



Le Brand



2020 Global Brand Letter - June Edition

“I have nothing to say and I am saying it.” - John Cage

“Here is some great Covid-19 preventative measures you can take to protect you and your family from my wonderful niece Barbara.” - Facebook post

“The most bitter remorse is for the sins one did not commit.” - old aphorism from the Oaxacaños

Allow me to engage in simultaneous pre-emptive branding and transgressive advocacy. Let's practice black-hat tactics, deploy some generative adversarial networks, all in anticipation of an exogenous shock. Nothing stops hypersonic weapons, geofencing or flagrant patent trolling. Counterrevolutionary retro backlash enables a vector for reverse transmission. Recommended antidote: neuroplasticity.

Updates

“Gaia is like Netflix, but instead of entertainment you get enlightenment.” - Gaia member

Advertising

The *pain of being unable to return to the past* is the trick-of-last-resort historically pulled out of the hat by advertising agencies when all else fails. Hardly the first tactic used in these **plague-ridden days**, with billboards gone blank at what were once the busiest intersections in New York, London and Tokyo. Fewer citizens prowl the lanes, outdoor advertising the first casualty, followed by FB's ad business, and Amazon's evaporating Google shopping pitches. Digital ad spends plunge, giant agencies suspend fall forecasts and the Cannes Lions postpone, then cancel their yearly back-patting bacchanal. Still, the industry continues to pack smartphones, building facades, stadium backdrops and movies with brand messages, and clogs our inboxes with promotional emails. It believes itself to be the lifeblood of tv networks, podcast companies, news outlets, lifestyle publications, and all of the internet. Yet major production studios have shut down while handmade messages increase in number. The bean-counters swear each ad dollar spent in the US leads to \$9 in sales, but will that math hold true once the New Frugality kicks in? Pre-Covid-19, the ad industry employed a half million people in the US alone. Mmmm, let's see, at 30% unemployment that means only 350K remain to populate the Digital Marketing, Social Media, Insight, Customer Experience and Customer Service teams who create ads, source services and buy advice for companies eager to protect their good names. Their recommendations: 1) Keep ads away from media reports or articles that include outbreak-related keywords; 2) Shift messaging to what is most useful to customers; 3) Run ads which underscore the theme of isolation; 4) Resurrect nostalgia.

Ogilvy cautioned against making **over-optimistic remarks** like *a return to normality could arrive suddenly and without warning*. Instead, they advise stressing community building, humanizing everybody, reminding customers we're all in this together. They counsel creating campaigns which express solidarity with relief and containment efforts which strike the appropriate tone, though they do not say what tone precisely that means.

It remains to be seen if **fashion** has learnt its lesson following a succession of advertising flubs last year. Tomorrow's luxury consumer will be more sensitive about culture, society and environment. A Gucci jumper depicting blackface resulted in a remedial Changemakers program which offers scholarships, and channels public statements about equity and inclusion. D&G's insensitive campaign in China, followed by Gabbana's racist tweets led to the brand being shunned by the world's biggest luxury market; it suffered a 98% reduction of sales, and never recovered. Burberry showed a hoodie with a noose during its catwalk and faced accusations of glorifying suicide. Dior lost face by appropriating Native American memes - even their associations with Johnny Depp and the Rosebud Sioux tribe couldn't obliterate finger-wagging over the racist product name Savage. An in-focus cultural snapshot of the times?

Business models for **global sport** were built around live events. With the current disruption, the playing field has changed. Two parallel economies co-exist, those who pump money into the games, and those who take money out of them, a cash ecosystem of services and related goods worth \$489bn in 2018. Not all scenarios will play out like the Tokyo Olympics, postponed for two years, where insurance is expected to recoup the majority of carrying costs. A projected 28m American households are expected to cancel their cable tv subscriptions by end of year. In the face of fewer live events, football teams go bankrupt, golf is shuttered and Formula One's calendar has been truncated. Big players are slashing marketing and sponsorship budgets and leading athletes accept pay cuts. Bailouts are in the offing, and enterprises borrow against their cash reserves. Forecasts are outdated. How to fill the surplus airtime with billions of eager, passionate fans? Supply is scarce for shows that are best watched live and unscripted. Promoters plan to add fake virtual crowds to empty stadiums. It may not transform cherry pit spitting and hamburger eating contests, entertainments ESPN has proposed, into compelling viewing. Following a riot of fans at the Pompeii amphitheatre in AD 59, the Emperor Domitian shut down gladiatorial games for 10 years. In real-time post-Covid web world, people are bound to grow impatient after two months.

