Fake news, gifs and hashtags: responding to a changing media landscape

Claire Forbes illustrates the challenges of communicating economic regulation

When economic regulators meet, conversation rarely strays to communication. The need to communicate is often seen as secondary to the detail of regulatory decisions. Concern about imprecision or misunderstanding means that documents can run to hundreds of pages, while news releases talk of complex financial penalties, rather than headline-friendly 'fines'.

At first glance, such caution seems appropriate. Popularity expressed by 'likes' or re-tweets is hardly the right indicator of success for independent regulators. Concepts such as RPI-X rarely enter public discourse while regulatory rulings encompass detail and complexity not typically delivered in 140 characters. Emojis may be described as the UK's fastest growing language (Ofcom, 2017: 25), but expressing policy through smiley faces risks imprecision and accusations of dumbing down.

Regulators are, of course, alert to changes in consumer behaviour and the impact on the markets that they regulate. Yet they may prefer to be detached observers, leaving engagement to their communications team. As consumer habits veer from boomerangs on Instagram to vloggers on YouTube, it can be hard to see the relevance of such channels for regulatory policy. Regulators may take comfort from the assumption that a regulated sector will engage with their latest announcements, however dense the document or arcane the language.

Yet this shifting media landscape cannot be the domain of the communications team alone. At Ofwat, the economic regulator for the English and Welsh water sector, journalists ring to ask for comment on our tweets, rather than the actual policy or decision that they promote. Parliamentarians tweet us to ask about investment in regulatory assets. Our social media content is shared in minutes across the world by individuals whose personal interest in water ranges from birthing pools to ice rinks and allotments.

Three trends in particular highlight the need for a more sophisticated regulatory approach to communication. The first is falling trust in institutions, a decline that is well documented (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2017). Reuters Institute's Digital News Report (2017) shows that fewer than half of people trust the news they read. Trust has been replaced by emotional responses, where news is 'liked' rather than believed (Beckett and Deuze, 2016). Instead of relying on an editor's judgement, people are more likely to trust news which is recommended to them by their social networks, friends and family.

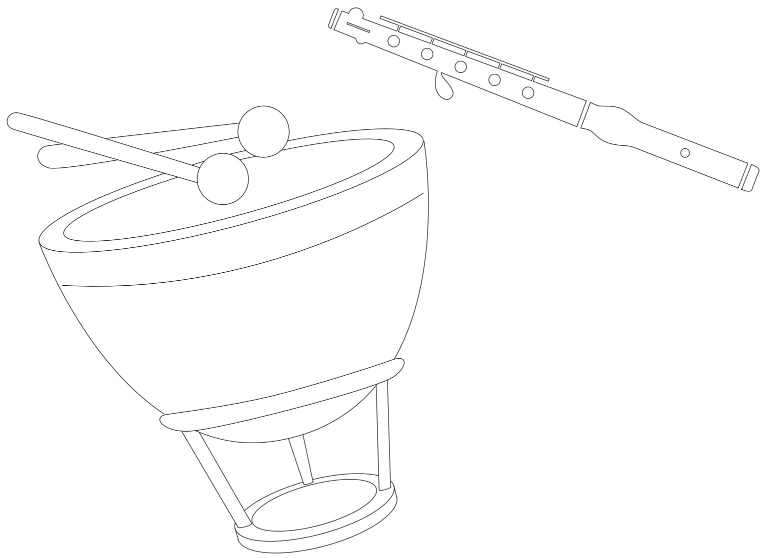
As trust in news media declines, traditional channels used by regulators to communicate become less relevant. Most broadsheet newspapers – the long-preferred outlet for regulatory news releases – use online paywalls, making content less accessible. Models of news are changing: the Huffington Post, one of the most popular websites in the UK, is a blogging platform.

