

The Debating Group



A Parliamentary forum for Media and Marketing Debate

Is wearable technology an ethical nightmare for PR, marketing and communications professionals?

“Wearable technology in its current form today is not an ethical nightmare, but believe me when I say this is about to change considerably”. These were the words of Stephen Davies, Substantial Digital Health, proposing the motion ‘Wearable technology is an ethical nightmare for PR, marketing and communications professionals’ at the Debating Group debate at the House of Commons on 7 July 2014. The debate was sponsored by The Chartered Institute of Public Relations and, in the absence of Lord Clement-Jones, chaired by Alistair McCapra.

Stephen Davies pointed out that, as everyone is aware, wearable technology – ‘the internet of things’ - is a new phenomenon and we are very much in the first generation of the genre. It is very like personal computing was in the 1980s - the application is still niche and the technology is not yet quite there, but we just know we are on to something game-changing and big.

Wearable technology as it stands today is fairly harmless. The data collected by today’s popular wearable devices such as the Fitbit, Jawbone UP, Nike Fuelband and the raft of other activity trackers on the market today provide basic biometric data that are only useful to the user. But even now we are beginning to witness a backlash against some wearable technologies, most notably Google’s head-mounted wearable Google Glass. This is increasingly being used in a business setting. Virgin Atlantic, for example, has been trialling it in the upper class lounge where staff can discover a variety of information about customers before they have even spoken. In some cases wearers of Glass have been physically attacked and verbally abused on the street and labelled ‘glassholes’. The very idea that someone is recording and looking up information on you as they are facing you is, understandably, unappealing to some. But at least with Glass it is blatantly obvious that the user is wearing it. But what if the same technology was applied to something like a contact lens with all the functionality of Glass but invisible to everyone but the wearer? What are the implications when someone can not only record you and look up information on you using facial recognition, but also analyse your skin tones for changes in blood flow to know when you are feeling under pressure, or indeed lying?

A number of research laboratories and universities are developing a bionic contact lens that does this very thing and more. Using a combination of nanotechnology and sensor innovation these bionic contact lens are already in the prototype stage and will be with us soon. Consider the implications when your client or CEO or any other important stakeholder can be scrutinised in such a manner and, of course, unknowingly. But it is predicted that the term ‘wearables’ will soon become obsolete as we move from technology that you wear on the human body to technology that you implant in the human body. This has been aptly named ‘implantables’ and once again throws up a number of ethical implications for the communications industry.

This research has wonderful benefits. A woman called Joanne Milne was born deaf, but thanks to the amazing wonders of technology she can now hear through cochlear implants inserted into the back of her head. At the opening of this year's World Cup the paraplegic, Juliano Pinto, who is paralysed from the waist down, kicked a football using an exoskeleton connected to the neurons in his brain. He just had to think about kicking the ball and the technology registered the brain activity, activating the robot exoskeleton to move.

Implantables are set to become a technology not just for people with a disability, such as a hearing or vision impairment, but to enable able-bodied people to have superhuman-like abilities. Stephen Davies quoted from an article in the *Wall Street Journal* in March this year 'The future of brain implants':

"What would you give for a retinal chip that let you see in the dark or for a next-generation cochlear implant that let you hear any conversation in a noisy restaurant, no matter how loud? Or for a memory chip, wired directly into your brain's hippocampus, that gave you perfect recall of everything you read? Or for an implanted interface with the Internet that automatically translated a clearly articulated silent thought into an online search that digested the relevant Wikipedia page and projected a summary directly into your brain? Science fiction? Perhaps not for very much longer. Brain implants today are where laser eye surgery was several decades ago".

Stephen Davies questioned the implications for the communications industry when any individual can hear a conversation across a crowded room. Or have sight that can zoom in on things that are far away. He pointed out that if we think social media has opened up the floodgates to an 'always-on' society over the last ten years, invisible yet ubiquitous wearable (and implantable) technologies are likely to increase this tenfold as some are built around cameras and geolocation data.