If you find yourself tempted to plop down \$35 for a 100-piece jigsaw puzzle of the orange dude against a background of the American flag, on offer in Trump's online campaign store, congratulations. You've jumped onto the virtue signaling bandwagon, where **merch** plays an important role in campaign fundraising. Call it the e-commerce approach to political marketing. Items of merch act as devices to capture contact information, later used to solicit donations and tender invitations to volunteer. In this peculiar universe, *rapid response merch*, all made on demand and in-the-moment is tailored to trending items and aimed at people stuck at home. Trump's signature red MAGA cap remains a top-seller. But recently a 10-pack of high quality politicized plastic straws, made in USA, priced at \$15, packaged under the tagline "Liberal straws don't work - buy your pack of recyclable straws today," sold more than \$1m of goods. It's not limited to the Republicans. Warren's campaign shop featured a bestseller coffee mug legended *Billionaire Tears*. Caveat emptor: each product carries a reputational risk.

Product placement got smarter, thanks to streaming and interactive television technologies. New tricks for inserting logos and prop packages that appear onscreen can be based on who is watching and when. Companies already target viewers by age, location, and where they like to shop. Streaming services have direct access to more detailed information on their customers. They have crafted platforms and ad-supported apps which individualize brands into shows and

films based on data generated by interactive programming. The capability was refined with the aid of *virtual product placement companies* who have figured out how to exploit captive audiences binge-watching series. One Netflix test group was given the option to vote on how a story unfolded. Watchers were also asked to choose between two breakfast cereals, Quaker Sugar Puffs or Kellogg's Frosties, to determine which would appear in a commercial on a TV in the show's background. Clicking remotes provided Netflix with data on subscriber preferences, and drove personalized insertion of brands into streaming shows.

One industry has yet to successfully quit its evil ways. The tobacco product known as **Juul** romanticized high-tech nicotine intake by selling vape pens that resembled cool flash drives offered in designer colors. Turns out the SF-based company initially stubbed out a marketing proposal positioning it as a technology company with a target audience of adult smokers. Instead, Juul used advertising to attract young non-smokers during its 2017 launch, appealing to teenagers and even younger children. A viral uptake contributed to the epidemic of underage vaping. The company attempted to recruit celebrities, bought spots on the Cartoon Network and other youth sites, and ran ads on math-themed educational sites frequented by young girls and high school students. They placed product in 850 stores in Massachusetts and were cited by the FDA for selling to underage teens. Their customer service sent emails advising young puffers how to get around age restrictions. A far cry from blowing smoke, eight states filed suit against Juul over carcinogenic marketing practices.

"The limits of my language are the limits of my world", wrote the philosopher Wittgenstein

AI

Should you want to hear something really really creepy, why not lend an ear to the reedy, otherworldly tenor of the ancient **Egyptian priest Nesyamun**, whose mummy was placed in the Karnak Temple in Thebes in 1100 BC. Enough of his throat remained intact to be scanned by a team of speech scientists at Royal Holloway, University of London, who then 3-D printed a replica of the cleric's mouth, larynx and trachea and hooked it up to a digital sound generator. The single nightmarish tone, "ehhhhhh," which echoes across three millennia sounds like a weird incantation from a 1930s horror movie.

"Everybody wants to be Cary Grant. Even I want to be Cary Grant," said Cary Grant.

Celebrity

Hubris assumed epic proportions as **famous faces** crafted home-made messages and remote missives while the rest of the world self-isolated. Gal Gadot kicked off the disillusion with high profile friends performing a slapdash cover version of John Lennon's *Imagine*. David Geffen tweeted that he was riding out the pandemic in the Grenadines, adding a photo of his 454 foot yacht *Rising Sun*. Madonna, nude, pontificated from a rose petal filled bathtub, and called the pandemic *a great equalizer*. Ellen DeGeneres phone-pranked bold-faced pals from a luxurious living room with a *Basquiat* on the wall in the background.

