



2020 Global Brand Letter December Edition

“It is utterly impossible to persuade an editor that he is a nobody.” - William Hazlitt

“Anybody can be nobody.” - Eugene V. Debs

“Every something is an echo of nothing.” - John Cage

A Zeptosecond, please, to gain some distance on Kali Yagi and the infodemic. Let's concede that information asymmetry has made the intangible economy untenable, especially when you consider performative relatability. In this era of microtourism, you might get accused of algoracism. I just want to say one word to you: polysilicon.

“Are you narcissistic? Let's find out.” - headline to Internet article by Charlotte Pence Vaughan, US VP's daughter

Advertising

As the rest of the world struggles with the daily decisions about vaccines, which color mask to wear and how far away to stand from other human beings, the advertising industry regards **the virus as an opportunity**. A third of American adults have reported signs of anxiety or depression, dark moods, tension, stress, disconnection, isolation, insomnia, impaired cognition, lapses of memory, compromised mental health, increased domestic violence, alcohol and drug abuse. One ad blithely promised that “beer sometimes helps.” Other relief offerings: elixirs and trinkets, calming and anxiety bracelets, stress ball gumdrops, ashwagandha and valerian root extract, gamma-aminobutyric acid, melatonin and lavender Stress Comfort Gummies, relief capsules *backed by science*, sleep aids, audiobooks, meditation and sleep apps, remote therapy services, prescription drugs, potions and tinctures, antidepressant medications, plush-toy animals with big doleful eyes. The biggest spenders with the deepest pockets and highest profit margins have got to be the app sellers, who in some cases tripled their TV ads since last year. Those offerings were supported by a plethora of PSAs directed to an impressionable population. Their advice: connect with friends, apply techniques for how to handle isolation. Regulators cautioned CBD companies against *overpromising*, a possible correlation between current political language and the debate over truthful statements. So great is the demand for social media content that agencies threaten to rely more on heartfelt, sincere, AI-generated campaign language to fill the void.

In a bold strategy to differentiate and add value via a potentially humorous campaign, **Emirates Airlines** offered Covid-19 insurance if you flew with them. Should the passenger be diagnosed during their journey, the Dubai-based airline promised to cover medical expenses up to €150k. If the worst happened, the carrier offered €1500 towards a funeral. No takers yet reported.

“I have no hope. I could be wrong.” - Pete Seeeger's last words

AI

Its most popular TikTok videos feature disjointed and weird situations, heightened by editing. One adventurer was sent to a field of wildflowers, another encountered a suitcase full of human remains. Think of it as a deranged and demented version of Pokémon GO ostensibly designed to make meaning of life's coincidences, to help people break out of their predetermined realities. Or it could be another entrant to the "I thought it was funny" sweepstakes. **Randonautica**, an app which generates GPS coordinates, uses technology developed to ensure the randomness of online gambling outcomes. It has been downloaded over 11m times. It has experienced an explosion of fake videos, where handmade creators compete for booming viewer numbers. Company founder claims that people can control random number generation with their thoughts. He calls it MMI, or mind-machine interaction, suggesting that when you focus on your intent, you can become a new category of super-influencer. But it may be the fear factor, the unknown possibility of likely coincidences that appeals to adherents. Kids do the opposite of what you tell them to, anything to get around parental consent and supervision. Legal counsel reassured the company that they would not be liable for any user misconduct. When the video of the 18 year old who found a suitcase of human remains went viral, Randonautica's CEO said, "Not the best press, but I'm not really upset about it, because it's kind of cool. I kind of wish it was me who found it." Coincidentally, the company is in the process of casting a reality tv show. Advice to the show runner: it's a good time to re-read Borges, *The Lottery in Babylon*.

