

The Power and the Cost of Influence

Phil Jump notes that a new emphasis on trust in advertising might benefit the churches

Influence, it seems, is an increasingly valuable and sought after commodity. Just speak to a successful YouTuber or TikTok creator, and you will quickly discover the eye-watering sums that are out there to be made – not from the hard graft of putting your material together, but from those short ads that get squeezed in between your presentations, most of which the content creator has no control or interest in. I still remember with some revulsion a particularly graphic advertisement for an earwax remover that regularly attached itself to my YouTube sermons during Covid lockdown!

But this is a two-sided reality, for the advertiser also has little interest in the content of the creator. The currency of this world are the likes, follows and subscribes that an influencer is able to muster – each one a potential customer with attention to be grabbed through the ubiquitous interruptions that the platforms create. The pace of its advent came home in my research for this article as I noted that writers in 2020 signalling “the influence economy is coming” had been superseded in just two years by those declaring that “the influence economy is here”.

Descriptions of this emerging phenomena are many and varied, but in short, they describe a number of shifts. Firstly, away from highly structured, expensive, mass media advertising channels to much more succinct and regular messaging promoted through a network of social media content


creators and bloggers. Even as I read the articles in question, I am bombarded by advertisements that represent in part what the algorithms already know about me (my age, health condition etc.), but they are subtly adjusted to include my new-found interest in marketing analysis.

And as we increasingly make our purchasing decisions based on the recommendations and preferences either from people we already relate to, or from fellow consumers rather than retailers, so has come a shift in advertisers vying for our attention to vying for our trust. This, in itself, raises some interesting questions for people of faith, as we consider whether religious leaders are those who might benefit from this re-emphasis on trust, or be lumped in with the plethora of defunct institutional channels that have become the objects of increasing suspicion and indifference.

But what has prompted me to write this article are the events that unfolded on my local streets in what has been a harrowing week for North Merseyside. The seaside town of Southport is just a few miles up the road from me, and mine has been one of the voices of faith leaders seeking to influence for good, the response and reactions of communities to the most dreadful and deranged act of violence against a children’s holiday dance club.

This heinous act is shocking enough, but the violence that has erupted on streets across the UK in its aftermath simply

adds to our sense of collective despair, and I should add, our resolve to speak out against it. Yet we have to acknowledge that the same market forces which seek to persuade online worshippers to engage in earwax removal have not only been used to corral and organise the street thugs who have invaded our community’s grief, but have generated the misinformation and fuelled the prejudice that motivates them. This of course is but one passing example, but it represents a disturbing, ongoing phenomena. The influence economy is one that some describe as “democratisation”, yet it is also one that funds a good deal of prejudice and misinformation, not so much through the adverts as the content that they fund.

In an arena where trust matters, we are perhaps also recognising the distinction between trust and trustworthiness. The former is a largely subjective reality that easily disintegrates into the echo chambers of personal preference that simply reinforce existing prejudices and divisions. And yes, marketing and social media platforms have their part to play in regulating these dangerous torrents of misinformation, but this is a world that we cannot simply avoid through control – we have to learn to live with it. We have to learn and teach others where trust truly belongs and in whom it should be invested. And as a people of faith, we need to ask what our responsibilities are in this rapidly changing marketplace. 



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