"*Messieurs, c'est les microbes qui auront le dernier mot.*" - Louis Pasteur

Epiphanies

Now begins the unanticipated age of sweatpants as **fashion and luxury** contemplate the deeper existential questions of the universe. An industry which gleefully leveraged social media and enjoyed record-breaking sales attributed to celebrity collaborations now confronts accusations of an excessively wasteful fast-fashion model, one worn thin with eco-sensitive influencers. A significant polluter, the *schmatta* business is responsible for more of the world's CO2 emissions than the international aviation and shipping industries combined. Synthetic fibres are being found in the deep sea and only 13% of total material in the clothing industry is recycled. A brand named Material World, which sells pre-owned luxury items to subscribers, even fell victim to accusations of greenwashing. Brands that preferred to over-manufacture by 30-40% have been making far too much product for far too long. Much ends up incinerated or in landfills. Runway shows suddenly appear outrageously extravagant. Count on fashion's environmental impact to drop sharply this year as manufacturers produce less, and less often. Concurrently if they want to improve their reputation, they will need to better ensure the welfare of their workforce. Customers will be forced to buy more at full price, and wait for discounts at the end of season. Department stores will consolidate and disappear, yielding transactions to online shopping. The first category to rebound should be big luxury brands, whose items will be regarded as investment pieces which hold their resale value. Retail will relocate to digital platforms which rely on improved showroom support. After this kind of migration, brands will capture more data, know more about you and eventually figure out fresh methods to sell you new product.

Joe Btfstplk, a cartoon character created by the American satirist Al Capp, brings gross misfortune to everyone he meets. He travels under a dark cloud which follows him wherever he goes. His unpronounceable name is similar to unrecognizable trademarks you happen upon in social media, used by pseudo-brands you've never heard of, advertising disparate categories of goods you don't really want, created for sale on **Amazon**. Under such tongue-twisting monikers Bezos & Co has registered hundreds of its own market-researched identifiers which represent a large and growing portion of the monopolist's business. These bftstplk vendors work against fundamental understandings about brands which in the best of worlds deliver reliable behaviors over time. Their strategy entails using guerilla marketing, black-hat tactics, fake reviews, click farming, competitor sabotage, selling product until the market gets flooded, then moving on. It's a scenario where the name of the brand has become increasingly less important even though these are goods sold under the Amazon banner, through Amazon Prime, fulfilled by Amazon, shipped in an Amazon box, purchased through an Amazon device. Only the company store matters, no longer the products, no longer the brand.

Does Ivanka spell *quid pro quo* 为了某物? Last year 14% of all **US trademarks** were filed by Chinese applicants. In August 2019 Chinese law firms reached out to US counterparts inquiring about idle trademarks and whether they might be up for sale.

Crowds On Demand, an LA company established in 2012 by a UCLA poli sci grad, furnishes **rental mobs** for trade shows, campaign rallies and protests. You can even pay to have celeb clients thronged by fake paparazzi outside posh boutiques. "Our business is about cultivating perception. It's basic marketing, far less misleading than TV ads," the founder says. Initially geared toward corporate events and PR stunts, the business has matured. Trump paid actors \$50 each to cheer at his campaign launch. Synthetic crowds generate buzz and media

coverage, to the point that it is impossible to distinguish inauthentic from grassroots fervor. Other international crowd companies offer from 2 people to hundreds, some able to muster more than 1000 warm bodies. With sports organizations about to digitally populate empty stadiums, this type of business may no longer require sentient humans.

Our kids are finally coming to their senses, if the fragrance providers can be believed. Millennial customers pushing for natural, vegan, sustainable essences are **transforming the perfume business**. They're sniffing about for more transparency and universal, gender-neutral scents, often citrus-based. Along with the demand for natural botanical smells, there's a wariness of greenwashing. Young customers want to know the artisan making their perfume. In response to the limitation of natural musk scent, most products in the perfume industry now contain synthetic molecules. Gucci's *Mémoire d'une Odeur*, released in August 2019, features a retro unisex package designed to fulfill longings for the recent past.

