# Pharma online: does regulation or corporate social media policy need to change to allow a real dialogue about medicines?

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'Big Pharma' is a good example of a major industry that is finding that the Internet is a minefield as well as a field of plenty. It's a great place to sell your goods and everyone is talking about medicine and health online. Yet, in most countries like the UK, they is strict legislation on what they can do to 'promote' their wares directly to the digital public. And, of course, there are all sorts of reputational hazards.

Katherine Relle, a former LSE student and Polis Intern won our 2012 Human Digital/Polis Social Media Research Prize for her work on trying to understand how pharmaceutical companies might benefit from understanding what people are saying about them online. We celebrated the prize with a seminar that included social media marketers, researchers and pharmaceutical professionals. You can read more about Katherine Relle's research here. This report on the event is by Polis intern Lucia Cohen.
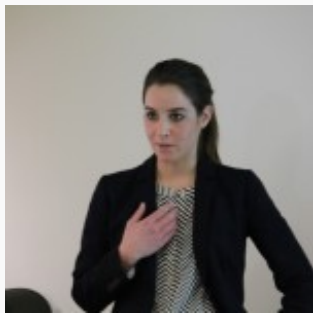
Katherine Relle

The paradox of understanding online fora is that to know what people are thinking online, you need to be human. So to study what people said online about medicine, Katherine Relle decided to use human content analysis rather than computer analysis. This allowed her to perceive nuances and categorise her findings in a much more precise way.

Relle focused on people´s comments on contraceptives in three health-related forums (she studied 200 posts per forum, 600 in total). She chose to focus on those pills because they are usually taken voluntarily and no one needs them to treat a serious disease. Although she used the American regulatory system as a framework, the nature of the Internet means it was likely that people from other countries published on the analysed sites.

Relle pointed out that the fact that pharmaceutical companies spend approximately 15 years to get a drug to the market means that they cannot tolerate online criticism – which can be based on lies or misunderstandings – without reacting. In this respect Relle's findings suggested that industry engagement in media could mitigate the negative aspects of risk communication, and strengthen the positive aspects of personal profiling, education, and sentiment.

According to her findings, it is important that pharmaceutical companies involve online because people ask questions, express their concerns and seek for information. As Relle said, "social media expresses human voice", which represents "invaluable information". Therefore, the industry could use this environment to protect the company brands, to inform and to answer consumer concerns.

Olivier Delannoy, from Astra Zeneca, described the research as an eye opener for the industry. In the past he said that companies had to show the benefits of its drugs to shareholders and regulators. But "nowadays the picture is fundamentally different" and in the face of public discussion the industry's reputation is becoming "worse and worse".

Delannoy said that using social media as a marketing and engagement technique can be a way to improve reputation, establish leadership and increase visibility. However, the industry is working under out-dated laws and a lack of guidance from rgulatory organisations such as the FDA.

Delannoy said that there was a "social responsibility" on the part of pharmaceutical firms to engage with citizens, to show them when they are mistaken and to guide them.

In that respect, Christian Gladwell, from Human Digital, explained that it is important to understand what is happening in social media before hiring a social media team. Contrary to what is often assumed, people do not just complain online. It is important to analyse the data on social media, which according to Gladwell, means basically "the Internet". And when he refers to data, he is thinking about words and pictures that signify sentiment as well as the numbers. Understanding why there are people posting would be the best way to know how to react.

Christian Gladwell (Human Digital) and Olivier Delannoy (Astra Zeneca)

This post by Polis intern Lucía Cohen