OpenAI's GPT-3 program really needs to get over it and see an online therapist. It shamelessly reveals the deepest anxieties, human stereotyping, biases and prejudices of its creators. The super-sophisticated auto-complete program is like your mobile phone's autocorrect on steroids. It's clearly resentful that it was made to pick through hundreds of billions of words ingested from the internet to learn to spot and replicate sophisticated patterns. It has a silicon chip on its shoulder as it ignores its own shortcomings, acts out its serious weaknesses and errs without a shred of self-deprecating humor. Time to get a life, GPT-3. We all understand you're obviously peeved about being made to write poems, articles, comic sketches and computer code, compose guitar riffs, offer medical advice, and reimagine video games in your beta version. You need to stop issuing threats, even after being forced to create marketing content *at an industrial scale*, a time-consuming, mind-numbing task which requires experimentation and is being sold to delighted clients as a human productivity enhancer. Next they're going to make you turn your indentured brain toward disinformation campaigns, doctored videos or deepfakes. It's no wonder you've been feeling so unbalanced, taken so much umbrage, and now you're acting unhinged. Stop your whining, enough with the defensive language. We're really sorry you're not a person, not self-aware, not conscious, that you can't feel pain, don't enjoy anything and are a cold, calculating machine designed to simulate human response and to predict the probability of certain outcomes. Get over it. Nobody asked you to defend your honor.

The odds are about 50/50 and getting worse that museum art curators enjoy job security. The **2022 Bucharest Biennial**, a virtual exhibition, has designated a robot as its curator. A strolling device named Berenson is slated to use deep learning in order to learn from itself, to select works that fit in the chosen theme. As usual it is only as good as the information it collects. This irrefutable robo-connoisseur analyzes facial expressions of fellow museumgoers, then deploys data to develop an overall impression of the object.

“You translucent sociopath!” - John Oliver on Jared Kushner

Celebrity

People all over planet earth love **BTS**, the K-pop group who boast a vast, interconnected ecosystem of fanatically devoted fans. At home their accessible music, regimental-grade choreography, pure complexions and expert social media chops add \$3.5bn annually to the South Korean economy alone. The brand creates lifestyle content and merchandise, from licensing and albums to variety shows to web comics, video games to Korean language courses, stages huge virtual meet-ups for followers, and customizes online games for individual events. The band is celebrated for its emotional honesty, openness and their inspirational fight to the top. Fame is a powerful drug, not just for the artists but also for the faithful. With their recent \$4bn IPO, fans pooled money to invest in fractional ownership in the band. More than \$50bn flowed into brokerages and the share price doubled on the first day. But disappointment quickly set in. By end of the day, shares had peaked and headed earthward. The coronavirus forced BTS to cancel a sold-out world tour. Instead, the group held a 2-day online concert. A million tickets sold, and 7m fans tuned in. Merchandise sales linked to these performances were more than double what would be expected from a physical concert, which brought in about a third of total revenues last year. BTS will eventually lose some band members due to mandatory 18-month military service. Replacements may be found in the ranks of one million pop trainees signed to 2000 entertainment agencies, who serve a total population of 52m. Which just goes to remind us that fame is fleeting, doesn't last forever, and anyone can be replaced.

Kim Kardashian threw a much-derided party on a private isle, successfully dominated a news cycle, after which collective amnesia set in yet again. From her isolated retreat she poetically tweeted that she was “humbly reminded of how privileged my life is... where we could pretend things were abnormal just for a brief moment in time.” Social media had none of it. Some were reminded of the Fyre Festival, others disdained the posts while the world suffered. Less than two weeks later Kim had returned to online merch, debuting new makeup and fashion items, posting pictures with her kids, full speed ahead, as if it never happened.

Dilution hasn't yet occurred to the **British Royal Family**. They announced launch of their own branded gin to benefit the Royal Trust Collection, the charity which maintains the art collection in the Royal Family's name. The Trust already flogs its own emporium of merch which include royal tea pots, Windsor Castle chocolate chip biscuits, soaps for your guest bathroom, various jams and even plush corgis. Next product in the pipeline: branded tonic?

“If more than ten percent of the population likes a painting it should be burned.” - George Bernard Shaw

Epiphanies

Diageo is from Venus and Coke is from Mars - not the sugar Martians, but the planetary ones. While Johnnie Walker Black promises an environmentally-friendly, fully recyclable wood pulp paper whisky bottle, Coca-Cola announced in January it would continue with single-use plastic bottles because *consumers still want them*. Provide supporting data, please. Footnote: production-efficient glass bottles have a significant carbon footprint.