Consumers – particularly younger ones – are increasingly getting their news from social media and research shows they trust these channels even less (Reuters, 2017). Technology lowers barriers to influence and anyone with a phone can generate debate online. The speed at which news spreads – fake or otherwise – means that timeliness becomes all important. An internet minute represents millions of posts, pictures and messages. The spread of rumour or alarm across social media networks about bills or company performance can leave regulators struggling to respond swiftly in a way that is both empathetic to emotion and accurate in detail.

The second trend is in how people are accessing media. The growth of mobile technology makes interaction with news and information more fleeting and more intimate. People are more likely to access news and information in bed than sitting at their desk. The growth in the use of apps for lifestyle transactions such as ordering food or booking transport means that websites are no longer the first port of call. And while regulators are not yet using Facebook or Instagram for communication, these channels are being subsumed by more private newsgroups, such as Whatsapp, where content is more reliant on recommendations than on algorithms.

The third trend for regulators to consider is in content. Moving, animated and easy to understand content, which communicates without the need for sound, is now the norm. The traditional distinction between business to business and business to consumer communication is blurring, as short form content prevails across all channels. Short form content – tweets, infographics, gifs and videos – is not only for consumers and can be well received by time-poor stakeholders as a portal into more complex material.

Stories makes content memorable and relatable. Personality – conveyed through tone or image – enhances the authenticity of the message and its relevance to the audience. Senior staff



in regulators may shy away from being 'Instafamous', but use of real people, their names and faces, can drive relevance and impact. Stories resonate more than facts – a water company working to fix a burst is fact, but a picture and story of the engineer who is working hard on Saturday night to restore supplies gets more response.

These are challenges for regulators more comfortable with the language of licences and codes. Social media opens up a new range of demand-side tools for regulators to connect with consumers directly and access to influencers who may be more powerful than regulators and the companies they regulate. To utilize these tools, regulators need to emulate the creative language of brands, incorporating campaign planning, storytelling, visual communication and personality. A creative approach to expressing regulatory complexity can help relate decisions back to consumers' experience, making regulation more relevant and accessible.

To achieve this, there is a need for new collaborations within regulators, among communications, legal and economics teams. At Ofwat, our communications team works alongside economists to plan campaigns, using our 'Taste, Snack, Feast' model, which enables the audience to access content most suited to their levels of interest and expertise. In our recent campaign, promoting our price review methodology, the main headlines were explained via 'Taste' – mere morsels of content, presented graphically. The opportunity to 'Snack' on more detail came via videos and short summaries online, while the most engaged audiences were able to 'Feast' on the full repertoire of our methodology documentation. Crucially, 'Taste, Snack, Feast' is not an exercise in editing, but rather a portal into different expressions of a single narrative.

The number and variety of channels provide a repertoire of choice for regulatory interventions. These range from a nudging tweet to a multi-channel campaign, produced in-house, with real time metrics allowing us to adjust and adapt our approach according to reach and response. When we see and hear companies reusing our hashtags and straplines we know we are changing the lexicon for the sector in a way that will filter through to customers.

We plan Ofwat's social media from an editorial perspective, taking our cue from a journalistic, rather than regulatory approach. This allows us to utilize a range of styles across planned campaigns, ranging from #greatplacetowork to #ofwatconsults. Members of our senior team have their own social media accounts, giving us a range of regulatory voices, including the authority of @OfwatChair and other, more informal reflections on daily life at Ofwat.

We follow the social media channels of each of the companies we regulate and what we see can support or belie the formal regulatory responses we receive. Social media listening contributes to market intelligence, shedding light on what consumers are talking about and how they feel about it. Twitter, YouTube, Facebook and Instagram can expand regulators' networks in new and unexpected directions, providing exposure to fresh ideas and the potential and power of influencers. Here the language of emojis prevails; a language that regulators need to hear and understand.

This type of communication is not secondary to regulatory activity, but a tool to be used to drive customers' engagement in competitive or monopoly markets. Creativity, personality and regulatory communication can work together to make the complex accessible and the technical relevant. YouTube will have more influence on the demand side than the Financial Times. For regulators, this is no longer a set of trends to be observed from afar, but part of what economic regulation is and needs to be.

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