Gavin Jinks shows how those in power disseminate and control information in ways that avoid scrutiny and how individuals can take simple steps that make a big difference.

Behaving professionally in an age of political and corporate nonsense

WE live in a period when, more than at any other time in history, we are bombarded with information. However, sifting through that 'information' is even more complex than dealing with its sheer quantity, especially as much of the data to which we are subjected has little credibility. In order to maintain our own credibility, integrity and morale as professionals, it is important that we base our practice on sound evidence but also that we dare to challenge the practices of our organisations when these lack rigour. And that means not just finding ways of standing up to those with the most power but recognising when we are being sold stories that lack veracity.

It is not difficult to find examples of statements that are backed up by little or no evidence but which nevertheless have real influence. These types of statements rely on poorly defined terms used to camouflage a lack of substance. To mention some from the more public domain:

"In my great and unmatched wisdom……." *Donald Trump*.[1] (We might all like to 'write our own reviews' but some people have a profile that makes it easier for them to have this capability.)

"I am afraid that the security people didn't want me to come along tonight because they said the road was full of uncooperative crusties and protesters of all kinds littering the road." *Boris Johnson*.[2] (Whether or not Boris's security people actually said this, on the occasion that Extinction Rebellion held a protest outside a Policy Exchange event he was addressing, we do not know but what I do feel sure about is that Boris was more focused on the opportunity to use the rhetoric of 'uncooperative crusties' to describe climate protesters, who are known to be a disparate group that cannot reasonably be converted into a single stereotype.)

"We know that [Saddam] has stockpiles of major amounts of chemical and biological weapons……" *Tony Blair*.[3] (Famously, there was no evidence whatsoever to support this view.)

"We resent the scroungers, beggars and crooks who are prepared to cross every border in Europe to reach our generous benefit system". *The Sun*, 7 March 2001. (There is considerable evidence to suggest that much of the UK media have tended to over-emphasise the benefits accruing to asylum seekers coming to the UK while providing much less information on the horrific circumstances from which asylum seekers may be fleeing. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has previously called on the UK government to do more to ensure accurate reporting.)

"Our organisation prioritises the wellbeing of staff and values them for all that they do/We consider safety our highest priority/We always put the needs of our customers first." (The sort of thing many large corporate organisations say when caught in blatant disregard for good practice.)

Algorithms

The ways in which information is now published and consumed have made it easier for un-evidenced statements to have influence and evade scrutiny. Most notably, the use of targeting in social media means that those wishing to spread misinformation are able to locate people who will be susceptible to being influenced by deception. The Cambridge Analytica saga demonstrates how companies can be hired to create algorithms to influence the outcome of elections by using this approach – Facebook data from up to 87 million users was 'mined' by political consulting firm Cambridge Analytica to help elect Donald Trump. The Netflix documentary *The Great Hack* highlights in digestible form how it is possible for organisations to employ staff with the skills to use algorithms to identify and target individuals with specific beliefs and prejudices, and bombard their social media feeds with information and propaganda that supports and reinforces the views that they already hold. So, in an election campaign, having identified voters in key geographical areas that can disproportionately affect the outcome of an election, these organisations can have significant influence over the eventual result.

Ben Elton has also illustrated this phenomenon in a more amusing fashion in his novel *Identity Crisis*.[4] He illustrates how modern digital media 'get to know us' and then ensure that this information is used to sell us both products and ideas. All of us who have ever bought items online know this to be true. It becomes impossible to avoid emails and pop ups that are based on our previous online behaviour.

