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Branded Content Governance Project's *Media-Marketing Integration* Conference

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Abstract

The *Media-Marketing Integration: Practices, Policies, Problems and Remedies* conference, held at the University of the Arts London on July 3–4, 2025, was organized as part of the Branded Content Governance Project (BCGP). The BCGP is a three-year international research project examining the regulation and broader governance arrangements for brand-funded content in thirty-two countries, including all EU countries, Canada, USA, Mexico, Australia, and UK. The conference brought together international researchers working on media-marketing convergence and included keynotes from leading scholars, such as Joseph Turow, Sonia Livingstone, and Nick Couldry.

Keywords

advertising regulation, branded content, comparative analysis, disclosure, governance, influencer marketing, native advertising, promotional industries, sponsored content



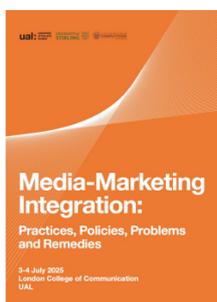
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Fig. 1.

Coorganizer Jonathan Hardy welcomes attendees to the *Media-Marketing Integration* conference in London on July 3, 2025. Photo credit: Kadeen Brown (www.kadeenbrown.com, [@kadeenbrown](https://twitter.com/kadeenbrown)).

Media-Marketing Integration: Practices, Policies, Problems and Remedies was a two-day conference, on July 3–4, 2025, to mark the completion of a research project on branded content governance and to share the work of international researchers. Held at the London College of Communication, part of University of the Arts London, the conference brought together over 150 academics and research students as well as legal, policy, and industry practitioners. The conference invited papers on the practices and governance of branded content—content produced or funded by marketers. Researchers delivered twenty-two papers in themed panels, and distinguished scholars Joseph Turow, Sonia Livingstone, and Nick Couldry presented keynote addresses. The Branded Content Governance Project (BCGP) research team also delivered the results of their research.



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Fig. 2.

Download the 2025 conference program. [\[supp01\]](#)

BCGP is a three-year international research project (September 2022 to November 2025) funded jointly by two UK research innovation (UKRI) councils, for humanities (AHRC) and social sciences (ESRC). This ambitious project aimed to address a core question: as media and marketing merge and new forms of marketing communications proliferate, are regulations, guidance, and industry best practices keeping pace?

The BCGP team is led by three professors: Jonathan Hardy, University of the Arts London and Co-Investigators; Iain MacRury, University of Stirling; and Patricia Núñez Gómez, Complutense University, along with postdoctoral researcher Dr Maciej Wysokinski. The lead researchers also established the Branded Content Research Network in 2016, following a small grant from the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). Throughout the BCGP we've developed the network, with online "reading group" sessions and other events involving early-career researchers and leading scholars, including Mara Einstein, Michelle Amazeen, and Emily West. We now have over 150 subscribers to our mailing list, which users can self-manage, and a Microsoft Teams site with access to more resources.

The conference, organized by the BCGP team, marked a pivotal point to share findings and to provide space to other researchers to share their work, from PhD students to leading professors in communication studies. We also wanted to deliver something that has been vital throughout: dialogue with industry, regulators, and civil society groups. The BCGP team would like to thank all those who contributed as speakers and all those who travelled to take part.



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Fig. 2.

Keynote speaker Professor Joseph Turow responds to a panelist. Photo credit: Kadeen Brown (www.kadeenbrown.com, @kadeenbrown).