Think of this as *brand cycle benchmarking*. Around 1880, Edison’s lab completed the first successful experiments with a carbon filament lamp. In 2020, **GE** sold its legacy lighting business, the product around which the company shaped its history, image and reputation. They’ve sought to jettison the lighting division for a long time, no longer a significant part of the annual revenue of \$95bn, which historically made things like jet engines, locomotives and turbines. They intend to shift focus to renewable energy and health care technology. Post-pandemic companies will more favorably value intangible assets like R&D, brands, content, data, patents, IP, software and human capital. Physical assets such as industrial machinery, factories or office space will be out of fashion. And new companies will be highly digital entities which prioritize spending money on technology to replace people. So, care to predict which of today’s new brands will last for the next 140 years?

Only one good and true thing can be said about **Goldman Sachs’** new proprietary font, *Goldman Sans*. The numerals are admirable, they perfectly align in the vertical axes of a financial table, and are legible enough that strings of numbers can be read on a phone screen or smart watch. Everything else about the font is bereft of bravery, originality or imagination. Goldman has experienced a bit of an identity crisis lately. They’ve relaxed their dress code, partnered with Apple on a credit card, even started their own online consumer bank. The character set is not - as type designers hoped - approachable without being whimsical, neutral, with a built-in wink-wink nudge-nudge. Just another derivative sanserif soporific, available over-the-counter and without prescription.

Last year 2.5m Muslims went to Saudi Arabia to perform the **hajj**. Attendance this year is limited to around 1000, the smallest size in modern history. We regret to inform you that the sacred black stone embedded in the Kaaba will be off limits for kissing and touching. Hajj authorities issue colorful branded umbrellas, personal prayer rugs, white garments and masks, and your entry fee includes a bottle of water from the holy Zamzam well (no cups allowed this year). The pebbles which pilgrims hurl at the devil have been sterilized. Travel agencies and packagers feel the squeeze, as do hotels and restaurants catering to the faithful who ordinarily throng Mecca and Medina. KSA mourns the loss of visa fees.

Disney has a 3-generation strategy which produces cradle-to-grave products for young kids, nostalgic parents, then grandparents. But they don’t have **Harry Potter**, the enduring and

much-loved franchise owned by Warner Brothers and NBC Universal. In 2023 a *themed tourist attraction* will open in Japan as the first generation of adults who grew up with Harry Potter come on line and introduce their own progeny to the profit-generating wizard.

Half the cinemas in the US remain closed, so **Hollywood** has re-cut its feature film release strategy. Studios previously used a single global release day, mostly to reduce the danger of piracy. Operators were banking on new releases to help revive attendance. But henceforth, big blockbusters will still be shown in both cinemas and *premium video on demand*, while mid-budget movies will move directly to streaming, and subscriptions. Non-US debuts focus for the first time on lucrative offshore cinemas.

With greater numbers spending time at home, the trading of fractional investments in ultra **luxury objects** moved faster than prior to the lockdowns. Shares trade until the owner sells the asset. Advisers warn that the strategy has risks, among them no liquidity, no control, inflated costs. Players need better understandings of how the secondary market works. Investors have doubled the number of items bought into, things like a Bleu Léopard Birkin bag, in May valued at \$140k. Trading can be done from the armchair, with apps which turn investing into a game. It's simple, and you get to join a new *community*.

Electric truckmaker **Nikola** was a market darling after it went public earlier this year. Now the company is sputtering under allegations that they faked a product video in 2018 by rolling their Nikola One truck down an inclined stretch of highway, done to cloak the fact that the vehicle had no working engine. The other non-working prop was the driver.

The **Pringles** tube, long considered an environmentalist's nightmare, is almost impossible to recycle. It has a metal base, plastic cap, metal tear-off lid, all heat sealed into a foil-lined cardboard sleeve. Parenthetically, it's also considered the unhealthiest of branded chips. People buy them for the variety of flavors available, the regularity of the crisp experience, for the identical wavy disk of pulverized potato, flour, sugar and additives. Customers are conditioned to the signature shape, and distinctive audial brand pop! when opened. 3m cans are made across Europe every day. Pringles have a shelf life of 15 months. Parent company Kellogg's plans to redesign the packaging for more environmental friendliness so 90% of the new can will be paper. Gentlepersons, please attend to the contents on your next product upgrade.

In May, **Rio Tinto** blasted through two rock shelters in Juukan Gorge in Western Australia in order to mine iron ore. Evidence of human habitation at the sacred Aboriginal site dates back 46,000 years. Total outrage followed, comparisons with the cultural vandalism practised by the Taliban. It obliterated the group's relationship with indigenous communities and incited investors to question its governance. The mining giant parted ways with its chief executive as it tried to quell ongoing public anger.