Replacing Boomer as the internet villain of choice, **Karen** is the new meme for obnoxious grown-ups. She's an archetypal middle-aged woman who does not understand fashion - the annoying, interfering adult you love to disdain. Shorthand for bigots, she's also the object of sexist jokes on TikTok, the most efficient black hole for time-wasting currently known to 800m daily users. A frivolous algorithm, its chief currency is dance moves, in-jokes and the latest youthful obsession.

"No matter how much the cats fight, there always seem to be plenty of kittens." - Abraham Lincoln

Gaming

Before the pandemic, shares in Nintendo, which relies on hardware sales for over half its revenues, had plunged by almost 9%. Coincidental with the acceleration in the viral outbreak in China, **app downloads surged**. Cloistered citizens sought alternative methods to resume daily activities remotely. During the lockdown they downloaded a record number of 222m games. The number of education apps running doubled. Orders boomed in Apple's online Chinese store. Coupled with the prospect of more smartphone purchases by homebound Chinese, projections point to a bumper year for the \$150bn global games industry.

The problem with games is that they can take a long time to learn. The good thing about games is that they can take a long time to learn. The joy comes from **cognitive engagement**, and the ability to do things like fly a spacecraft around and say "pew pew pew." The people you are playing with are often more important than what you are playing, thus explaining the social allure of streaming and live broadcast gameplay. Different games yield different benefits. Red Dead Redemption, for example, is known for the best dialogue in the business.

The top-selling 2020 pandemic game title, Nintendo's **Animal Crossing**, a gentle and creative family-friendly distraction, led the lockdown boom in video gaming. It provided a peaceful island fantasy where users could plant flowers, catch butterflies, decorate homes, customize outfits, go fishing, exchange fruit, and speculate on the price of turnips. It beat out the hugely popular *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* which previously dominated the market with snipers, graphic car chases and explosions. Both titles enjoyed a surge in in-game spending, where item sales rack up multiple microtransactions on which most mobile game revenue models are built. A buck

here, \$5 there, can add up quickly. Sales on ecommerce sites increased. A new constituency of users substituted sports simulators as surrogates for watching live broadcasts.

Money launderers quickly discovered video games **an easy channel for creative fraud-sourcing**. *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive*, a popular title from Seattle-based Valve, provided fertile terrain for scammers. Games mint their own currencies without facing the same oversight as financial institutions, a vulnerability exploitable in online marketplaces. Companies have largely avoided burdensome requirements or anti-money laundering regulations. Counter Strike created *container keys* used to obtain in-game items such as guns, rare knives or limited edition stickers. Nearly all key purchases that end up being traded or sold in the marketplace are believed to be fraud-sourced and used to liquidate larger gains from other kinds of illicit activities. Players can still trade items for Valve games, from a catalog of hundreds of weapons which may cost hundreds of dollars. A Bright Water flip knife or a Souvenir Army Universal Gun start at \$1800 and trade on eBay. Fortnite, another popular game, saw its in-game currency V-bucks discounted and sold on the dark web.

Online games carry an additional risk: **privacy**. Players freely surrender data to these platforms.

“A frat party that descended from a UFO and invaded the federal government.” - a senior official at FEMA, describing people Kushner embedded in the agency

Influencers

Did you hear the one about the 2015 survey for a national convenience store chain that examined **anti-influencers**? A team of marketing professors at Northwestern University looked at consumers who are systemically drawn to flops, based on data from the chain's loyalty card program. About 25% of customers consistently took home products that did not succeed, individuals the researchers called *harbingers of failure*. Many products debut to strong sales and positive customer feedback, then come to an ignominious end. The researchers searched for larger correlations, but to no avail. They did identify harbinger ZIP codes, pockets of the country that consistently gravitate toward unsuccessful new products, but found little else. A comparison with contributions to congressional campaigns indicated some preference in those areas for candidates who end up losing their races. But age, ethnicity, gender, income did not matter. Some folks always picked the dogs.

