



What's Hot?!

March 2026



Does 'Shock Jock' Advertising Still Work?

It's the economy, stupid. The timeless words of James Carville, master political strategist, coined during the 1992 presidential campaign, are often repeated today. Why did Donald Trump return to the White House? It [was the economy](#), stupid. Why is his party now behind in the polls? It's [the economy](#), stupid. Why is the current UK Government so unpopular? You [get the gist](#).

If advertising had its own equivalent phrase, it would be 'It's attention, stupid'. For all the changes over the past fifty years, as media time fragments and new platforms spring up faster than you can say 'disruption', the core goal of campaigns remains: maximise views of your ad, and make the message compelling enough that people don't want to look away.

When people lose interest in an ad [after 1.3 seconds](#), and [half of ads](#) register no emotional response, it's little surprise many brands turn to shock-jock advertising to gain an advantage in the attention war.

So-called 'shockvertising' was back in the headlines recently after online healthcare brand Voy launched a [provocative campaign](#) about male hormones. Though the ads were criticised by some as misogynistic, the ASA, after receiving 33 complaints, chose not to investigate. Voy, seemingly defiant, suggested the campaign was the first of many aiming to 'bring awareness to typically stigmatised' topics.

The late Oliviero Toscani, legendary art director of Benetton, made such awareness [a hallmark](#) of the Italian fashion brand's campaigns in the '90s. From depictions of HIV-positive subjects to an interracial lesbian couple, Benetton's campaigns were often devoid of products, prone to controversy – and highly successful.

What is notable about the Benetton campaigns is how non-controversial many of them feel today. So too the Yves Saint Laurent poster depicting a naked Sophie Dahl, [at the time](#) one of the most complained about ever. What is shocking in one era can feel distinctly ordinary in the next, as cultural taboos shift.

Indeed, taking ASA complaints as an imperfect metric, the most shocking are often those which simply grind people's gears, like a 2005 KFC Zinger ad which broke [complaint records](#), but not rules. What shocks consumers is often not the depiction of a controversial subject, but something brash enough to make them look up from their dinner with disgust. Enough to capture attention, for better or worse.

At least, that used to be the case. In today's online landscape, the average social media user scrolls past a myriad of shocking posts every day. The disgust that once accompanied Benetton's [depiction](#) of world leaders kissing is nonexistent in a world where AI generates a million such images daily.

Shock-jock advertising can still have a powerful impact when executed correctly. Charities have long since deployed the tactic to draw attention to a cause, such as CALM's award-winning '[Last Photo](#)' campaign – although research suggests even charities are [using it less](#). Elsewhere, brands have often combined shockvertising with humour to drive cultural saliency. Doing so, however, requires the topics to be appropriate and the jokes to be funny. [Numan's](#) attempt worked well. [Brewdog's](#) did not.

Undoubtedly, shockvertising lives on, but its ability to – and the topics which – shock will be fluid. In an era of infinite obscenity, provocation is no longer a shortcut for originality. It's about attention, stupid, but it also has to be good.



Navigating Trust in Manosphere-Muddied Waters

Documentarian Louis Theroux's latest community deep dive took viewers to the frontlines of the manosphere, an online world where machismo reigns supreme, racism, homophobia and sexism are worn as badges of honour, while double standards of sexuality and lifestyle between men and women are deeply entrenched.

The hotly anticipated documentary arrived on Netflix to [mixed reviews](#), with many reflecting on the impact this culture and its prevalence have on women and minority groups, and others exclaiming shock that this world exists at all.

While the focus has understandably been on the impact of such regressive behaviours upon society, their impact on the world of advertising cannot be understated. Theroux acknowledges early on that the manosphere is a broad term that also encompasses relatively harmless fitness content and more mainstream celebrities, but its darkest corners—those on show in the documentary—still rack up billions of views. From afar, its most popular figures are not dissimilar to ordinary content creators, all carefully cultivating a selective narrative to broadcast to fans seeking escapism from their own realities.

That such blurred lines exist is problematic for the influencer economy. Trust is an essential element of influencer marketing, brand partnerships and sponsored content. Audiences enter into an unwritten contract with content creators, trusting that they genuinely believe in the products they endorse. When this contract is breached, when manipulative creators like those on the fringes of the manosphere are caught peddling scams, it in turn challenges the credibility of the millions of ethical content creators who brands recruit every day to promote their products.

As Theroux showed, many manosphere influencers openly promote risky investments and cryptocurrencies that do not reap the promised rewards. Even though legitimate financial brands would never consider advertising through such influencers, these scams may muddy the waters if audiences become sceptical and scared of being burned by false promises. Without trusted voices, the entire social landscape risks becoming inhospitable.