A Gartner report recently estimated that wearables will propel a huge surge in the amount of data people share through apps. This is the data dilemma. As IBM has pointed out we are in the era of big data and have created more data over the last two years than we have since the beginning of time. Big data come from numerous sources but increasingly we will see streams of data also coming from individuals. Personal data or 'people analytics' will throw up numerous problems for the communications industry, particularly around privacy and the new era of individualised advertising. Wearable technology is going to be a boon for consumers. It will give them access to all sorts of information about themselves that will help them make better health and general life decisions. Imagine having technology that knows and understands more about your body than you do – that can anticipate when you are fatigued, stressed or dehydrated; that can tell you what foods agree with your body and at what nearby restaurant you may want to eat. Technology built into company ID badges, to smartphones, to smart watches or to smart jewellery will include environmental sensors which will provide reams of fine-grained data on interaction patterns, motion and location, among other things. By combining precise data from real and virtual worlds, consumers will understand their own behaviour at a previously unimaginable scale. The era of personalisation will truly be on us as technology will dictate what we want and when we want it. This is perfect for advertising as Near Field Communication technology will match an individual's biometric data with display ads built on that data. For instance we often do not know we are dehydrated. The technology that is monitoring you knows when your hydration levels are low and sends your biometric data over to a nearby display ad via Near Field Communication which displays informational ads for the nearest place to buy water. In the 2002 Spielberg film *Minority Report* this was indeed a feature as Tom Cruise's character walks through a futuristic shopping mall.

Facial recognition billboards are currently being developed by Japanese tech company NEC. These billboards will theoretically be able to recognise passers-by via facial recognition, call them by name and deliver customer specific advertisements. IBM is developing similar billboards which can deliver customised adverts to individuals who carry identity tags most likely embedded in wearable devices. IBM feels this will not be intrusive as the billboards will only advertise products in which a customer is interested.

In this era of ultra-personalisation, where does PR fit in? Stephen Davies believes it does not. People analytics are too individualistic, too niche and do not fit into the PR model – even the post-social media PR model. Data sets of people analytics will be a prize that PR people will look to gain in unscrupulous ways, much as they did with email lists in the early 2000s so that they could mass-mail (or spam) journalists with press releases.

Stephen Davies concluded by suggesting that wearables will create a paranoid society where every event is noted, where every conversation is heard and where corporate reputations will be ruined. The personalised data revolution will eradicate the need for PR in its current form as algorithms and smart advertising cater to the individual's every need. "The coming years are not only going to be an ethical nightmare for the profession, but one where the industry questions its place in the world".

Ethics

Opposing the motion, **Stephen Waddington, President of the Chartered Institute of Public Relations and European Digital and Social Media Director, Ketchum**, quoted statistics for the new industry. Management consultant Deloitte predicts that the combination of smart glasses and fitness bands will sell 10 million units in 2014, generating \$3 billion. Canals reports that the market will grow to 23 million units by 2015, and more than 45 million units by 2017.

Stephen Waddington believes that the public relations business has been slow to adopt new technology in the past. It was late to recognise the opportunity offered by blogs, branded forms of media, and more recently social media. He suggested that it has been an awakening for the PR business and he urged practitioners not to miss the huge opportunity that wearable technology offers as a force for good and means to advance professional practice. He argued that wearable technology provides significant potential for the relationship between citizens, organisations, stakeholders and the state. He also argued that we must view wearable technology simply as a new iteration of technology and that the industry's existing ethical frameworks provide adequate protection.

Stephen Waddington described a wrist device he has been wearing which tracks his movements during the day. This very basic feedback loop has resulted in an increase of his physical activity and better management of his diet. Exercise has resulted in weight loss and improvements in sleep, blood pressure and mental health. As human beings we typically know our age, height and weight. Wearable technology improves transparency in the patient/physician relationship. This technology has the potential to change our lifestyle decisions radically, reducing rates of diabetes and heart disease. It calls us to personal account. It is not an ethical issue, but it may be a solution to improving the health of a nation and relieving the pressure on our overburdened health service.

