
Can we trust the public with decisions?

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Any survey worth its salt will clearly illustrate the current mindset of people worldwide. There is a growing distrust of governments and companies that is manifested in our reality from electoral swings (Trump) to unforeseen referendum outcomes (Brexit).

It suggests that the previous status quo is no longer acceptable and that a vote for potential disaster is preferable to a vote for more of the same. Despite the consequence of these decisions playing out in our world and across our television screens there are those who still believe a sense of comradeship and loyalty exists between the institutions they represent and the man in the street. Those that choose to test this theory in social media are being given a grim reality check by people no longer willing to blindly adopt their expected roles in these most public of dialogues. If anything, it seems that trolling has become a team sport.

While the occurrence of the rogue hashtag and a satirical sense of humour maybe as old as social media itself, direction has certainly been given by high profile social commentators. Stephen Colbert, host of *The Late Show*, may have provided the initial impetus to an audience all too keen to flout convention.

In 2009 when NASA announced a poll to name a new International Space Station module, Stephen was unimpressed by the name choices offered by the pioneering space agency. Along with mocking the NASA suggestion on *The Colbert Report*, saying, "Come on, *Serenity*? That's not a space module, that's a Glade plug-in.", he kindly offered his own name as an alternative. The write-in name "Colbert" topped the poll with 230,539 votes. Almost 1.2 million total votes were cast in the contest. "Colbert" received more than 40,000 more voters than the second-place runner up, "*Serenity*", which was one of the choices NASA put forward.

Predictably NASA did not use the showman's surname. In a bid to undo this seemingly unfortunate outcome, they referred to rules which stated that NASA has the right to choose a name "in accordance with the best interests of the agency." The rules also say, "Such name may not necessarily be one which is on the list of voted-on candidate names."

So, *Serenity* it was. A name far more fitting with the other modules named *Unity*, *Harmony*, and *Destiny*. Still a sense of justice and good humour prevailed when in 2009 NASA engineered a new treadmill for the International Space Station and renamed it the "Combined Operational Load-Bearing External Resistance Treadmill", or COLBERT. Despite being a backronym, the COLBERT is the only piece of NASA-engineered equipment in space that is named after a living human being.

NASA may have avoided a tricky social media mishap but then the name Colbert is certainly not inflammatory. Far worse mistakes have been made by brands or institutions who have allowed an element of free speech to a public clearly unwilling to toe the line.

In 2012 McDonalds launched a Twitter campaign using the hashtag #McDStories; it was hoping that the hashtag would inform their customers around their treatment of farmers and illicit heart-warming stories about special moments. The hashtag became the grounding point for many who apparently weren't lovin' it. "One time I walked into McDonalds and I could smell Type 2 diabetes floating in the air and I threw up. #McDStories (via Twitter)" and "#McDStories I lost 50lbs in 6 months after I quit working and eating at McDonald's (via The Daily Mail)" seemed to make up a large portion on the menu of replies.

In the UK, two campaigns suffered a similar fate almost concurrently, The National Lottery ran a Twitter campaign to thank athletics supporters mere months after a Walkers Crisps online campaign had already gone disastrously awry. Walkers invited the public to send in selfies to be held up in a tweet by ambassador Gary Lineker, only for mischievous users to send in photos of criminals and despots instead.

The National Lottery introduced a campaign that was supposed to work by re-tweeting the Lottery's post which would lead to an athlete showing a Twitter profile username - leading to some people changing them to offensive names or slogans. Both campaigns appear to have been naïve enough to have set up an automated system to upload the name cards, meaning it was unable to filter out the rude entries.

Finally, the most celebrated public contribution to date. When the British public was allowed to contribute suggestions for the naming of a new polar expedition vehicle in 2017 a whole new class of nomenclature was born. After a BBC radio presenter James Hand jokingly suggested Boaty McBoatface, the dye was cast.

A website inviting name suggestions attracted huge interest, with Boaty McBoatface the runaway favourite. While the polar ship itself will not be named Boaty McBoatface (they chose Sir Richard Attenborough instead), one of its remotely operated sub-sea vehicles will be named Boaty in recognition of the vote. The results of the poll inspired similar results in other naming polls with the subsequent creation of; Horsey McHorseface, Trainy McTrainface, Mega McMegaface, and Floaty McFloatface. One can justifiably assume that more Namey McNamefaces are yet to appear.