That is why trust has never been more essential in advertising, particularly for social and influencer-led campaigns. Brand partnerships with influencers remain an incredible way of gaining cultural relevance and dedicated attention from communities that will purchase products promoted by the creators they love. But it is essential that this contract remains unbroken. As scepticism grows around ulterior motives, expect increasing demand for creators who build long-term trust through authenticity.

For brands, this highlights the benefits of investing in communities where trust remains strong. By choosing smart and impactful influencers who reflect brand values at heart, and by prioritising considered, long-term investment over immediate financial gains, brands can navigate the muddied waters of the manosphere.



Harnessing Cultural Change: Insights from a Decade of Consumer Tracking

Is 2026 the new 2016? Many TikTok users think so. Since January, there have been over [55 million](#) posts on the social media platform reliving and comparing life in 2016 to now. A decade on, that comparison is understandable. From major political events including the rise of Donald Trump and the Brexit referendum, to cultural hallmarks such as the debut of *Stranger Things* and the 5,000/1 outsiders Leicester City winning the Premier League, 2016 certainly feels – with the benefit of hindsight – like a year when *a lot* happened.

For the7stars, this also marked a milestone. Fuelled by evolving consumer sentiment in the lead-up to the EU referendum, we launched the7stars quarterly tracker, the QT. Each quarter, we poll a nationally representative sample of 2,000 UK adults on their happiness levels, attitudes towards income, confidence in institutions and propensity to spend across categories, alongside a range of contextual questions each period.

Through our tracking, we successfully predicted the Leave victory in that vote, and ever since have closely monitored consumer reaction to the ever-changing economic landscape. Using ten years of longitudinal data to predict Brits' behaviour in 2026, it's clear that while much has changed in that time, the role of brands in our society is as clear as ever.

While trust in brands has ebbed and flowed over that time, Brits continue to express net positive sentiment towards brands. This stands in sharp contrast to formal institutions: since 2016, there has been a marked decline of over 20 percentage points in the confidence the British public has in the state. Alongside this, while overall financial comfort has remained relatively flat in that time – with more Brits continuing to feel worse about their income than those who feel better off – there has been a homogenisation of attitudes, such that the gap between low- and medium-income households has narrowed.

For all the macro changes, brands remain a constant in our lives. This helps to explain why, since 2016, there have been double-digit percentage point increases in Brits' identification with a range of community types – with everything from sports teams to ethnic, religious and sexual identities growing in importance. In an increasingly unstable geopolitical landscape, consumers are seeking constants to provide escapism.

For brands to bridge this gap, they must show up in culture with intent, prioritising brand acts over brand ads. The good news is that through emerging tech, social platforms, and immersive events, there have never been more opportunities for brands to join the conversation. But doing so will require a test-and-learn mentality and, above all, bravery in handing over some control to audiences. The things that resonate and the places brands fit can and will surprise.

Harnessing the past decade of cultural change and showing up in culture need not be a daunting prospect. In fact, it's okay to be lighthearted. In trying times, people are turning to communities to provide light relief from the world around them. So, keep it simple, test the waters, and don't be afraid to loosen the reins – in 10 years' time we'll all look back fondly on it anyway.



What Next for Social Media as MPs Reject Ban

Since Australia became the first nation in the world to ban social media for under-16s in December, the question on everyone's lips has been: will the UK be next?

This month, an affirmative answer to that question became less likely. Westminster MPs [rejected](#) an amendment to institute an Australia-style ban in the UK by a vote of 307 to 173. This margin, while large, suggests the debate will rage on. Indeed, the proposal has attracted the support of large swathes of the Westminster establishment, including the House of Lords and the opposition Conservatives.

While the intention of the proposed ban – reducing children's exposure to potential harms online – is universally supported, many on both sides of the debate have suggested that a ban would be ineffective. Tech firms have opposed the ban on [multiple fronts](#), including free speech grounds, and have argued that banning social media could increase social isolation. On the other hand, some academics have suggested that banning social media [is ineffective](#) because teens will always find workarounds.

Recent reporting from Reuters suggests the Australian ban has had [mixed success](#). While social media usage fell among 13-to-15-year-olds, one-fifth were still accessing TikTok and Snapchat. VPN downloads increased as the ban was implemented, though have stabilised since.