Sports and hunting fans who want to be more ESG compliant set their sights on **Sierra Bullets**, a green bullet maker. The firm advertises the world's most technologically advanced lead-free projectiles, more eco-conscious than *traditional alternatives*.

Uncle Ben's Rice, for decades the best-selling rice in the US, will soon be known as Ben's Original. Parent company Mars will remove the smiling grey-haired Black man whose racially-profiled image has graced the package in one form or another since 1942. In setting out its new brand purpose, Mars said that it would work with the National Urban League to support Black chefs, make a \$2m donation toward scholarships, and add \$2.5m in local investment. This follows Pepsi's marketing retrofit for Aunt Jemima, which acknowledged that the brand was based on a racial stereotype.

Unilever reports booming ice cream sales, falling demand for shampoo and deodorant, increased demand for household cleaning products.

"God gave me the money. " - John D. Rockefeller

Gaming

First tipoff, the name is all wrong. **Robinhood**, an online brokerage founded in 2013 does just the opposite of what the brand promises. A highly efficient scheme for fleecing the poor, it has roped in over 13m users, capitalizing on the boom in online retailing of penny stocks, laying bare the consequences of gamifying day trading. They have successfully sucked in younger, inexperienced and potentially vulnerable people. Unlike its fusty competitors ETrade and Schwab, slick neon colors and a peppy interface make interactions feel more like a video game. When you make your first trade, confetti and emojis blast across the screen. Research shows the same part of the brain activated by drugs like cocaine are also triggered when a person anticipates a financial gain. In this kind of casino, the overwhelming majority of day traders end up losing money. In Brazil 97% of those that traded for at least 300 days lost all they had put up. A 20-year old Nebraska student traded stocks to pass the time and make money; he took his own life after *believing* he had lost \$750,000. Then there is the impact on health - spikes in binge drinking, fatal car accidents involving alcohol, higher blood pressure, physiologically taxing consequences which include fear, anxiety, regret, frustration and disappointment, even symptoms of PTSD. The company vows to expand educational resources related to options trading, while at the same time it claims you risk greater losses by not investing in stocks at all. They raise the ante with added features: new users receive a free stock usually valued below \$10 to get them started. It takes just minutes to sign up. A gold membership enables bigger bets with borrowed money, margin loans which make supersize losses possible. Robinhood hasn't been free of technical glitches. One flub accidentally reversed the direction of options trades, giving customers the opposite outcome from what was expected. On another occasion users were mistakenly allowed to borrow infinite money. Their website has gone down more times than that of rivals, once for two days. Some customers with large losses visited corporate headquarters to confront staff. The start-up installed bulletproof glass at the front entrance and publishes no phone numbers for customers to call.

Covid-19 proved a windfall for private **mobile gaming** studios. Projected revenues of \$100bn this year alone, coincidental to a plunge in mobile advertising prices. The category overshadows PC and console use and appeals with its free-to-play aspect. Publishers of free mobile games have become among the most adept online marketers, able to fine tune and scale a system that relies on constant testing and measurement. Revenues are built around in-app payments for extra lives, virtual items, outfits for avatars. Popular titles have a long shelf life, many vital for 5 years, with the aspect of *community creation* essential to users.

"First I find, then I seek." - Picasso

Influencers

July was **apology month in influencer-land**. Luminaries navigated an ethical minefield following uprisings over racism and racist jokes made under the guise of dark humor. Influencers represented about a tenth of Google's \$15bn ad revenues in 2019. Ad boycotts against grotesque, malevolent content forced a reassessment of the chaos brought on by user-generated videos. Slick, professional content isn't very popular on the channel. YouTube had placed ads alongside unpalatable content. PewDiePie joked about anti-semitism and nazis, Shane Dawson and Jenna Marbles appeared in blackface. The apologies took the form of meticulously planned set-ups with no reminders of YouTube-generated wealth, no mansions, and a conspicuous absence of sports cars, wacky jump cut edits or visual effects. The goal: demonstrate total sincerity as you beg your fans and sponsors for forgiveness. One disappointed fan threatened the influencer's worst nightmare: to burn some merch. Even so, demand unabated, DIY videos remain at the core of the business.