Brits are monitored and tracked more than the citizens of any other country. Our daily movements around our towns and cities are recorded by both private and state CCTV cameras. We have accepted this as a norm. The technology to record or track has been available for several decades. It is not the stuff of Q in the James Bond movies. It is available to anybody via eBay or Amazon. This is the story of the miniaturisation of electronics that has adhered to Moore's Law over the history of computing, doubling in processing power every two years. Cameras have been embedded into tie pins, watches and pens. Audio recording equipment fits into a match box or USB drive. The key ring in front of Stephen Waddington cost him £20. It is able to record audio and video. It could have recorded every moment of this debate. It would take seconds to upload and share the content via the web. This is no different from the function of Google Glass. This technology has been available since the 1980s and has not required us to reinvent our ethical frameworks. Faster cars do not demand a rewrite of the Highway Code.

Stephen Waddington pointed out that as a public relations practitioner he has signed up to a Code of Conduct set out by the CIPR. This calls on him to maintain the highest standards of professional endeavour, integrity, confidentiality, financial propriety and personal content. It also states that he must deal fairly in business with employers, employees, clients, fellow professionals, other professions and the public. These two principles, along with others, adequately cover the issues that

we face from wearable technology, as they have with prior generations of technology. They have provided a framework for professional practice for the last 20 years of his career and he is confident that they will see him good for the next 20 years. The proposers in this debate are right to call for ethical considerations of wearable technology but he argued that existing frameworks are sufficient. The issue that we should be tackling is the public relations and marketing practitioners who have not signed up to a professional Code of Conduct. The only way is ethics.

Stephen Waddington believes that traditional forms of marketing are starting to feel dumb and stale. We are bombarded with around 3,000 brand messages a day. Most are ignored. Those that do resonate will usually be rooted in an insight based on a truth, and typically a higher order human need. He thinks of the social web as the biggest market research exercise that no one commissioned. It can be incredibly valuable to brands that are prepared to plug into the conversations that are taking place around their market, organisation or product. Relationships rely on an exchange of information. Marketing practitioners view that relationship as one-way whereas PR practitioners view it as a two-way dialogue that starts with listening. Consumers are prepared to sign up to a more personal relationship with a brand providing that they receive sufficient benefit. The currency for the brand is data and the pay-off for the individual must typically satisfy a physical or emotional need. We share our data via apps and social networks in return for services. Smart brands such as Apple, Disney and Nike have spotted that wearable technologies are a conduit for this relationship. Trust is critical to this relationship remaining healthy. If the brand oversteps what an individual deems to be acceptable the relationship will break down. This is part of the much larger narrative around open and transparent brand and organisational communication.

Stephen Waddington cited *The Cluetrain Manifesto* by Doc Searls and other which in 1999 taught us that markets are people and that the Internet enables us to connect and form networks. In *Brand Anarchy* published in 2012, he and Steve Earl describe how this can be used for good and bad in the engagement between citizens, brands and the state. Anarchy was a bid to grab headlines and snare reviews, but it is also the reality for organisations that fail to engage with their market and take proper care over how they record and share personal data. Facebook and Google have discovered this to their cost in the very recent past. Changes to services and terms and conditions are scrutinised by markets. Customers use social forms of media to complain noisily and then vote with their feet. Stephen Waddington's view is that the market polices itself. He urged the industry to recognise the opportunity of the fast-growing \$3 billion wearable technology market and realise that this is not a new ethical challenge for the PR profession. It is a force for good for improving health. It is a means of improving the dialogue between citizen, organisation, stakeholder, or state. He concluded "...vote for innovation. Vote for citizens. Vote for the market. Vote that our Codes of Conduct are robust. Vote against this motion. The only way is ethics".

