



THE CYBERSMILE FOUNDATION

PRESS RELEASE

The Cybersmile Foundation Launch “Modern Witch Trials” Campaign to Tackle Cancel Culture

LONDON, UK, February 6, 2024 - The Cybersmile Foundation has announced the launch of “Modern Witch Trials”, a brand new campaign designed to tackle cyberbullying and online abuse with a focus on the harmful effects of mob harassment and so-called ‘cancel culture’.

The initiative encourages people to think independently rather than to follow others, and to choose more productive ways of engaging online. The multi-channel campaign launches today to mark Safer Internet Day and will feature a combination of video content, cinema spots and support from a range of international creators and public figures.

Mob harassment is frequently confused with activism, but in reality, is completely different. Activism is a valuable part of modern life and an important driver for accountability and restorative justice - as well as being a vital component of effective allyship to minorities and marginalised communities. Contrarily, retributive mob harassment suppresses freedom of expression, reduces opportunities for meaningful dialogue and makes any chances of restorative justice almost impossible.

Dan Raisbeck, Co-founder of The Cybersmile Foundation, said, “Modern Witch Trials highlights worrying aspects of so-called ‘cancel culture’ and group justice mentality. We must do more to promote diversity of thought and independent thinking to save social media from continuing to be used as a weapon for retribution. We need to help people understand the importance of proportionate, restorative justice - which prioritises improving people, and society”.

Modern Witch Trials was created as part of a partnership between The Cybersmile Foundation and JOAN Creative, an independent agency founded in New York back in 2016 with their first London shop opening in 2023.

Tom Ghiden, Managing Director at JOAN London, said, "We're delighted to be working with The Cybersmile Foundation. Upon meeting the team, we were immediately aligned to their founding principles and mission: that everyone should have an equal right to access and enjoy our connected world. It spoke to our core beliefs here at JOAN London, and spurred us on to use creativity to make a better online society for all. We love the work Cybersmile have done to date, and we are extremely proud to have been part of their latest campaign, to tackle this very complex and polarising issue, and bring this to life in a compelling way."

For the campaign, The Cybersmile Foundation has also partnered with Chromista, the production company of Hollywood director Darren Aronofsky (Black Swan and The Whale), Ted Robbins, Adina Birnbaum, and Scott Franklin, to create a powerful short film. The hard-hitting creative, directed by Emmy Award nominee and Venice Film Festival winner Eliza McNitt, demonstrates how historical mob justice has now been 'upgraded' from 17th century witch hunts with burning torches in Salem, to online mobs weaponising the power of the internet and social media to destroy people's lives.

The campaign rollout is being supported by a forty second cinema spot playing at theaters across the UK, in partnership with Pearl & Dean - a cinema advertising company representing a wide range of cinemas, with multiplex chains at landmark locations.

"We are thrilled to partner with the Cybersmile Foundation to showcase this powerful film. We know that Cinema advertising reaches consumers in an exclusive, distraction-free environment and this in turn encourages deeper messaging, which is key around such important campaigns," said Cristina Duffy, Head of Agency Trading at Pearl & Dean.

The problem of mob harassment and cancel culture on social media is a global phenomenon, with a number of high-profile cases even attracting the attention of Barack Obama. The former President recently shared his concerns about the issue, highlighting the difference between activism and empty public call-outs, "There is this sense sometimes of 'the way of me making change is to be as judgmental as possible about other people', and that's enough. Like if I tweet or hashtag about how you didn't do something right, or used the wrong word or verb, then I can sit back and feel pretty good about myself, because man you see how woke I was. I called you out. That's not activism. That's not bringing about change". Adding, "If all you're doing is casting stones, you're probably not going to get very far, that's easy to do".

Recent examples of mob harassment in popular culture include:

Greta Thunberg - Since childhood, Swedish climate-activist Greta Thunberg, who suffers from Asperger's Syndrome, OCD and selective mutism, has experienced relentless mob harassment following her passionate speech at the UN Climate Summit where she was savagely mocked for telling world leaders "You have stolen my dreams and my childhood".