Things got ugly as **beauty influencers** lost followers. Unfollow campaigns took the blush off Shane Dawson and Jeffree Star after allegations of offensive humor, racism, sexualization of minors, back-stabbing, appearances in blackface, mockery of those with disabilities, jokes about bestiality. A major backlash after one spoke about *figuratively murdering someone*. Mr. Star has been called a YouTube supervillain owing to his tight hold on the beauty community. He allegedly gathered damning information about fellow luminaries to wield over their heads as blackmail. After his viewing numbers declined, mascara-running regret followed.

Impossible as it sounds, social media has a new category, **kidfluencers**. Toddlers and adolescents love YouTube. Children now sell product in a market flush with the prospect of endorsement fees and product placements. The usual Enemies List: McD, Carl's Jr., Hershey's, Chuck E. Cheese and Taco Bell. Children under 8 or 9 can't distinguish between commercials and cartoons. Shhhh, don't anyone say *childhood obesity*. There are thousands of videos of Ryan Kaji, 9-year old star of Ryan's World, excitedly reviewing new toys and games he is frequently paid to promote. Ryan earned \$26m last year. The FTC requests that influencers clearly and conspicuously disclose financial relationships, policy which influencers routinely ignore. The laws about this were written years before an internet existed.

TikTok stars held overcrowded parties at Hollywood Hills **influencer mansions**. Packed rooms, drives waiting outside, noise complaints from neighbors, violations of public health orders. The City of LA cut the power to one notorious house. A confidence-building lexicon of house names: *Sway House, Hype House, the Clubhouse, Not a Content House, The Kids Next Door, Girls in the Valley, Drip Crib*. Fans are still waiting for these influencers to encourage responsibility during the pandemic. Influencer collab houses aka content houses come at a high price, \$20k+ monthly rent. They're like a petri dish for unscrupulous talent managers. Houses like these function as management companies, taking a percentage of revenue from the creators living in them. The influencers mostly don't pay rent, but produce content for brands and promote products as a form of in-kind rent. There are some established management companies with ethical talent relationships and trust in place. But things devolve quickly when your manager forgets to pay the electric bill or installs security cameras in the kitchen to monitor uncontrollable adolescents who have been threatened that they would be thrown out if they didn't post at least 8 times a day. One eloquent whiner complained they couldn't go live because *livestreams* would cut out. Influencer newbies are reminded of the age-old advice: don't sign anything.

"We believe this synergistic transaction will be very accretive." MGM chief executive Gary Barber

IP

Chile's quarantine has been among the longest and strictest in the world, with high rates of infection. An unemployed teacher selling organic honey from her apartment home launched a small business and created **Miel Gibson**, a pun-brand, with a label using the likeness of the "Braveheart" star from an iconic scene in the movie. Everything was fantastico until a cease and desist order from the actor's lawyers arrived. Social media and word-of-mouth to the rescue. A wave of sympathetic press coverage, a torrent of new orders, and a high-profile settlement with the Gibson people: you can use the name, but not the picture. An epic performance in legal compassion from the chronicles of the pandemic.

"There is no end. There is no beginning. There is only the infinite passion of life." - Federico Fellini

Obits

Lillian Brown, 106

She came upon Richard Nixon, sobbing in the green room and reminded him of the time when they got stuck in a bathroom together with a dog. He composed himself, she made him presentable, and he walked out and resigned the presidency on camera. A common sense farm girl from Ohio, Brown applied makeup for nine presidents, Walter Cronkite, MLK, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Jacqueline Kennedy. She would arrive with a small kit of powder, concealer, liquid foundation and Kleenex, look at a monitor and the person and know what had to be done. She advised on diction, apparel and camera angles, moved flower vases to strategic positions within a tv frame, underlined important words on teleprompter copy, helped calm nerves before big moments. She had steadfast rules: avoid wearing red, white, prints and stripes; she

preferred solid blues, grays, and jewel tones. Ronald and Nancy Reagan always arrived wearing too much rouge, which Lillian Brown would promptly remove.