Inflated expectations

Seconding the motion, **Neville Hobson, Neville Hobson.com**, reported that he had asked ten people on his social networks on Twitter, Google+ and Facebook what they thought about wearable technology, with mixed responses. 80% said wearable technology will be hugely beneficial to people in their daily lives; 30% felt it will promote even more divide between information haves and have-nots (or between those with money and those with not enough); 50% thought that wearable technology is still years away from being mainstream, moving out of the early-adopter and experimenter niches like fitness brands and Google Glass; 70% were certain that privacy and information confidentiality will be a big worry as wearable technology becomes more common. Some of those he asked are in the PR business. No one mentioned ethics or ethical behaviours.

Wearable technology is more than a wristband or Google Glass. In fact it sits at the peak of inflated expectations of what it can do. By observing how emerging technologies are being used by early adopters, there are three main trends at work:

- Augmenting humans with technology e.g. an employee with a wearable computer device.

- Machines replacing humans e.g. a cognitive virtual assistant acting as an automated customer assistant.
- Humans and machines working alongside each other e.g. a mobile robot working with a warehouse employee to move many boxes.

Neville Hobson questioned whether connected cars are wearable technology. While away from the car, owners can use the watch to keep tabs on the vehicle's location and fuel level, access Google local search to send a destination to the in-dash navigation system; can remotely unlock the doors or start the car. Everything from gloves to jackets to high-tech helmets will hit the market and be loaded with collaborate technology that will take your inputs and mental simulations and incorporate them directly into your driving experience.

Google has just released Glass in the UK, making it the second country to get the android-powered eyewear after the US. But the Cinema Exhibitors Association, which represents 90% of UK cinema operators, has banned wearable technology such as Google Glass from its members' auditorium. The Association is asking customers not to enter any cinema auditorium using wearable technology capable of recording images. A fifth of Britons want to ban Google Glass, highlighting the British public's concern over the privacy implications of the device. Yet all this is just skirmishing, ahead of the real challenges surrounding wearable (and other) technology that will confront society. In 2005, there were 2.5 billion connected devices, mostly PCs, smartphones, tablets. Gartner says that by 2020, there will be over 30 billion connected devices, mostly *not* PCs, smartphones and tablets.

Neville Hobson maintained that people don't really care about the Internet of things. They care about the Internet of caring things and about caring organisations which make or provide those things and tell us we can do amazing things with them. They will then trust those organisations with data and other information that they give in return.

Five converging forces are reshaping our lives: mobile, social media, data, sensors, location. They will have profound effects on each of us individually, in the workplace and in our society at large during the coming decade. Is there, or will there be, an ethical nightmare for PR, marketing and communication professionals? Neville Hobson had three answers

1. Yes, if we do nothing to raise awareness and educate our publics on the SWOT of wearable technology
2. Yes, if we fail to recognise the critical importance of the trust consumers place in our clients, in our employers and in governments that their behaviours are ethical
3. Yes, if we fail to take advantage of the opportunities to advance our profession at the vanguard of understanding the ethics, scope and scale surrounding the enabling technologies that are before us, and what they will do – and do not – for our clients, our employers, consumers and society at large.

If those things do not happen it will be a nightmare.

Dream opportunity

Seconding the opposition, **Claire Walker, Firefly Communications**, acknowledged that it would be illogical to deny that wearable technology in itself has ethical issues, but it is not an ethical nightmare. With 15 years' service as a member of the CIPR and PRCA professional practices committees, she has dealt with numerous complaints, accusations, appeals and breaches of the respective Codes of Conduct and has even stood as expert witness. She is also the newly appointed PRCA ethics trainer. Through all these experiences she knows first-hand that the PR industry's Codes of Conduct are robust and will stand firm and meet the high ethical standards we set ourselves. New technology and innovations always provoke a bout of ethical soul searching, not just within the communications industries but in society more broadly. Mobile phones and the cancer scares, the arrival of the Internet and more recently the explosion of social media have meant privacy and data capture are certainly recurring issues that morph but don't wholly go away.