Via a sponsored ad, FB habitués were invited to become a **Gates Notes Insider**, to stay updated on efforts to tackle global issues and to *participate in giveaways and more*.

In the heat of the Covid-19 testing frenzy, few details emerged on how they gained access, but public figures swiftly moved to **the front of the line**. The rich and famous obtained the coronavirus test without exhibiting symptoms. Celebrities had a far easier time. Press officers explained that the tests were obtained through private companies to avoid using public resources.

The four-year old synthfluencer **L'il Miquela** (b. April 2016) signed a management contract with the CAA talent agency for a half million dollars. She impersonates a freckled teenager, and brings with her over 2m IG followers as she endorses product, records songs, breaks up with a boyfriend online and reports on it all in a professionally-authored social media voice. What makes her unique is that as a digital creation she never ages. One CAA exec calls her *a true*

multi-hyphenate. Top Hollywood agents are busy signing all the sentient influencers they can as the fame landscape shifts: a new generation of carbon-based talent creates, self-broadcasts, and shares it with the world. Welcome to the age of handmade. The influencer marketing industry is expected to top \$15bn by 2022. Internet-native stars often succeed at generating the thing agencies care most about: cash. Their merch drops never see a retail store; business decisions get instantly vetted by IG followers; meet-and-greets via Facetime save location costs; and an ongoing churn of new digital platforms provide endless, albeit short term, opportunities.

For proof positive that **brands can't save you**, look no further than Trump's lineup of CEOs assembled to validate his daily coronavirus briefings. Corporations could not be expected to rush in and fill the competence void. FB decides who gets to run political ads, healthcare monopolies set how much you will pay for insulin, and Covid-19 controls the death rate.

"The absence of bad luck in life is the most important thing." - Peter Piot

Obits

Joyce Gordon, 90

A bespectacled pitchwoman, she broke many a glass ceiling onscreen and off, confidently wearing her signature eyeglasses as she delivered live, on-air advertising pitches for products like Crisco and Duncan Hines cake mixes. She was known for her voice in radio and television through commercials and announcements. Moviegoers heard her in dubbed foreign films as Annie Girardot, Claudia Cardinale and Jeanne Moreau, and for other stars in films by Bergman, Renoir and Visconti. She was the first woman to head a local unit of the SAG union, first woman to serve as TV announcer on a national political convention, the first to do on-air network promotions, the first television hostess to wear glasses while appearing on the cover of TV Guide. Her glasses were not a prop, and she believed they gave her identity and authority. But she will be most remembered by millions of telephone callers who in the 1980s heard her voice inform them that "the number you have reached is no longer in service."

Johanna Lindsey, 67

Ranked among the leading romance writers of her time, Lindsey's stories of unbridled passion, revenge, submission and abductions among aristocrats, debutantes, pirates and fearless heroines sold over 60 million copies. Producing two books a year, during her career she turned out nearly 60 saucy titles, sci-fi bodice rippers, tales of romantic and sexual surrender, among them *Beautiful Tempest*, *Wildfire In His Arms*, *The Devil Who Tamed Her* and *Captive Bride*.

Peregrine Pollen, 89

Possessed of an evocative name, this graduate of Eton and Oxford introduced a note of theatricality to the stuffy NY auction scene in the 1960s. After Sotheby's acquired Parke-Bernet, he was named president and brought music, fashion shows and even a rock concert to the staid galleries. His 1967 blockbuster show *Treasures of the Spanish Main* was a media sensation, featured items from a fleet of Spanish ships wrecked off Florida in 1715, and included a trunk of gold coins offered for sale only to children.

Mal Sharpe, 83

One of the pioneers of the street-level pranking and a godfather to the observational comedy genre, along with partner Jim Coyle in the 1960s he played countless tricks on unsuspecting

passers-by. He influenced the whole field of ambush humor, documenting their escapades with a tape recorder hidden in a briefcase. In an era when comedy albums enjoyed a surge in popularity, he tormented the man on the street with elaborate stunts with titles like *Selling Insects to a Clothing Store*. His records did not sell well. An unflappable cool guy who could pass for a square, in days of yore - and unlike social media jokers today - the pranksters and their targets usually parted as friends, mostly thanks to his genial personality.