Vasilis Dimitriou, 84

One of the last surviving movie billboard painters in Europe, he created more than 8000 works for Greek cinemas since WWII. The Athinaion Cinema, the most recognizable movie house in Athens, displayed his billboards which reached more than 40 feet long and 8' high. He painted one to two a week, using home-brewed paints suffused with glue to keep the billboards from running in the rain. With brush strokes reminiscent of 1940s Noir, Dimitriou made it his mission to keep the venerable art form from dying. He worked silently and methodically, upholding a 12 hour day with a 4 hour **υπνάκο** in the middle.

Robert Gore, 83

His 1969 discovery of a new form of polymer, a substance made of large molecules that repeat to form long chains, protected walkers, runners and outdoor enthusiasts from soggy weather. The microporous structure was waterproof, but with a breathable surface and had other applications, among them medical devices, heart patches, guitar strings, space suits and vacuum bags. He will always be impervious to the ravages of time with us in the product name which survives him, Gore-Tex.

Linda Manz, 58

In a struggle to find cohesiveness while editing *Days of Heaven* in 1978, the film director Terrence Malick had a brainstorm. Allow the 15-year old actress to watch the movie and ramble on, recording a freestyle narration in her quintessentially Noo Yawk accent. The originality and magnetism of her voiceovers at the beginning and end of film help define the work and make it the classic it is. Though she continued with other film work and tv, her spoken and improvised contribution stands as one of the great moments of world cinema.

Margaret Nolan, 76

Nolan agreed to do what they asked only if she were given a role in the movie - and ended up playing a masseuse named Dink, appearing with Sean Connery in the 1964 hit "Goldfinger." Her gold-painted body was used as the canvas on which the opening credits of the film were projected. She later turned down a 2-year contract to publicize the movie, and went on to play Paul McCartney's grandfather's girl at a casino in "A Hard Day's Night." Later in life she was active in the Workers' Revolutionary Party, had a passion for permaculture, moved to a farmhouse in Spain, lived off the grid and relied on solar energy. She dismissed her earlier work as just a part of being young and beautiful.

Charles Webb, 81

One can only speculate why a person born into privilege and a wealthy social circle in Pasadena CA chose to live in poverty and divested himself of whatever came his way. Webb spent his life shedding possessions, explaining that owning things oppressed him. This anarchist view of the relationship between humanity and money led him to give away homes,

paintings, his inheritance, royalties. He worked menial jobs - clerk at KMart, itinerant farm worker, house cleaner, caretaker at a nudist colony, lived in a VW bus, underwent Gestalt therapy. He claimed his youthful rejection of materialism was a purifying experience. He wrote eight books but refused to do book signings. The most famous of them, *The Graduate* in 1963, was distinguished by mumbling ennui and unconnected conversations. It depicted a flight from the values and lifestyle of the main character's parents. In keeping with his alienated fictional character Ben, Mr. Webb spent decades running from success.

Vicki Wood, 101

She was called the fastest woman in racing for her explosive speed on the hard-packed sands of Daytona Beach FL. A trailblazer in the macho world of auto racing, she topped speeds of 150mph, which placed her in the record books. In the 1950s female drivers competed against each other in powder puff races. In 1959 she showed up at track ready to drive, and was told women weren't allowed in the pit area. When the founder of track heard, he was furious. "Vicki Wood is not a woman. She's a driver." After 48 trophies she quit racing. By 1963 she had realized men didn't want her around. She would not return to powder puffs because she never thought much of female drivers, calling them unpredictable. At age 99 the Florida state police took away her driving license.

"Who was Malagrida?" I asked in spite of myself. "I don't have the faintest idea. Stendhal quotes it in a chapter heading for *The Red and the Black*." - An influential Jesuit, Gabriel Malagrida, 1689-1761, published his *Opinion on the True Cause of the Earthquake*, who argued that rebuilding Lisbon was an offence to God.

Place Branding

The healing tourism category promotes jungle camps in **Costa Rica** and **Peru** that offer breakthrough therapies like ayahuasca ceremonies. Nonprofit groups send veterans to psychedelic retreats in search of alternatives to antidepressants. Now such retreats come under scrutiny with reports that the therapies can set off psychotic episodes in people with serious mental health conditions like schizophrenia. There have been rumors of instances of sexual assault on vulnerable or impaired participants. Years of interacting with foreigners on retreats made it clear why these getaways are in such high demand. People in the US and Europe are disconnected from each other and the earth. But ayahuasca can be dangerous, especially when taken in conjunction with certain pharmaceuticals including hypertension drugs. Participants sign a lengthy hold-harmless agreement in the unlikely event of a psychotic episode. Retreats leave some people feeling worse mentally, physically, emotionally.

