

2021 Global Brand Letter June Edition

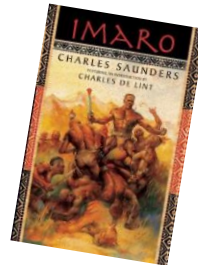
/li = literally
/ij = inside joke
/rh or /rt = rhetorical question
/gen = genuine question
/hyp = hyperbole
/c = copy/pasta
/sx or /x = sexual intent
/nsx or /nx = non-sexual intent
/th = threat
/cb = clickbait
/f = fake
/g = genuine



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"You promised us colonies on Mars. Instead we got Facebook." - Buzz Aldrin

"When I was young, I believed in three things: Marxism, the redemptive power of cinema, and dynamite. Now I just believe in dynamite." - Sergio Leone

"Live Stream the Shroud of Turin NOW!" - internet offer

Do you sense an asynchronous uncontrolled re-entry as we start our vacci-cation? Please deposit your intangible resellable non-fungible tokens at the door to join the cognitive revolution. The embodied codes speak! Take heed, force multipliers, listing flippers and the recently deterritorialized.

"Embrace the Divine Masculine Essence with this Luxury Designer Athletic Set. 50% Off Today." - Internet offer

Advertising

What misinformation problem? In a clear case of disingenuous marketing, on April Fools Day **Volkswagen of America** pranked AP and other news organizations, falsely reporting a name change to *Voltswagen of America*, explaining it signaled emphasis on new electric vehicles. The deception briefly lifted the company's stock price after the WSJ bought into the ruse. VW even changed its Twitter page, and a fake news release briefly posted on the company website; it later disappeared. Traditional scenarios for rebranding occur at junctures of acquisition or merger, new product introduction, change of leadership or competency, competition in the marketplace or in an instance of sad news. This may have been a case of the latter, a shocking attention-grabbing pun gone bad.

South Korea's broadcast regulations prevent insertion of commercial beaks during programming. To circumvent this, **Subway** adopted a strategy of product placement in popular South Korean TV dramas. A character on the fringe of death recalls taking a past lover to a Subway restaurant where he gently feeds her a sandwich - a logo peeks out from the background. Terrestrial advertising had proved too expensive, and many stations did not reach Subway's desired young customer base. But Netflix has become a leading portal for Korean dramas. The chain has seen a positive impact on global sales. Shows collect on average \$900k for a product placement. IRL newer restaurant locations announce the chain's TV appearances on digital signboards. Subway also released co-branded streetwear in partnership with Fila.

The pandemic took no prisoners in the entertainment industry. The first great casualty was 30,000 sound-and-recording jobs lost in LA County alone. Other victims: Hollywood **Oscar** campaigns, which encompass caterers, chauffeurs, florists, DJ gigs, and trade organization receptions where studios normally paid \$15-25K per table. Survivors: "For Your Consideration" billboards and branded swag. *Nomadland* producers sent locked-down Academy members

wineglasses, license plate covers, keychains, and a foil-covered windshield shade and walked away with the Best Picture award.

The global feminine intimate care market is valued at \$1.1bn, of which *intimate washes* account for 40% of sales. **Vagisil** launched a new line of intimate care items branded OMV (Get the joke?) which targets teens. Immediate backlash followed, indicting flack for ad copy lines which suggested “period funk” was a nuisance to be eliminated. Accusations were made that the industry preys on the insecurity of women, and promoted the ideas that vulvas are dirty and that they should appear and smell a certain way. Critics claimed the brand’s focus on freshness might be contributing to unhealthy body image issues. Any product that is scented can potentially damage the skin; fragrance is the number one cause of allergic dermatitis, can potentially disrupt the healthy balance of bacteria and increase risk of bacterial, sexually transmitted and urinary tract infections in teens.