Jameela Jamil - The British actress, activist and podcaster experienced sustained mob harassment over her judging role in HBO Max's new show 'Legendary', a voguing competition series that commentators online felt should only feature queer black and Latinx people as judges due to the history of ball culture. Jameela felt pressured to open up about her own sexuality and came out publicly as bisexual soon after - something she had wanted to do in her own time.

Rebecca Black - At age 13, Rebecca released a song called 'Friday' which was written for and aimed at other teenage girls. Soon after release, mob harassment began with death threats as well as abuse targeted at her. Bullies encouraged her to kill herself while telling her repeatedly that she'd never have a career in music.

Kelly Marie Tran - The American actress was the target of sustained mob harassment after landing the role of Rose Tico in 'Star Wars: The Last Jedi'. She was viciously targeted about her body and Vietnamese heritage resulting in Kelly being forced to delete her social media accounts and retreat from public life.

The campaign message for more productive use of social media echoes similar calls from researchers who have previously examined online mob harassment and vigilante-type behaviours.

Sarita Schoenebeck, Associate Professor of Information at the University of Michigan, voiced her concerns following the publication of the University's 'When Online Harassment is Perceived as Justified' report in 2018, stating, "The problem I'm concerned about is that people are punishing each other in ways that are unfair, inconsistent, and often disproportionate. I'd like to see more people trained in principles of fairness and due process and then use them in their online interactions. I also think there's a lot more we can do to train people in their roles as bystanders online."

Tips for Engaging Productively Online

Independent thinking rather than following the crowd isn't always the easiest option. Sometimes it requires a lot of patience, forgiveness, tolerance and compassion but the rewards are worth the effort. Consider the following when contributing to online debate or conversation:

- 1. Remember:** Words are powerful and have consequences. Try to be mindful of the words you use online, the effect that these words can have on whoever you connect with, and the impact that they can have on the wider audience.

2. Be Aware: Online mob justice can often end in the ‘punishment’ being completely out of proportion to any alleged wrongdoing. This can result in people losing their friends, families, careers, or even their lives.

3. Be Honest: We all make mistakes and it’s important that we allow each other the opportunity to learn from them. Consider using your voice to elevate productive and meaningful conversations and help others to learn and grow from their mistakes rather than tearing them down publicly.

4. Encourage: Look for opportunities to encourage people to see things from different perspectives and discuss the importance of forgiveness, reconciliation, restoration and rehabilitation - integral to all forms of justice.

5. Consider: By contacting someone privately and “calling them in” rather than publicly “calling them out”, you can still press the need for accountability but in a humane and balanced way. Supplying links to resources or information to the person offers them opportunities to learn and grow from the situation - likely resulting in a more positive outcome instead of public shaming.

ABOUT JOAN CREATIVE

JOAN Creative has been breaking the mould for what it means to be a small agency since its inception in New York in 2016. A formidable challenger, this female founded independent serves as a global offering of a big agency, while bringing the creativity, ageility and fire of a small agency.

Their first London shop opened in 2023 with the ambition to continue the JOAN legacy for being one of the most creative and forward-thinking agencies with a strong house style, powerful purpose-driven initiatives, and award-winning pro bono work.

With a joyfully rebellious spirit, JOAN London’s vision is to do things differently, with the belief that diversity of thought creates not just great work, but also the ability to make modern brands legendary and legendary brands modern.

ABOUT CHROMISTA

Chromista is a creative content company focused on melding storytelling with brands to create evocative advertising. They offer solutions for all media platforms including commercial, social, experiential and beyond. Founded by award winning director, Darren

Aronofsky, Chromista is an extension of his feature film company Protozoa which offers some of the best development capabilities in the film and television industry.

ABOUT THE CYBERSMILE FOUNDATION

The Cybersmile Foundation is a multi-award-winning nonprofit organization committed to digital wellbeing and tackling all forms of bullying and abuse online. We work to promote kindness, diversity and inclusion by building a safer, more positive digital community. Through education, research, awareness campaigns and the promotion of positive digital citizenship we reduce incidents of cyberbullying and through our professional help and support services we empower those affected and their families to regain control of their lives.

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