Modern social media also allow media organi-

sations to monitor the responses of individuals to their targeted messages and thereby assess the impact of their 'campaigns'. Interestingly the Conservatives outspent Labour by a factor of 10 to 1 in the 2015 election. In a country that bans political advertising on TV, this means of campaigning allowed the Conservatives to reach over 80 per cent of Facebook users. The use of social media has been a staple of Donald Trump's campaigning and presidency. His tweets go from the relatively benign "Every poll has me way out in the lead" to the rather more offensive "Huma Abedin, the top aide to Hillary Clinton and the wife of perv sleazebag Anthony Wiener, was a major security risk as a collector of info".[5]

Digital technology now also makes it possible to edit video and audio records of real events. An edited version of a Keir Starmer TV interview was circulated during the 2019 election campaign so that he appeared to struggle to answer the question posed by an interviewer. We need to make up our own minds on whether or not this was a deliberate attempt to deceive the public but maybe the more important issue is that technology now makes it possible convincingly to deceive the public. Thus the proliferation of photographs that show people to have been present where they were not – or not present when, indeed, they were.

As the philosopher and ethicist Sissela Bok has explained, political lying is a form of theft. It means that voters make democratic judgements on the basis of falsehoods. Their rights are stripped away.

Corporate power

Nor can we get away from the fact that there are corporations holding disproportionately high amounts of power and influence. The gambling industry in the UK is booming. The gross gambling yield (the amount betting firms win from customers) has risen from about £8bn in 2008 to about £14.5bn in 2019. The tax revenue from this industry ensures that the betting firms retain significant influence over regulation despite the evidence of huge rises in problem gambling and addiction, often leading to suicide as people despair of ever repaying their debts. Lobbying of government by the pharmaceutical industry clearly has an influence on decision making, such as decisions by NICE about which drugs should be used in the UK. Documents obtained by the *Guardian* under Freedom of Information legislation revealed that the world's biggest drug company, Pfizer, warned ministers that it could take its business elsewhere.[6]

Large corporations in a globalised economy have greater power than at any time previously. This is partly due to their sheer size and turnover (and lobbying power) but it is multiplied because of the ability to avoid regulation of their power to expand. Between them, for example, Facebook, Google and Amazon have taken over or acquired over 350 other businesses. They are in a position to 'buy out' aspiring competitors, such as Whatsapp and Instagram. The rise of such enormous multinational brands raises a legitimate question as to whether they are more powerful than governments. Apple was at the forefront in moving away from the idea that 'the customer decides', so that product development is based upon their strategic aims rather than customer demand: the decision to make it difficult to use an external storage device with an iPad was decided in order to foster an increase in subscriptions to cloud.

Selling status

In the 2014 BBC documentary series *The Men Who Made Us Spend*, investigative reporter Jacques Peretti highlighted the many ways in which large corporations are able to influence our consuming behaviour. In one episode, Peretti talks to customers queuing up to purchase a newly released iPhone. It is striking that, when he asks a number of these customers why they are upgrading their phones, they are unable to identify any new features that they want or need. Their motivations for the purchase are based solely on the perceived sense of status the new product will bring to them.

The best selling author Michael Lewis in his *Against The Rules* podcast series[7] demonstrated just how difficult it can be to challenge a large corporation for misuse of power. The examples of a woman finding it impossible to escape from an oppressively administered student loan debt and his own experience of trying to challenge liability for a debt illustrate how little protection there might be for an individual, even when all objective evidence indicates that the individual rather than the large corporation is in the right. I could not help but smile wryly whilst listening to Lewis, recalling my own attempt to challenge a telecom company for illegally digging up my garden and cutting the cable of their competitor, whom I had decided to go with after weeks of waiting for the original company to install a telephone and broadband line at a new property and making repeated complaints. After nine weeks of challenge and despite being persistent enough to achieve a dialogue with the PA to the chief executive of this telecom company, I finally concluded

that their offer of £100 was the best I could hope for in what felt like a David versus Goliath contest.

