

Beware of knee-jerk reactions

By  [Chris Brewer](#)

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So Prisa (the Public Relations Institute of Southern Africa) is calling for regulation of the PR industry following the Bell Pottinger fiasco.



Is it time to regulate the PR industry?

Daniel Munslow 14 Jul 2017



I have two words for them:

Please. Don't. (Well that's actually three words, if you want to be pedantic).



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I'm sure it was a panic reaction to reinforce the fact that we have an essentially honest and professional PR industry in South Africa.

Bell Pottinger and others of their ilk, maybe not so much.



Bell Pottinger issues apology statement

7 Jul 2017



But “regulation” is a dreadful step to take. It conjures up all manner of probable abuse by politicians. Way back in the early 1960s, Harold Wilson's Labour Government tried really hard to ban advertising (which would, of course, force the closure of most publications and therefore any thought of a PR career would have been still-born. The same would have applied to the vast majority of journalists). They were strongly in favour of “heavy taxes” on advertising – taxation, of course, always a simple solution to socialist concerns. Capitalists, of course, prefer complete arcanic control. (By the way, I'm deliberately not mentioning social media in any context today because that's another bucket of bananas altogether).

Ultimately the movement failed and The Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) was formed in the UK in 1962. That august body recommended a code of ethics which was followed, most of the time, by the industry.

Prisa has an admirable code of ethics. Whether everyone adheres strictly to it can be argued but the point is that they **exist**. And **that** is what we should be promoting – not regulation.

And the same goes for the ASA of South Africa, too. We have rules.

It's true that some agencies flaunt those rules and produce material that is alarmingly close to the edge. Often it's too late, after the ad has been made public, to make any meaningful stopping of the campaign – or even retribution, for that matter.

However, the ASA does have more power over its part of the industry than Prisa does over its practitioners. For one thing, in some cases it's almost impossible to track what a so-called “PR practitioner” is up to. They can operate in almost total secrecy and yet still accomplish their brief.

On the other hand, there is nothing clandestine about advertising. The work is published (in one form or another) and therefore subject to scrutiny by all. This means we're all on the same page, so to speak.

I suppose it's possible for the ASA to call on the industry to refuse to carry **any** advertising for **all** clients of a continual errant agency even though that may be difficult and expensive to enforce.

That's the theory, anyway. In practice, the ASA of South Africa is fighting for life and frankly, I dread what may happen next.



Fundraising for Advertising Standards Authority at halfway mark

11 Jul 2017



Can you imagine what would happen if a politician (or friend of a politician) could gain access to advertising and public relations codes? Next stop government control and, should that happen, then kiss free speech goodbye.

So Prisa, please stick to encouraging your members to follow your codes of conduct and to the ASA I say “good luck” and wish them well in winning their fight against some powerful enemies.

But please, please, do **not call for regulation**. It will complicate everything.

Just rally the media to show Bell Pottinger the exit door – along with anyone else who misbehaves.

ABOUT CHRIS BREWER

Having joined the ad industry in London, Chris Brewer spent most of his career in media analysis and planning - but has performed just about every advertising task from Creative to Research. He's an honorary lifetime member of the Advertising Media Association and regularly advises agencies and clients regarding their media plan costs and strategies. He is also often asked to talk at industry functions. Email: chris@brewers.co.za. Twitter: [@brewersapps](https://twitter.com/brewersapps). Read his blog: www.brewersdroop.co.za

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