



Time to Wake up the Giants?

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*Far-left “human rights” activists who use smear campaigns to increase internet censorship - this is how Breitbart News, a conservative American news website, describes *Sleeping Giants*, an online social campaign group which aims to increase social corporate responsibility and decrease online hate speech¹. Haven’t heard of *Sleeping Giants* or ethical advertising? Who are these “far-left censors” and why are they targeting particular online media outlets?*

Sleeping Giants take aim at Breitbart with Programmatic Advertising Awareness

As a result of the 2016 US elections and the negative rhetoric associated with the Trump campaign, an activist group called *Sleeping Giants* was created with the goal of making hate speech unprofitable². Matt Rivitz, an American freelance copywriter and founder of *Sleeping Giants*³, used Twitter to ask well-known brands why they were advertising their products on websites which, in his opinion, were amplifying and perpetuating racist, xenophobic, and sexist content⁴. These initial tweets to some companies subsequently developed into a larger group running a successful campaign aimed at minimizing the profitability of hate speech.

For *Sleeping Giants*, Breitbart was initially the primary focus, as a site “funded by white supremacists and written by white supremacists”, according to an interview with Nandini

¹ “Financial Blacklisting; *Sleeping Giants* and Soros-backed group pressure Mastercard to censor the right”, Breitbart.com (<https://www.breitbart.com/tech/2019/06/25/financial-blacklisting-sleeping-giants-and-soros-backed-group-pressure-mastercard-to-censor-the-right/>).

² “Tech companies’ newest cause celebre? Boycott Breitbart”, Cnet.com (<https://www.cnet.com/news/boycott-breitbart-lyft-hewlett-packard-t-mobile-autodesk-uber-amazon/>).

³ “Revealed: The People Behind an Anti-Breitbart Twitter Account”, *The New York Times* (<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/20/business/media/sleeping-giants-breitbart-twitter.html>)

⁴ “How a Twitter account convinced 4,000 companies to stop advertising on Breitbart” Vox.com (<https://www.vox.com/2018/9/3/17813124/sleeping-giants-breitbart-advertising-matt-rivitz-kara-swisher-recode-decode-podcast>).

Jammi, another key member of the Sleeping Giants campaign⁵. To give some examples of articles collected by CNN Business which have been published by Breitbart⁶:

‘Birth control makes women unattractive and crazy’ which explained that ‘We need the kids if we’re to breed enough to keep the Muslim invaders at bay’

‘Would you rather your child had feminism or cancer?’ which appeared in a video promoting a university debate

“The solution to online ‘harassment’ is simple: Women should log off”

As it turns out, according to Rivitz, most businesses are not well acquainted with where their advertising appears⁷. This is because on many websites, ads are managed through user-targeted “Programmatic Advertising” algorithms - meaning advertisers are connected with users who are most likely to engage with their products⁸. More specifically, information searched for by users is recorded in their browsing history. When reading the news or searching for specific locations, advertising on these other, unrelated, sites is sold in approximately 50 milliseconds to advertisers who target individuals using this browser history knowledge⁹. The websites that offer advertising space earn money by selling these spaces to different businesses. For businesses this increases the chances that targeted individuals might notice their advertisement and they might get a new customer.

Many people may not have an issue with targeted advertising if it improves their ability to find products that suit their personal preferences, rather than being flooded with irrelevant

⁵ “Sleeping Giants on Breitbart and brand safety: ‘It’s not our job to police your ads’”, thedrum.com (<https://www.thedrum.com/news/2019/09/04/sleeping-giants-breitbart-and-brand-safety-its-not-our-job-police-your-ads>).

⁶ “10 of Breitbart’s most incendiary headlines”, CNN Business (<https://money.cnn.com/2016/11/14/media/breitbart-incendiary-headlines/>).

⁷ “How a Twitter account convinced 4,000 companies to stop advertising on Breitbart” Vox.com (<https://www.vox.com/2018/9/3/17813124/sleeping-giants-breitbart-advertising-matt-rivitz-kara-swisher-recode-decode-podcast>).

⁸ “Scale vs. Brand Safety: Is There a Programmatic Winner?” (<https://tinuiti.com/blog/performance-display/scale-vs-brand-safety-is-there-a-programmatic-winner/>).