And then there is the proliferation and culture of 'feedback' that we currently flounder in. As an educator I had always assumed that feedback was a means to reflect upon and improve practice. However, it is apparent that feedback surveys are now more frequently used as tools for marketing than for learning. My sister was recently contacted after completing a survey about a holiday, enquiring whether she would be happy to complete a survey about the holiday feedback survey! After attending hospital for a minor operation, I was contacted and asked as part of a survey if I would recommend this to a friend! And I have had a number of experiences of feedback surveys where there has been a significant amount of coaching, encouraging me to provide 'desired answers' rather than my honest opinions. Two of these experiences also concerned satisfaction surveys at the end of holidays. On both occasions, the person asking me to complete the survey informed me that giving lower than 7 out of 10 for any aspect of my holiday experience would mean that I "thought the service was rubbish".

In November 2019, the BBC reported that a number of people and organisations providing talking therapies for the NHS had commented on the pressures exerted on them to manipulate feedback so that interventions might appear more successful than they had been perceived to be by clients/patients.[8] (This is also one of the issues explored by Farhad Dalal in his book *The CBT Tsunami*, reviewed in this journal in June last year.) In December 2019, the BBC reported that charities had complained that figures for waiting times for talking therapies were being manipulated to create an impression that patients were being seen quicker than was actually the case.[9] These are not new problems. In 2014, the BBC reported on how online patient feedback review systems were open to abuse, including one NHS trust where 49 per cent of 'patient reviews' had actually come from staff.[10]

Unreliable tool

In higher education all third-year undergraduate students are invited to complete the National Student Survey (NSS), which asks questions about the quality of teaching, learning opportunities, assessment and feedback. NSS has become a key tool in producing league tables and is also a major marketing tool used by universities. I have yet to come across a coalface academic who considers NSS to be a reliable tool for measuring the quality of teaching, tutoring and assessment for a degree programme and yet it receives massive priority from vice chancellors, nevertheless. It is interesting that 90 per cent (and above) approval by students completing the survey is the 'mecca' that universities aspire to for their programme's NSS results.

NSS takes the form of a customer satisfaction survey. Can one reasonably use a customer satisfaction approach when students are subject to assessment rather than simply buying a product? In any cohort there will be students who struggle/fail on some of the assessed modules. Would one not expect that a reasonable proportion of those students would be unhappy? Might the pressure on universities and on individual degree programmes to produce 'good' NSS results make it more likely that 'grade inflation' will take place? And, in any case, how reliable is a customer satisfaction survey in an industry where 'the customer' has no real means of making a comparison? Undergraduates have no other university with which to compare their own institution when providing marks out of 10 for different aspects of their university experience.

Who has the power to define?

So where does this all lead us? I teach my students that one of the most important questions they will ever ask when scrutinising any situation is "Who has the power to define?" The power to say that something or someone is good, bad, right or wrong is the power to dictate what happens or does not happen, be it in a family, a workplace or a society. American social activist Jerry Rubin considered the power to define to be the ultimate power. As a parent, I had far more power to define right and wrong than my children did when they were growing up. Managers and chief executives have more power than employees to define objectives and appropriate standards of behaviour. Our political leaders' views on the priorities for any issue are guaranteed an airing that the views of the person in the street will never receive. Our politicians, our bosses and religious leaders often jealously guard the power to define for this very reason.

Allied to this is the language that we use to describe a person or issue a statement. As Gerry Mooney, a social science and global studies academic at the Open University, has pointed out, this will determine the policies that we adopt. If, for example, a narrative is established that benefit claimants are lazy scroungers, it becomes much easier to adopt policies to reduce and restrict benefit payments. If refugees are portrayed as benefit tourists, then it becomes easier to close down our borders regardless of our government's involvement in creating a refugee crisis in the first place. So it is vital to our professional integrity that we are prepared to interpret information and current practices in the light of questioning who might have the power to define the narrative on any issue or situation.

For a number of years I have grappled with the dilemmas created when attempting to main-

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tain morale and professional integrity in a context of poor quality information. What follows is my approach to these dilemmas. I do not suggest that this represents 'the answer', rather it is my attempt at an answer, and some may find aspects of it helpful to adapt for their own circumstances.