In the '80s a desirable technology was ISDN, an early version of an Internet line. The digital highway transition seems to happen at a very slow pace. It is now hard to believe the innocence, perhaps ignorance and underestimation of how our lives would be turned upside down. But new technology does not always deliver on its promises and the changes it brings may not be what we expected. PR professionals need to know if the technology works or does not and make clear what is future gazing and what is real, and be ready for unexpected surprises.

In the mid '90s we really began to feel the benefit of the Internet but also the pressures of the new fast-paced world of work which put many ethical practices under strain. Some thought our brains would explode due to 'Information Overload'. Claire Walker pointed out that her company has advised clients on what could or could not be said. For wearable technology, similar issues apply, except we happen to have thousands of messages streaming into our Google Glasses or smartphones and details of what we are saying and doing or buying is stored somewhere in a pile of big data ready to be mined. The truth is we have more processing power in our finger tips than the entire IT department enjoyed in 1985. Claire Walker's father enjoys near-perfect hearing with a microscopic almost invisible hearing aid, her mother has a pace-maker managed by a remote control. She herself is tagged with a fitness band. But why should faster processing power, greater mobility and wearable technology change the principles of our industry's ethical framework?

The Code says: 'have the responsibility to deal fairly and honestly with the public'. Firefly Communications asks prospects and clients simple questions: 'What is your business model, what are your business objectives and are you profitable?' It follows those questions with 'Does it work? Can I buy it now? Can I speak to a customer?' Claire Walker asserted "...we don't assume anything. We have a responsibility to ask the questions and check the facts". She sees no reason why wearable technology should cause PR practitioners suddenly to disregard the Code and compromise their ethical responsibilities. Wearable technology is after all, just the latest iteration of a technological revolution.

Each new wave of Internet-enabled technology offers more direct access to consumers, to the public. The Internet, mobile phones, social media – each of these facilitate a conversation, one in which behaviour deemed to be unethical is clear to all, quickly scrutinised and dammed publicly, if need be, with a trial by Twitter. That is not to say that there won't be issues with wearable technology itself - of course there will be. Already Google Glasses are banned from Vue cinemas for fear of piracy. As a society we always strive to find the right balance between the freedom of the individual and embracing change. In the travel industry the change from horse and cart to motorised vehicles did not change the principles of vigilance, courtesy, anticipation, giving way and being in control of your transport mode at all times.

The PR industry has very thorough Codes of Conduct. The CIPR has six Principles, with 17 supporting statements over 24 pages; the PRCA has four principles with 10 supporting points serving three different disciplines over eight pages. These Codes do not contradict each other and they have been proven to be robust. Three key words are prominent: integrity, honesty and transparency. These are the non-negotiable watchwords of the PR industry. It is our duty to ask many searching questions before representing a client. According to Claire Walker a big mistake would be to listen to this motion and be scared away from wearable technology – the most exciting technological trend of the decade. Our Codes of Conduct are uniquely placed to advise wearable technology clients to uphold good ethical practices to ensure that they explain things in the right way in the public interest. This is far from an ethical nightmare – it is a dream opportunity.

Discussion from the floor

For the motion:

- Most people do not understand what wearable technology is. We have to educate the public. We also have to ensure that the technology has the ability to prevent hacking.

- When there are technical developments that can be abused, they will be. The good guys may have high standards and will adhere to professional ethics. But how do we cope with those who don't. We have to live with this and cope with it.
- The contributor disagreed with the people who said it is not a PR nightmare. We are not the stars of our nightmares, and this nightmare might be taken out of our hands, because people sign up without realising the implications.
- In a global economy we are all competing and we need any advantage we can get. Wearable technology can provide an advantage
- Wearable technology is a serious ethical challenge. The way in which we treat diseases will change. Implant devices are inserted after a heart operation without the patient realising. Who owns these data? Genetic data and genetic analysis are very powerful. This may not be an ethical dilemma for the PR industry, but it may be for some of its clients. How are the data being used?
- Wearable technology enables intimacy – touching and listening to everything. Things can be linked and identified. Things which were hidden can now be in plain view. It is easy to be ethical if you are in control, but you are not in control anymore.