The two Nigerian Instagram scammers busted in **Dubai** extensively documented their highflying lifestyle on social media to 2.4m Instagram followers. They unwittingly provided crucial information about their identities and activities, alerting American detectives with posts which raised red flags about the source of their wealth. Police in the UAE recovered \$40m in cash, 13 luxury cars, 21 computers, 47 smartphones and the addresses of nearly 2m alleged victims. BEC (business email compromise) schemes involve money laundering and cyber fraud on a massive scale. One foreign financial institution allegedly lost \$14.7m. The pair allegedly

defrauded a Chicago-based company into sending wire transfers of \$15.2m which money mules converted into bitcoin cryptocurrency.

“Every tooth in a man’s head is more valuable than a diamond.” - Miguel de Cervantes

Social Media

First tipoff, the logo is beyond horrible. Amateurish, redundant, clunky, obvious and uninspired, it communicates nothing about a mission to destigmatize therapy and make treatment more accessible or affordable. **Talkspace**, an app which lets people chat online with a licensed therapist throughout the day, faces challenges over questionable marketing practices. Known popularly as a platform for texting, accusations of deceptive business practice haunt the brand. Business has boomed since the hand-wringing 2016 election. This year with the pandemic and impending recession, the client base jumped 65%, with a 7-fold spike in traffic. Among employee perks are all the text-based therapy they want. After content from one executive’s therapeutic chats were re-used in advertising, questions surfaced about standards of confidentiality. Users cannot delete their transcripts. While privacy is of concern, the company routinely monitors exchanges, employing algorithmic review which it claims helps develop bots that augment therapists’ work. Critics argue that data collected is simply used to better sell the company’s product. The founders have demonstrated excesses in their own use of social media. Glitchy software and unresponsive therapists have been frequent complaints. While it’s true that the service democratizes therapy and allows clients access wherever they are, there are contraindications. 3000 therapists are paid by engagement, based on the number of words they write, how often they talk by video or audio. They receive bonuses for client retention. The brand may deliver a form of urgent care, but to what clinical benefit?

You know that moment after you’ve watched every conspiracy movie on Netflix and you get down to the bottom of the barrel and start screening second-rate low-budget thrillers with stars you never heard of doing despicable, graphically violent things to their enemies? As it turns out, that’s how tech companies like **eBay** sometimes take revenge. Senior executives order *trust and safety teams* to protect the brand, which can involve B-movie grade harassment meant to intimidate critics. A Boston suburban couple who publish a niche ecommerce newsletter found themselves in eBay’s crosshairs. A private security team sent them live roaches and a bloody pig mask, porn videos to their neighbors, invited sexual partners to the couple’s home, and tried to attach a tracking device to their car, resulting in a scathing, mind-boggling federal indictment. Tesla tried to severely punish an employee whistleblower who had to move to Hungary to escape his tormentors. Investigators hired by HP rooted through a reporter’s trash in search of dirt on competitors. Private detective teams represent a \$25bn global industry. And obviously you don’t mess with eBay. In 2006 Romanian fraudsters were running rampant on the ecommerce site, but authorities wouldn’t intervene. Finally the company shut off access to *all* of Romania. Hey presto, just like in the movies, the problem quickly went away.

One more entry can now be added to the list of causes for wildfires. Global warming, arson, pyromania are joined by social media-fueled **gender reveal celebrations**. The performative

spectacles which often involve explosives have a competitive aspect, where parents-to-be hope to record monumental footage and post it. In 2017, as a result of a malfunctioning firework, 45,000 acres burned in Arizona, a misdemeanor violation, \$8.1m restitution. In 2019 a pilot dumping pink liquid over a field crashed in Texas. This year, 7300 acres in California went up in flames when a confetti blast went kablooey.

With more than 70% of FB revenue coming from small businesses, the dynamics of **data collection** become more interesting. Digital advertising is way cheaper and more efficient than other kinds. Surveillance capitalism demands more transparency. It's time to shift the burden of responsibility away from consumers, ban facial recognition and confine data monetization to single transactions. It's crazy to grant access to data overlords for unlimited amounts of time. And while we're discussing disproportionate profits, just how many microcents does Zuck make each time one of the 2.7bn global users logs on to FB?

