the highest grossing film of all time in the US. The scale of backlash had they instead retained the movie is of course unknown, but HBO has since acknowledged that the simple removal of the film might not be the best step forward, and it will return to the platform with a "discussion of its historical context".

This is a timely reminder that, despite the intention to support a cause, there is potential for social rejection, which itself can divert attention from the issue at hand.

2. The choice to amend or contextualise

As unprecedented amounts of content come under review, there are examples of where the appropriate action is

to amend or contextualise content. Audiences have praised Sky Cinema for applying warnings to the synopses of films. For instance, the synopsis for the hit **Aliens** now reads: **'This film has outdated attitudes, language and cultural depictions which may cause offence today. Sci-fi sequel starring Sigourney Weaver. Contains violence.'**

By providing disclaimers instead of de-platforming content you show that you are aware of the issues at play and give your audience the choice to consume considering that information. The argument for this approach is that to embrace change, we need to be clear on what exactly it is we are trying to change, rather than simply removing something from a platform because it could be deemed offensive.

A study by Ipsos in partnership with Ofcom provides evidence of audience backing for such measures. Participants thought that the various mitigating actions taken by broadcasters helped manage expectations, moderated the level of offence, and reduced the

likelihood of harm.

3. The choice to not act

Taking no action at all is of course an option that should be considered carefully. However, given the gravitas of these issues, we believe that there is a responsibility for brands to be proactively doing something.

We fully acknowledge that this choice is not simple and that there are many complex factors at play. The right decision for one media provider may not be appropriate for another, as expectations, audiences and influence can differ greatly across services.

Therefore, there is a real need to consult with audiences directly when making decisions around de-platforming content. Discursive engagement with the target audiences will provide a space to test and refine ideas. Consultation with audiences, facilitated by empathetic and culturally attuned researchers, will deliver insight driven justifications, authenticity and credibility for any decisions undertaken.

It is important to anticipate and prepare for progressive change

Modern activism can gain momentum in a short space of time. Although it is not easy to foresee which direction the winds of social change are blowing in, it is possible to prepare for it. By establishing an ongoing dialogue with audiences and keeping a close eye on cultural trends, you can begin to enact proactive measures towards platforming progressivism. In order to build ongoing relationships with consumers, brands need to gain an understanding on changing perspectives and societal influences, not just leverage newsworthy moments.

This is something that we are passionate about. We regularly draw upon our deep knowledge of social trends, cultural analysis and custom research, to get closer to audiences, understand them and build recommendations to support media decision making. If you would like to discuss any of these issues then please get in touch.

FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT

ABOUT THE TEAM

Joe is an experienced qualitative practitioner with a background in media and tech research. Joe has a passion for understanding people and their behaviours and motivations. Joe has a keen interest in how cultures are represented and specialises in helping his clients deliver this with authenticity, sensitivity, and accuracy.

Yas' qualitative career has seen her focus on harnessing culture to drive change and inform strategy for media, technology and youth brands. Yas has a particular interest in championing diversity and has won a Virginia Valentine Award for her work within this space.

Preeti has spent most of her career studying socio-cultural changes to help build resilient strategies for brands. She believes that the only way for brands to create meaningful campaigns is for them to understand the customers' cultural nuances and the impacts of these on society.

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At Ipsos we are passionately curious about people, markets, brands and society. We deliver information and analysis that make our complex world easier and faster to navigate and inspire our clients to make smarter decisions.

OUR MEDIA EXPERTS

We are a close-knit team of experts who work exclusively to help you understand the media and tech landscape.

Through our work we leverage our deep understanding of people, society, and culture to make sense of audiences and how they use technology and consume entertainment.

We work with integrated data sources and curated insights to contextualise your business challenges, so we are in the best position to help shape your strategy and ultimately create greater impact.