Against the motion:

- The wrong question is being debated. Does wearable technology create an opportunity for non-ethical practices? But this is not an ethical nightmare for PR.
- The film *Minority Report* was about a dystopian future. It won't happen like that. The bad things people can do will be outweighed by the good that wearable technology can do.
- The evidence is that people like wearable technology. It is becoming acceptable.
- The contributor drew attention to the international dimension of this motion. Other nations might have different perspectives.
- The *Minority Report* illustrated a state-driven nightmare from government. But this is the marketplace and people will vote with their feet and choose products which are ethical and secure. It will impact on the industry because that will ensure security. The most ethical products will be the most popular.
- The motion is odd. Like Twitter wearable technology can be used as an advantage or disadvantage. Google Glass is not so different from a microphone.
- There could be huge communication issues in the future e.g. information from contact lens could be streamed to Facebook. But it a great chance to open up the debate. The PR industry should be at the forefront of this huge communications issue.
- The wording of the motion is not right. Wearable technology is not a nightmare, but a challenge for the PR industry. These technologies are coming: it is up to us in CIPR to set the ethical standards.
- Wearable technology is not a nightmare for highly-skilled PR professions. However not all PR people are in this category.

General comments

- The Highway Code does not apply in the same way anymore. This changes the ethical dynamics of the Highway Code analogy.

- The contributor was concerned about the ethical implications of collecting data and the use to which they are put. Can we have trust that the data will be used for the betterment of society as a whole? By using the data we imply that we trust them.
- The biggest danger of wearable technology is lack of security. If someone hacks into your Google Glass, they can use the data. It will need some measure of control. A health app on the device can certainly lead to problems. You have a choice: to manage the devices or block them out of your life
- What would we have said of TV? Were we as scared as we now are of Google Glass? But there is no reason to be afraid. There are two types of people: those who love technology and people who are afraid of new technology. New technology has to be explained. If people are not confused, that's the way to go.
- We collect data and use them, but we don't own them.
- Are we making spying easier? You either have ethics or you don't have them.
- We need guidance on how we interrogate the data.
- Companies want to make profits beyond PR.
- How do we get all PR people to follow the industry Codes? Some might lack the education to advise clients properly.

Summing up

Summing up for the opposition, **Stephen Waddington** re-iterated that wearable technology is not an ethical nightmare for PR practitioners. As practitioners you are either ethical or you are not. You work within your limits. Technology is always going to be used for good and ill: TV, mobile phones and email can all be used for good or ill. Our Codes of Conduct deal with this. Unfortunately there is polarisation in the industry between those who are highly skilled practitioners and those who are not. Wearable technology is a \$3 billion market. He hoped that the industry would embrace the technology rather than run away from it. There is a clear role in helping organisations deal with data. We have a role in every aspect of business. Social media means that PR is not siloed. Wearable technology can be a force for good. It opens up transparency and trust which are critical to a relationship. Simon Waddington urged the audience to vote for confidence in the market and in the PR industry's Code of Conduct.

Summing up for the motion, **Stephen Davies** pointed out that 10 years ago there was no social media. We couldn't anticipate what might happen. Blogs are a relatively new phenomenon. We are talking about wearable technology with today's mind-set rather than thinking about what will happen in the future. This technology will go forward and we have to think not of today, but the technology that is coming.

The result

The motion was defeated.

Next debate

The next debate will take place on **Monday 27th October 2014** sponsored by Thinkbox. For more details contact Doreen Blythe, Debating Group Secretary, e-mail: doreen.blythe22@btinternet.com