As regulators waded through uncharted territory down under, the UK may have parked a proposed ban for now, but ministers have been granted new powers to restrict social media features. From this has emerged greater scrutiny of how platforms are designed to keep British youth engaged for hours every day. Ofcom has given social media companies until the end of April to share information on how they are curbing online harm. Additionally, the government [has launched](#) a three-month pilot involving 150 children to trial new ways to reduce screen time.

All of this will have significant implications for UK advertisers. While most do not advertise directly to children, the legislation resulting from the government's ongoing consultation will directly impact all social media users. Should stricter measures be imposed on tech platforms to curb excessive screen time, the inventory available to brands may be reduced. The rules of the attention economy may need to be rewritten.

As the FT [reported](#) last year, by some metrics the world may have already reached peak social media. While that claim is debatable, should the algorithms be forced to change to reduce infinite scrolling, consumers' attention will likely shift elsewhere. Consider the IPA's [Touchpoints data](#): for all the fragmentation of media habits, our daily time spent with media has barely changed (lockdown excluded) in two decades. If one channel loses out, another stands to gain – though which one remains unknown.

While an immediate ban appears unlikely, brands could benefit from early scenario planning in the event of platform changes. By prioritising 'conscious' media time where consumers actively engage, including high-attention social media environments, brands can safeguard against future shocks. Social media will continue to play an essential role in the media toolkit, but as always, diversification of channel spend is key.



BBC Launches YouTube Content Partnership

The BBC [has announced](#) a landmark new content partnership with YouTube, marking a significant shift in how the British public broadcaster reaches global audiences. Under the deal, the BBC will create programmes specifically for YouTube's video platform that are aimed at digital-native viewers, particularly younger audiences who increasingly consume news and entertainment online. These YouTube-first shows will also be made available on the BBC's own services, such as iPlayer and Sounds.

This move reflects the BBC's efforts to adapt to changing media habits, as traditional broadcast audiences fragment, and online platforms become central to how people discover and engage with content. For the BBC, it's a chance to expand international reach, innovate with new formats, and potentially generate extra revenue where adverts are shown outside the UK.

Critics and commentators say the partnership underscores broader trends in the media landscape, where legacy broadcasters are partnering with tech platforms to remain relevant in an era of digital disruption.

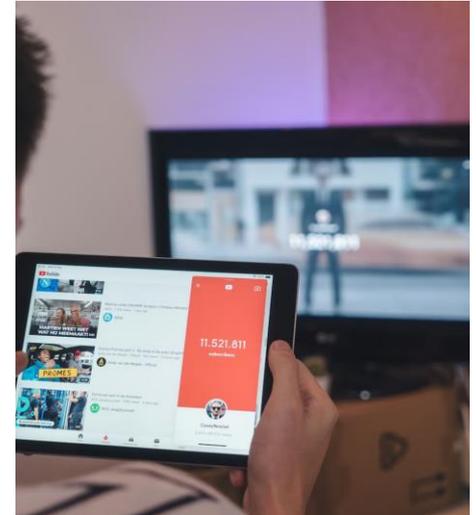


HBO Max to Launch in UK

Sky and Warner Bros. have announced that HBO Max will launch in the UK and Ireland on the 26th March. Launching with pricing tiers between £4.99 and £14.99 a month, the move is the latest in a series of shakeups to an increasingly crowded market. In challenging its streaming rivals, the media giants are hoping that the HBO brand, a household name in the United States, is strong enough this side of the Atlantic to attract interest.

Alongside the launch, Sky has unveiled a new bundle which groups Sky, HBO Max, Disney+, Netflix, and Hayu for £24 a month – highlighting a shift in how broadcasters position their services alongside streamers.

Notably, the move comes as Warner Bros. Discovery and Paramount prepare to merge, the latter of which [has announced](#) plans to merge Paramount+ and HBO Max into a single streaming service. The implications for the UK launch remain unclear.



YouTube Pulls Out of Barb Ratings

Google [has sent](#) cease and desist letters to Barb, less than a year after the UK's industry currency for television launched a world's first measurement of YouTube viewing figures on the big screen. As part of the initiative, Barb reported on 200 of the most-watched YouTube channels in its regular reporting, including Peppa Pig, WWE and MrBeast. However, Google has now blocked this, citing a breach of its terms of service.

The move was swiftly criticised by industry bodies, including ISBA and Thinkbox, who suggested that YouTube was avoiding transparency. In recent years, there has been fierce debate between the parties over whether YouTube constitutes the new TV. Thinkbox's Lindsey Clay has previously [stated](#) that, 'TV is on YouTube, but YouTube isn't TV'.

According to Barb's own figures, the reach of YouTube in the UK recently overtook the BBC's combined portfolio for the first time, having already surpassed ITV.