"Just do it"

I have always been something of a rebel in my personal and professional life, in that I am generally comfortable challenging existing norms and beliefs. In 2017, I attended the Higher Education Academy Conference and I listened to the keynote speech given by Helen Bevan, who has (among other things) been a change manager in the NHS. She talked about how most large modern organisations are not fit for purpose, saying that they were too big, too 'top down', too slow and too unresponsive. Her proposal for dealing with this as a professional was simple but struck a chord with what I already held to be true. She recommended that we form informal alliances and networks with other competent professionals, both within and outside our own organisations. Such informal networks and alliances can provide us with the opportunities to create cooperation and influence over those professional issues that most concern us. She suggested that we should make our own plans for how to be most effective and most competent, and then, to paraphrase her words and borrow from a high profile sportswear company, we should "just do it".

It is this kind of philosophy that has underpinned a student peer-mentor project that I have led on the BA in social work at the University of Derby. And it is also the philosophy I adopted when adapting the standard university policy on personal tutoring to fit the needs of my particular degree programme. These were pieces of work that led to my receiving two awards from the Union of Students at the university. I cannot know what might have happened if I had sought official permission for these initiatives before I took action. By grasping the nettle I was able to try out these ideas, demonstrate that they worked and, importantly, I began to be taken more seriously inside and outside of my own institution. By this means my capacity to influence in other arenas grew.

Stephen Covey, an American businessman, educator and author of *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People,* suggested that in all areas of our lives there are circles of control, circles of influence and circles of concern.[11] Circles of control are those areas in which we are in charge of decision making. I choose how I am going to spend my leisure time, what interests I pursue and the friends I spend time with. At work I am in charge of the content and delivery of my teaching. These are small examples of my circles of control.

Circles of influence are those areas of life in which we have *some* degree of impact on the outcome. At home I play a part in making some family decisions and in making suggestions to family and friends when they ask for them. At work I play a part in team decision making and I also influence students through what I say and do.

The circles of concern are those issues and circumstances that bother me but over which I have no meaningful impact. The cost of fuel and the policies decided by the university executive would be two examples here. Importantly, it is in the circles of influence that we need to focus our attention because this is where we can genuinely be an instrument of change. Crucially, we should seek to act in a manner that widens our circle of influence. So, as mentioned, the work and recognition I received as a result of the student peer-mentoring project and the new approach to personal tutoring have widened my circle of influence at work. More people (further up the hierarchy) are aware of me and I am invited to events and decision-making forums when I would previously have been invisible. (My relatively lowly position in a large bureaucratic organisation with many layers of management fosters the conditions for 'invisibility'.) So now, for example, I am being consulted on the design and content of team stress-risk assessments by the relevant person in human resources. Work I undertook to widen my circle of influence has borne fruit.

Speaking up

I firmly believe that we have a tendency to stay silent when really we should speak up. In their books *Crucial Conversations* and *Crucial Confrontations*, corporate consultants Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan and Al Switzler, who evaluated the qualities and behaviours of effective communicators in the organisations to which they provided consultancy, explored the most effective ways of handling difficult conversations.[12,13] Their work is based on 25 years of research. They suggest that there is a tendency to over-estimate the negative impact of speaking up and to under-estimate the positive impact of speaking up. This tendency is increased in situations which involve speaking up to someone perceived to be in authority. They provide the example of the man who never said a word in a 'pre-op' for an ear operation when a nurse drew a circle around his nether regions. He was nevertheless surprised to wake up from his anaesthesia the not-so-happy owner of a new vasectomy.

More alarmingly, from black box recordings, it would appear that some airline disasters could have been averted if co-pilots had trusted their instincts and been more assertive in raising concerns to pilots. Dan Gretton, in his book *I You We Them*, explores how many people have

inadvertently been involved in facilitating terrible events, from the horrors of Auschwitz to the environmental depredations wrought today in Nigeria by Shell.[14] He suggests that the two primary factors here are staying silent and compartmentalising one's involvement – suggesting that people tend to rationalise away their involvement in wrongdoing by believing that they are just doing what their job requires.