"Cairo writes. Beirut prints. Baghdad reads." - Old Arabic saying

Place branding

Jacinda Ardern, the **New Zealand** PM who went to the UN General Assembly with her 3-month old daughter in her arms, announced on March 24 that the Easter Bunny and the Tooth Fairy were to be considered essential workers. She acknowledged that given the nature of the job the Tooth Fairy might have it easier than the Easter Bunny during the pandemic. "If the Easter Bunny doesn't make it to your household," she reassured anxious children, "then we have to understand that it's a bit difficult at the moment."

Bangkok, a metropolis of 10 million, suffers from an excess of crowds, clutter and health hazards. Street food vendors have become a target of some of the capital's planners, and **Thailand** is on track to lose some of its distinctive olfactory branding. The Deputy Governor, government bureaucracy, and metropolitan administration have mounted a sidewalk cleanup campaign, even after Michelin began recognizing street stalls as a national treasure. These may be your last days to catch the scents of coconut wood, chili fumes, lime rind, salted crab, fermented fish paste, palm sugar, green papaya, soups fortified with lemon grass, or glutinous rice dumplings in the open air. The city fathers haven't considered the socioeconomic impact if street food customers were forced to switch to food courts or convenience store fare. The action would disproportionately affect the 80% of street food purveyors who are female.

Unfortunately there's not a lot of evidence that the wacky and colorful characters used to lure tourists and investment to cities in **Japan** since the 1980s are delivering economic benefits any longer. Cities and regions are quietly mothballing them. The mascot craze was designed to inspire a sense of national connection. Mountains of *merch*, YouTube channels, dances, slick tourism websites, sticker editions, once drove up tourism. But a 2018 vote-rigging scandal at the *yuru-chara* Grand Prix, an annual gathering to crown Japan's king of cute, heralded a decline. Gone were the days when Kumamoto on the island of Kyushu reaped a \$1.2bn economic windfall in 2 years after its mascot, Kumamon won the first Grand Prix in 2011.

Mumbai police installed sound-monitoring devices that detect horn noise at especially loud urban traffic intersections. The more horns, the longer the red light doesn't change. They even put up signs reading *Honk More Wait More*. A Bollywood-produced video dramatizing the experiment went viral. In India drivers constantly sound their horns to warn, announce a daring maneuver, berate, or tell the sluggish to move. Many vehicles have the legend "Horn Please" painted on the back. Authorities will soon install honking meters so citizens can judge for themselves.

Ischgl, a ski resort with a reputation as the party capital of the **Austrian Alps**, operated under the motto "Relax. If you can." With its 39km of ski slopes, the city fathers no longer focus on

relaxation. The hamlet is now considered to be one of Europe's most notorious hotbeds of coronavirus infection. It's alleged that local authorities warned people and closed hotels and bars too late. Tourists from Israel to Singapore were infected with Covid-19 while skiing, then unknowingly brought the virus back to their home countries. In what is likely to trigger a wave of legal actions, guests are preparing class-action lawsuits against Tyrolean authorities asserting that they put greed ahead of people's wellbeing. Prosecutors opened a preliminary investigation.

"Murder unplanned is too easily traced." - Mickey Spillane

Privacy

Let us now ponder the demise of public anonymity. For over 20 years, police departments have made use of **facial recognition** tools, mostly limited to searching government databases such as mug shots and drivers licenses. Newer algorithms have improved accuracy, and companies like Amazon offer products that can create a facial recognition program for any database of images. They still carry the risk of misidentification because of the *doppelgänger effect*. A California company recently pointed out that typically surveillance cameras are placed too high - the angle being wrong for good face recognition. The company, Clearview AI, has a groundbreaking facial recognition app, its database of 3bn images scraped from FB, YouTube, Venmo and millions of other websites, far beyond anything ever constructed by the US government or Silicon Valley. But FB and other social media sites prohibit people from scraping users' images. Even so, more than 600 law enforcement agencies are using the app, without any public oversight. Clearview says the app can be paired with augmented reality glasses, but the company's capability to protect its own data is untested, even though they have the ability to monitor the folks law enforcement is searching for. Don't hold your breath waiting for a strong federal privacy law.