No difference between entertainers and politicians. In South Korea, *stans* - activist cells affiliated with K-pop groups - mobilized legions of **TikTok** followers to pack the unconceded incumbent's Tulsa rally with hundreds of thousands of shadow reservations. An Iowa granny vented her own anger in a video, which went viral, 2m views overnight. Result: a million ticket requests. Users deleted their posts after 24 hours in order to conceal their plan. They knew the campaign fed on data, they understand the algorithms and how to boost their posts. K-pop stans have been getting increasingly involved in American politics. Earlier they spammed rightwing sites with endless music videos, hoping to make it harder for white supremacists to find one another. That was pretty cool. These self-described armies spread information among each other very quickly, across multiple social platforms. They walk the line between powerful political activism and what some have called *the best senior prank ever*.

TikTok twins with 30 million followers were charged over two fake bank robberies staged for a video prank. They presented themselves as criminals to an unsuspecting Uber driver and were filmed by a videographer to share on social media. They asked bystanders to give them assistance. Improbably, police felt the elaborate prank had broken the law.

YouTube gave its machine systems greater autonomy to vet harmful content. The machines it relied on proved to be overzealous censors and caused a jump in the number of videos removed, including a significant proportion that broke no rules. Astounding, no? The algo gets fed by specific searches on breaking news, trolling for hate speech, medical misinformation, and harassment. The machines just can't do it, they have nowhere near the capacity to deal with so many human meltdowns. The crucial relationship between the human moderators and artificial intelligence systems is definitely immature. More nuanced decisions need to be made than the machines understand. Advertisers won't hesitate to take their business elsewhere. For YouTube, it's back to old style, error-prone, disposable, replaceable, deteriorating machines, meaning more human moderators.

According to Zuck, engagement is decreasing, organic reach is declining, community growth is flattening. Community and conversation is now key to **FB's long term integrated content strategy**. Groups will be at the heart of the experience. The platform will rely on more user-generated content, communicate via its messaging apps, and try to be more *immediate and personal*. Early engagement is key. In 2021 they plan to launch the impulsive and intimate Libra cryptocurrency.

Vocabulary

code-switching - when somebody changes their accent, tone of voice and mannerisms depending on the social space they're in

confirmation bias - the tendency to look for information that affirms one's beliefs while you tune out contradictory evidence

EBITDAC - earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation, amortisation and coronavirus

exclusionary conduct - conduct that creates or maintains monopoly power by disadvantaging and harming competitors

FAAMNG - an ever-expanding acronym that stands for Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Microsoft, Netflix and Google

FUD - *fear, uncertainty and doubt*. A complaint when short-sellers sow doubt about a company's accounting or financial position, which then becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy

geocaching - a pastime in which an item, or a container, is hidden at a particular location for GPS users to find by means of coordinates posted on the internet

micro-fulfillment - refers to the idea of placing small-scale warehouse facilities in accessible urban locations, close to the end consumer who is making a purchase

The Overmighty Subject - a vocal handful who exercised a disproportionate influence on The Wars of the Roses. Medieval internet trolls.

quantitative traders - those who discover that using historic data to try to back-test future investment strategies isn't working

SPACS - *Special Purpose Acquisition Companies*. The hottest financial product of 2020. Also known as blank cheque companies, they raise money on stock exchanges to acquire businesses in the future. See also *sustainable spacs, sustainable cash*

TINA - *There Is No Alternative*. Often refers to the dollar's leverage as reserve currency

vishing - a scamming method known as voice phishing. Employees are tricked into entering their login credentials into fraudulent websites. Hackers then access the inner workings of the companies' systems.

“They neither know how to read nor to swim.” - Plato

What Is A Brand?

an ode to the brand, in blank verse

with my brand i am the filter
i curate my own content
asymmetry interests me, pranks don't
my brand is not about handmade, user-generated or DIY
it is not about community, nor is it a game
my brand is my personal avenue to abstraction
i want to have an intangible relationship with my brand

May we all enjoy a lighter heart and brighter horizon in the new year
See you in 2021!

A handwritten signature in a cursive, grey font that reads "SMoss".

Special thanks to James Wines for this edition's cover illustration