The concept of compartmentalising is brilliantly illustrated in the film *Good Will Hunting*. *Will*, the central character, a flawed genius, is invited to use his exceptional talents by accepting a job with the National Security Agency, the intelligence agency of the United States Department of Defense. In a cleverly crafted monologue he describes how, by doing what he would be employed to do – breaking a code for the NSA – he might, among other unwanted consequences, play a part in killing thousands of innocent people.

Not so inconsequential

I have come to recognise that, in a less dramatic way, I may be a part of actions that go against all of my professional beliefs and values, if I do not speak up. So, to follow on from an earlier example, if I accept at face value the outcome of NSS for my degree programme, I may bow to the pressure to make changes in the interests of 'chasing good feedback' but which have little benefit to good educational practice. My individual involvement may be low level and on the face of it inconsequential, yet still play a part in generating wider poor practice. On a number of occasions I have heard academics say, "That's just the way it is," when I have challenged certain decisions. Similarly, a middle manager in the NHS may rationalise that there is no real harm done by cooperating with a system that records that a patient is receiving treatment when, in fact, said patient has had an initial assessment but treatment will not take place for many months, even years.

The Columbo technique

My particular approach to speaking up is heavily influenced by teaching I received as part of the HG Diploma back in 2001. I can remember being asked to consider how to respond to a counselling client who appeared reluctant to accept any kind of challenge to their behaviour. The 'Columbo technique', whereby one asks a sequence of seemingly innocent questions, was suggested as a means by which one could assist a client to consider the consequences of behaviour that he or she might otherwise have been reluctant to face. This is a technique which I have frequently used to challenge ideas and practices within organisations that have employed me. So, for example, when new policies are introduced which have a dramatic impact on my workloads and those of colleagues, I have

developed the habit of 'asking, with an earnest expression, whether I am being asked to work more hours or whether some other duties are being withdrawn. Asking this kind of question has facilitated discussions about workload that would never have taken place had I simply stayed quiet. Putting the question in writing or having it recorded in a meeting creates an environment where those making decisions or implementing them become more accountable – for the very simple reason that the question and the answer are 'on the record'.

The question I have found the most useful is "What is the evidence to support this?" It is what I call a golden ticket question, one that can be used in a variety of situations to challenge decision making without being unduly confrontational. (It always seems to me to be a missed opportunity if media reporters fail to ask politicians or business leaders such a question or, when they do ask it, fail to point out that the person being interviewed has side-stepped it by answering a different question.) What is essential is that we develop the habit of subjecting to scrutiny the ideas, policies and practices within our organisations.

The practice of subjecting thinking and behaviour to scrutiny is, in my view, at the root of most significant change. And it is essential to recognise that major social and political changes tend to occur because of the actions of those at the bottom rather than the top. Those in positions of power do not tend, in all but exceptional circumstances, to give their power away, and thereby do not choose to change the status quo. The reasons we have votes for women, an Equal Pay Act, equal marriage, an Equality Act, to name but a few, are all down to the actions and courage of ordinary people.

Pick the right battle

I tell my students the story of Ludwig Guttmann, a doctor who, after the Second World War, came to work at Stoke Mandeville hospital, where severely disabled soldiers were sent. Before Guttman arrived, these soldiers tended to be placed in coffin-like beds, heavily sedated and then left to vegetate in darkened wards. He challenged this practice, which was driven by the thinking that these soldiers were beyond any meaningful help, by suggesting that severely disabled soldiers might be assisted to lead ordinary lives. He introduced the idea of holding a 'National Games' at the hospital. The first event involved 15 participants. By 1952, it had become an international event. Fast forward to today and the Paralympics sit alongside the Olympic Games, with thousands of competitors from all over the world. We should never lose sight of the fact that, although we may need to pick our battles, one person can have enormous influence in creating change. ∎

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