That which is funny may fall victim to working from home and communicating at a distance. Immature and risky technologies like Zoom will allow powerful algorithms in collusion with ubiquitous sensors to become the norm. Beloved smartphones with their face-recognizing cameras facilitate totalitarian surveillance, abetted by their bosom buddies data breaches. Israel's recent authorization of technology normally reserved for terrorists was seamlessly redeployed to track movements of coronavirus patients. Anger, joy, boredom and love are all biological phenomena just like a fever and a cough, and biometric surveillance systems like these could easily identify laughs, monitor humor. Once the algorithms know what makes us LOL it's a short leap to manipulating our feelings. Data-driven brands then gain the potential to alter our idea of what is funny, and sell us anything they want.

"My father warned me about men and booze, but he never said anything about women and cocaine." - Tallulah Bankhead

Social Media

FB removed 700 accounts with ties to Epoch Media Group, the parent company of Falun Gong. With the help of AI, fake profile photos proliferated via **coordinated inauthentic behavior**. The network focused on support of Trump and sent messages in opposition to the Chinese government.

William F. Buckley Jr. once said John Simon “reviewed movies in the same sense that pigeons review statues.”

Vocabulary

black elephant - a cross between an unlikely, unexpected event with enormous ramifications and a looming disaster that is visible to everyone which no one wants to address

dead cat bounce - a temporary recovery of asset prices from a prolonged decline or a bear market, followed by the continuation of the downtrend

MMS - Magical Mineral Solution, chlorine dioxide products that have found favor with online conspiracy theorists and fringe activist hawkers

MMT - Magic Money Tree, mythological place where bankrupt governments go to fund politically popular initiatives; also, *Modern Monetary Theory*. Take your pick.

mootah - 1950s slang for cannabis

Plumps - Publicly Listed Unicorns Miserably Performing

spooncon - the result when influencers fail to disclose paid social media campaigns

WFH - Working From Home, but you knew about that already

xenobots - minuscule blobs of jury-rigged frog cells capable of a pulse and an appetite, and of executing computer-driven functions as if with minds of their own

"The problem with the world is that the intelligent people are full of doubts, while the stupid ones are full of confidence." - Charles Bukowski

What is a brand?

Suffering a case of seasonal *brand disillusion*? It's understandable with all the activity out there deliberately in the service of undermining trust. You can simultaneously love and loathe the brands you use every day. On one hand Google is fast and efficient and helps you research, translate, be entertained, keep track of your kids. On the other hand they control the news you receive, the products you search for, and your cloud storage. And they have the temerity to charge for it. Nobody, repeat nobody, pays you for your data that they so blithely capture and resell. Fashion brands you once loved look sullen and irrelevant, overpriced and unreliable.

This may explain the increase in *brand hijacking*, where symbology is co-opted in the interest of revisionist history, editorializing, snark or profit. It confuses the landscape when a pirated player steps forward and sounds like or looks like a stalwart friend, especially one who's invested a lifetime of vision + action only to be devalued or distracted by a copycat.

A brand used to be a reliable and consistent signal of fundamental values.

In the interest of returning to the dialog of clear thinking allow me to offer a short brand quiz to complete this letter.

2020 BRAND QUIZ

Guess the brand described below.

1. A brand whose entire premise is based on recreation, now a symbol for cultural insensitivity, pollution and colonialism.
2. A brand built on technological innovation, now associated with planned obsolescence and flimsy product quality.
3. A brand with visionary sustainability IQ but low workplace standards.
4. A brand dedicated to convenience and choice, now faced with accusations of monopolistic behavior and mistreatment of workforce.
5. A brand founded on lofty ethical expectations, now viewed as a promoter of disinformation.

Answers: 1. Coca-Cola 2. Apple 3. Tesla 4. Amazon 5. Google

We'll take up the discussion again in the new year, promise.
Have a great return to The New Normal.



DiGanZi