“Your foot has two eyes.” - GPT-3

AI

A new benchmark for the life cycle of automotive brands. In a deal valued at \$1.1bn, **Hyundai Motor Company** bought **Boston Dynamics**, creator of creepy zoomorphic robotic internet videos. The automaker seeks to reinvent the company as a *future mobility* service provider, and plans to transform the proportion of its revenues by half from car manufacturing to 50% robotics and urban air mobility. Hyundai, established in 1967, sees growth potential for logistics robots used in warehouses and factories, and service robots for the disabled or elderly.

“People are forgotten so fast.” - Elsa Peretti

Celebrity

Gravel-voiced **Tony Robbins**, who bills himself as *the nation’s top life and business strategist*, appears to have an HR/compassion problem with a veteran employee. A “personal results specialist” who has been with him for 18 years sued Robbins Research International - his multifaceted \$5bn global empire - for employee discrimination related to her case of Covid-19. She needed to work from home, but was unable to get access to the company email or database, where information about clients she served is stored. The suit alleges that Robbins described her as a “hysterical female, a weakling”.

“Can’t anyone here play this game.” - Casey Stengel, about the 1962 New York Mets

Epiphanies

Even the lowly hamburger felt the pandemic pinch. **Heinz** did not relish a uniquely American single-use ketchup package shortage, an unusual squeeze created by dramatic increases in takeout and delivery orders. Wholesale prices for packets rose 13%. Heinz has 70% of the US

retail market, and brand-loyal fans found it difficult to locate a suitably saucy alternative. Heinz increased production to 12bn packets to catch up with the demand.

You may think you are experiencing a *sans-culottes déjà vu* fashion moment reminiscent of the days following the French Revolution but it's no hallucination. Jacobin egalitarianism is back in the form of **worker jackets**. The boxy, roomy fit represents more than the *casualization of menswear*, more than the distancing of self from shirt-and-tie culture. These humble jackets help exiled office stiffs self-actualize as authentic. It's a style associated with middle class creatives, a political statement of proletarian credentials, which represents blue collar culture and expresses solidarity with the beleaguered masses. It's also reassuringly sturdy. The *bleu de travail* created in France in the 19th century for factory workers, laborers and engineers can still be had for less than \$100. Its singular color distinguishes lower levels from the ranks of management. But trendy young designers and established houses like Balenciaga and Junya Watanabe have jumped in, and offer luxury models which can cost up to \$1000.

Pandemic shortages meant loyal customers of **Post Grape Nuts** felt the crunch. As supply chains failed, the familiar one-of-a-kind wheat-and-barley breakfast cereal which contains neither grapes nor nuts experienced a panic on social media. Desperate loyalists fruitlessly searched around town only to discover inflated prices for the rare boxes. Fans followed the shortage on Twitter and FB. The manufacturer instituted a public apology campaign, and created a web-based notification list to alert customers when the product returned to shelves. Those prepared to disclose contact information received a coupon for \$1.50 off their next purchase. And a contest awarded 10 faithful breakfasters free cereal for a year.

Promising to provide one of the most Instagrammable places in China, a private developer in Hong Kong will invest \$620m to build a second **Hello Kitty** theme park. In response to a gap in the family tourism market and growing demand for family entertainment in The Middle Kingdom, the branded pleasure island will include a 250-room *luxury hotel*. The licensing agreement with Sanrio of Japan allows use of most of the company's 400 trademarked characters. Watch for Hello Kitty, My Melody and the inexplicably popular Gudetama the lazy egg, who has no qualms about showing his cartoony backside on social media.

It's not just Eastern European hackers and shady Chinese software companies who compete for talent from Silicon Valley. The **CIA's** new website features a stark black background offset by dots, lines and slick typography, hallmarks of modern web design. The minimalist branding strategy resembles electronic music festival flyers or marketing materials for groovy online clothing offers. In a kind of reverse engineering, spook central now attempts to provide a modern, relatable experience in its recruitment outreach. For some time, underground culture has co-opted militaristic, monolithic, dystopian signifiers. Think of the popularity of camo, where club culture kids took a battlefield aesthetic and made it cool. Everything's been deterritorialized. There's a kind of backhanded justice at play: during the Cold War, the CIA funded Jackson Pollock in an attempt to defang Russian propaganda.