⁹ Ibid.

advertising. Additionally, it is an effective way for companies to reach out to their own audiences with the help of 3rd party companies that promise to reach a particular clientele, “all while using standard tools to keep your brand safe”¹⁰.

The issue is, however, that advertising success is based on being noticed by the widest possible audience, no matter what the platform is. This is true unless advertisers or individual companies block particular websites, or only use websites that they believe align with their own values¹¹. Otherwise, advertisements can end up ‘following’ would-be customers to websites that do not necessarily align with the company’s values, and because companies are using these sites to attract customers, they are paying them to be able to advertise there¹². This means more funds are going to the host sites, allowing them to produce more content that promotes the kind of controversial content that Breitbart specialises in.

There has been surprisingly little awareness concerning where companies’ advertising money ends up. Only recently, after different organizations and social groups, such as *Sleeping Giants*, started questioning the monetization of hate and fear content, this has been changing¹³. With increased awareness of this process among consumers, businesses, and advertising companies, some company policies have shifted, and some businesses have stopped advertising on websites that are not aligned with their values. As a result, advertising revenue to some controversial websites has decreased.

Values are not the only reason a company might remove its advertising from a controversial website. Companies also have to protect their brand and public image¹⁴. An international language school trying to attract foreign students, for example, would probably not want to be

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ “How to Destroy the Business Model of Breitbart and Fake News”, The New York Times (<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/07/opinion/sunday/how-to-destroy-the-business-model-of-breitbart-and-fake-news.html>).

¹² Ibid.

¹³ “How a Twitter account convinced 4,000 companies to stop advertising on Breitbart” Vox.com (<https://www.vox.com/2018/9/3/17813124/sleeping-giants-breitbart-advertising-matt-rivitz-kara-swisher-recode-decode-podcast>).

¹⁴ “Scale vs. Brand Safety: Is There a Programmatic Winner?” (<https://tinuiti.com/blog/performance-display/scale-vs-brand-safety-is-there-a-programmatic-winner/>)

advertising on a site known for publishing articles promoting racist views about immigrants. Finally, there is also a growing awareness among companies concerning their social corporate responsibility to use “Ethical Advertising” which consciously avoids inciting negative emotions (e.g. fear or stereotyping) and advocates socially conscious decision-making, actions and value.¹⁵

Boycott Back

Companies must also be aware of the risks involved in taking steps to control where their ads are being shown. When the Kellogg’s company announced in 2016 that it would pull its advertising from Breitbart, the news site reacted by launching a retaliatory campaign to encourage readers to boycott Kellogg’s products. Breitbart argued that the campaign launched by *Sleeping Giants* was “an escalation in the war by leftist companies...”, and that “...for Kelloggs’ an American brand, to blacklist Breitbart News in order to placate left-wing totalitarians is a disgraceful act of cowardice”¹⁶. The boycott did seem to work. Two days after the launch of the boycott, according to the New York Post, Kellogg’s stocks fell by 3.6 percent, apparently as a direct result of the backlash¹⁷. Breitbart also claimed the boycott played a role in company layoffs which affected large numbers of employees¹⁸.

More recently, in 2018, Breitbart threatened *Sleeping Giants* with a lawsuit claiming that it was the victim of a smear campaign designed to deceive the public and advertisers¹⁹. However, it appears that they have stopped short of actually taking legal action as *Sleeping Giants* tweeted on 2 September 2019 that “...Breitbart threatened to sue me last October. Our lawyer asked

¹⁵ “What is the Difference between Unethical and Ethical Advertising?” Chron Small Business (<https://smallbusiness.chron.com/difference-between-unethical-ethical-advertising-19262.html>)

¹⁶ “Breitbart declares war on Kellogg’s after cereal brand pulls advertising from site. The Guardian (<https://www.theguardian.com/media/2016/nov/30/breitbart-news-kelloggs-advertising-boycott-alt-right>)

¹⁷ “Kellogg under fire for pulling ads from Breitbart”, The New York Post (<https://nypost.com/2016/12/01/kellogg-under-fire-for-pulling-ads-from-breitbart/>)

¹⁸ “Do Boycotts Work? Why Kellogg Could Get the Last Laugh Over Breitbart News”, triplepundit.com (<https://www.triplepundit.com/story/2017/do-boycotts-work-why-kellogg-could-get-last-laugh-over-breitbart-news/19756>).