We were delighted to invite Professor Joseph Turow from the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania. His work examining the industrial and social implications of media and advertising has been an inspiration to our work, as to so many others. Professor Turow spoke at a 2017 Branded Content Research Network conference, so it was a great pleasure to invite him to present a 2025 keynote and closing address and to mark his retirement from Annenberg. He built on recent work and a forthcoming book to address surveillance marketing and data privacy in his presentation, "The You from Nowhere: Reframing Privacy in an AI Age." Turow set personalization within the long historic sweep of marketing, arguing that contemporary AI systems that continually track and map individuals to serve targeted messages link back directly to work of the peddlers and hawkers who noted their customers' particular preferences in the early decades of the industrial age. Yet, the continuities in this core feature of marketing should not detract, he argued, from the enormous problems of AI-accelerating personalization. Turow argued this personalization threatened the mix of segment-making and society-making media, with the prospect of a society where people routinely see the world so differently from one another that they will struggle to comprehend other's understanding of the world—a phenomena he calls *AI discombobulation*.



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Fig. 3.

Keynote speaker Professor Sonia Livingstone discusses children's vulnerability to online commercialism and what we should do to protect them. Photo credit: Kadeen Brown (www.kadeenbrown.com, @kadeenbrown).

In her keynote "Drawing the Line Between Digital Business Activities and Commercial Exploitation: A Child Rights Perspective," Professor Sonia Livingstone drew on her work as a leading architect of the digital rights of children. Professor Livingstone described the role of the Digital Futures for Children Centre she leads at the London School of Economics (LSE) as offering evidence for advocacy and policy. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child provides, she said, a holistic framework in which rights are indivisible, and she highlighted two articles of particular relevance for branded content: protection from a harmful world (now being applied to influencer marketing and to parent and child influencers) and protection from exploitation. The UN General Comment 25 calls on states to prohibit by law the profiling and targeting of children for commercial purposes. Livingstone argued that the UN principle of acting in the best interests of the child should be upheld against the commercial interests of "Big Tech." Citing toys with cameras that collect children's data, she called for regulation to mandate privacy by design and for an approach to embed or respect children's rights in digital design and playful spaces.



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Fig. 4.

Keynote speaker Professor Nick Coudry discusses the concept of data colonialism. Photo credit: Kadeen Brown (www.kadeenbrown.com, @kadeenbrown).

The conference also included a “public meeting” to bring problems in the media-marketing ecology to a wider audience, with an opening address by Professor Nick Coudry, “When the Hypernudge Becomes the Rule.” Drawing on his work on data colonialism, Coudry discussed the intensifying processes of data extraction which, he argued, followed the colonial pattern of explore, expand, exploit and exterminate. He set out the concept of data territory as “bounded online spaces from which data can be continuously and exclusively extracted.” Coudry was joined for a panel discussion by Gia Thom, Development Director at Impress, the UK’s press self-regulation organization, and Alex Murray, Head of Advocacy at the Conscious Ad Network (CAN). The panellists mixed analysis of problems across media-marketing with strategies for positive interventions on sustainability, advertising transparency, and a human rights-based approach, including support for the BCGP proposals on advertising identification and disclosure.

The conference panel sessions addressed many topics, from critical cultural brand analysis, promotional formats and cross-promotion, to influencer marketing, branded content in news and political communications, and marketing to children and young people. Key themes in sessions included AI, AdTech, KidTech, regulation, and ethics, with contributions from individuals and project teams from across Europe and North America. There was also an industry panel workshop and then main session; speakers from project partner the Branded Content Marketing Association, Gorilla Gorilla, Audience2Media, and the Influencer Marketing Trade Body joined advertising lawyer Geraint Lloyd-Taylor from project partner Lewis Silkin. Lloyd-Taylor is also active in the Global Advertising Lawyers Alliance (GALA), a key resource for expertise and data on advertising regulation that the BCGP has used.

The conference provided a key opportunity to share and discuss both BCGP findings and proposals for reform. We launched two reports. The first is the *32-Country Comparative Analysis* (Hardy et al., 2025) that is a companion to individual country reports on the law and regulation affecting branded content practices in all EU countries together with Canada, United States, Mexico, Australia and the United Kingdom.¹ The other publication, *Problems and Mitigations* is a shorter summary of key arguments and the BCGP’s recommendations on governance reform.²

About Media-Market Integration

Throughout most of the twentieth century, advertising and media were separated, albeit imperfectly, by a combination of laws, self-regulation, and professional norms. Over the last thirty years, formats blending advertising and media have proliferated, raising challenges around the identification of marketing communications and ad disclosure—for instance, how to identify sponsorship in podcasts, paid posts, and gifting transactions in influencer marketing or how to enforce rules across platforms, marketers, adtech, media providers, and creators. Our project identifies four main problem areas: consumer identification of advertising, the impact of integrated advertising on media quality and integrity, limits on marketers’ power to dominate communications, and the capacity of creative workers to act ethically.

A key insight is that while efforts have been made to align converging media with converging regulation, efforts remain woefully incoherent across media-marketing, with regulatory gaps and anomalies. For example, in the UK, a fifteen-year-old influencer on TikTok has a greater obligation to declare gifting from a brand than a professional journalist has to declare a studio-paid trip to a film set.

The BCGP recommends that the principle that all marketing communication should be recognizable—as set out in the voluntary code of the International Chamber of Commerce—should be clearly established in law as a duty on all those involved in paid advertising, which it isn’t in most countries in our study. At the same time, a mix of regulatory types is beneficial. We identify “governance-in-practice” as the reflections of practitioners, guided by industry bodies that produce best practice and codes. There is a key role for both self-regulators and statutory regulators. We propose recognising multiple “centers” of governance and focusing on better integration and interlinking between them to ensure an escalation path for effective enforcement, as well as delivering the support and training needed across the media-marketing ecology. In academic terms, we call this *integrated polycentric governance*.

We will be publishing final versions of all reports in November 2025, when the current phase of UKRI funding ends. Our other outputs include three research reports that build on our deeper comparative analysis of the UK and Spain. These are *Governance-in-Practice*, an analysis of practitioners’ views on branded content practices, ethics and governance; *Media Analysis*, a study of the reporting and discussion of branded content governance issues in professional (“trade”) and public news media; and *Policy Analysis*, a study of branded content regulation, policy actors, and processes in the UK and Spain. We also published in 2024 an interim version of a report forthcoming though open publication by Routledge, *Mapping the Media-Marketing Ecology*.³

Finally, the conference was also designed to invite suggestions and support for the development of international research collaboration. The closing session of the conference, chaired by Matt McAllister, invited discussion and demonstrated strong support for the conference and for the continuation of the network.

We do hope the BCGP publications may be of interest, and we warmly invite you to join our Branded Content Research Network mailing list or get in touch with any comments or requests by contacting bcgproject@arts.ac.uk.

Project publications: https://figshare.arts.ac.uk/BCG_Project

Project website: arts.ac.uk/branded-content-governance.

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/company/branded-content-research-network/>.

Jonathan Hardy

Jonathan Hardy is a professor of communications and media at the University of the Arts London. He is the principal investigator for the Branded Content Governance Project (ES/W007991/1) and coordinator for the Branded Content Research Network. He writes and comments on media industries, media and advertising, communications regulation, and international media systems. His books include *Sponsored Editorial Content in Digital Journalism* (editor; Routledge, 2023), *Branded Content: the Fateful Merging of Media and Marketing* (Routledge, 2022), *Critical Political Economy of the Media* (Routledge, 2014), *Cross-Media Promotion* (Peter Lang, 2010), and *Western Media Systems* (Routledge, 2008). He is coeditor of *The Advertising Handbook* (Routledge, 2018/2011) and is book series editor of Routledge's *Critical Advertising Studies*.

Footnotes

1. Jonathan Hardy et al., *Branded Content Governance: 32-Country Comparative Analysis*, University of the Arts London, September 26, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.25441/arts.29424839.v3>.
2. Jonathan Hardy, Iain MacRury, and Patricia Núñez-Gómez, *Branded Content Governance: Problems and Mitigations*, University of the Arts London, September 26, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.25441/arts.29424842.v2>.
3. All outputs can be accessed at https://figshare.arts.ac.uk/BCG_Project.

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