¹⁹ “Breitbart News threatens Sleeping Giants with a lawsuit”, Columbia Journalism Review (https://www.cjr.org/the_new_gatekeepers/breitbart-news-threatens-sleeping-giants-with-a-lawsuit.php)



them to preserve any and all communications with the Mercers, Steve Bannon and Cambridge Analytica among others and we haven't heard back since. Weird how that happens"²⁰.

Accordingly, supporting *Sleeping Giants*, ethical advertising, and company values seems to come with the risk of a backlash involving the possibility of online threats and financial damages. However, a longer-term analysis also appears to contradict Breitbart's declarations of victory over Kellogg's. Instead, evidence suggests that company stocks have generally been on an upward trend and that the redundancies seemingly connected to Breitbart's boycott were actually the result of a long-term project to increase company efficiency²¹. While some may have paid heed to the boycott call, other consumers demonstrated support for Kellogg's stance against Breitbart – that is that the impact of the boycott is less clear than was claimed by Breitbart²². In this case, the victory seems to be on Kellogg's side, but this example does not negate the overall potential damage that retaliation boycotts can cause. This, of course, is an uncomfortable thought for businesses deciding between cultivating a positive, inclusive brand image and the financial risk of a reactionary boycott.

So “Far-Left” that they’ve gone full circle and ended up on the right?

Breitbart's claim that its boycott was effective is ambiguous and undetermined, but what about the arguments that it is being targeted by a group of far-left “human rights' activists using a smear campaign to increase internet censorship?” When considering the far-left aspect, UK Conservative politician Baroness Sayeeda Warsi said of these types of campaigns, that “...the public have the right to vote with their feet and with their money, and as a Conservative, as

²⁰ *Sleeping Giants*, September 2019, 13:42AM., (https://twitter.com/slpng_giants/status/1168655493679566850)

²¹ “Do Boycotts Work? Why Kellogg Could Get the Last Laugh Over Breitbart News”, triplepundit.com (<https://www.triplepundit.com/story/2017/do-boycotts-work-why-kellogg-could-get-last-laugh-over-breitbart-news/19756>).

²² “How to Destroy the Business Model of Breitbart and Fake News”, The New York Times (<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/07/opinion/sunday/how-to-destroy-the-business-model-of-breitbart-and-fake-news.html>).

someone who believes in the free market, I think it is a very centre-right position to be able to say that the market should respond to this hatred by saying that we find this unacceptable...”²³

When a prominent UK Conservative supports “leftist” campaigns, it should be considered a bipartisan issue instead of a polarizing one. Having a safer, cleaner media space is arguably beneficial to people on both sides of the political spectrum, not just the liberal democrats. Reducing fear-mongering in online content is potentially just as important for the conservatives, so they can distance themselves from those who wish to polarize politics for personal gain instead of public benefit.

Baroness Warsi’s argument that social campaigns like the Sleeping Giant’s one is centre-right and relies on market forces seem to be forgotten when campaigns are directed against groups or news sources on the right. However, when the same approach is taken by these news sources in retaliation, for example when Breitbart called for a boycott on Kellogg’s, it is no longer a far-left approach but an acceptable method of political action. Boycotting in the private sector is either an acceptable free-market approach to value-based consumerism used by both sides of the political spectrum, or it is unacceptable by both sides. However, it cannot be a smear campaign when the left use it, and a legitimate response when the right use it.

Where censoring the internet is concerned, *Sleeping Giants* does not attempt to remove content from Breitbart. The campaign seems to rest on the argument that people can write what they want but have to accept that their business can suffer and they may be marginalized if their content and opinions do not align with the values of companies paying for advertising space.

Yet, there are disadvantages to these initiatives which should not be overlooked. For example, there are important questions to be answered with regard to which platforms should be targeted, who should decide this, and for how long. If various disinformation and hate content exists online, how should we decide what is classified as “hate”, and how could this impact freedom of speech?

²³ “Baroness Warsi on Stop Funding Hate and the Co-op”, Stop Funding Hate (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wSQGpoCdyCE>)



While these are important issues, the bottom line of these initiatives remains simple: the current reality is that, even platforms which are seen to foster divisions and target particular societal groups, such as Breitbart news, can publicize any opinion and are free to receive financial support from those who support these opinions. However, they cannot expect unconditional financial support from companies which do not want to fund these platforms or be associated with hate speech and disinformation.