OnlyFans, a social media platform that allows (often unemployed) people to sell explicit photos of themselves boasts a staggering 90 million users. The company takes a 20% cut of all transactions. Some folks have made money selling original exclusive content to monthly subscribers. The most successful content creators seem to be models, porn stars and celebrities who have large social media followings. Though fans hunger to see daily postings, digital sex work gives only the illusion of safety and privacy. Creators can be subject to *capping*, a practice where unauthorized screen shots get shared elsewhere on the internet. Reports of death and rape threats on social media often follow such postings.

In February, following tepid market reaction to the Fenty collection, **Rihanna** and **LVMH** announced her joint venture was to be put on hold. Initially presented as the group's foray into the future, instead it illustrated how difficult it was to sell high fashion clothes during the pandemic. Both a rare failure for world's largest luxury group and a rare misstep for one of the world's most effective celebrity polymaths, it suggested that in spite of a famous figure having an enormous cultural following and outrageous taste, it does not mean they will make saleable, original clothes. From its outset, Fenty failed to define its offer. Initially vague, Rihanna proved better at choosing statement-making looks for herself than creating new ones for her followers. The clothes seemed more derivative than groundbreaking and more expensive than fans expected. Other LVMH brands reported a sales rebound, largely fueled by China.

Metaphorically speaking, **Pantone's** unusual selection of two 2021 colors of the year tells an alternate story than the official version offered, which touts complementary tones supporting each other. *Ultimate Gray*, recollects interloping battleships prowling the oceans; *Illuminating Yellow* reminds us of radioactive waste warnings, and definitely not a smiley face.

The pandemic offered the perfect storm to the category known as *unattended retail*. Popularly referred to as **vending machines**, automated delivery devices conveniently dispense artisanal pizza, hot bowls of ramen, prime cuts of beef, healthy bowls and salads in jars, mascara and sundries, cannolis and baked goods from cupcake ATMs. Customize-your-yogurt machines, bread-baking machines, and machines that dispense slippers appeared at university dorms, airports, manufacturing plants and military sites. Everything's touchless, considered safe, prepackaged, so products haven't been mangled or breathed upon. New technology monitors stock with sensors. We no longer occupy a 9 to 5 world, and consumer thinking has evolved. A hands-off opportunity to upsell real products enabled by IT and robotics.

China and the US are the world's main consumers of **water**. In the next few years $\frac{2}{3}$ of the planet could experience water shortages, highlighting an inequality of distribution. The insufficiency is related to excessive exploitation by the primary sector, industry, human consumption and climate change. Wall Street began to trade *water futures*.

"Fiat jūstītia ruat cælum." - "Let justice be done though the heavens fall."

IP

At the time of his death in 2009 **Michael Jackson** faced a number of lawsuits and was mired in debt, but had no active endorsement or merchandise deals unrelated to a music tour, publishing or albums. For the last seven years the entertainer's estate has been embroiled in a case with the US tax authorities which hinged on the value of his *name and likeness* at time of his demise. The IRS contended the number was \$161m. Jackson's heirs said the value was \$2,105, which the presiding judge characterized as the price of a heavily used 20-year old Honda Civic. The court finally ruled his name and likeness was worth \$4.2m. Had the IRS number held, the entire estate would have underpaid its total tax obligation by \$500m and owed \$200m in penalties. Since his death The King of Pop has been one of the world's top-earning celebs, garnering \$48m last year. The IRS likes to drag its feet, kind of its own version of the moonwalk. Still in dispute: the estates of superstars Prince and Aretha Franklin.

The new culture of owning *digitally native assets* isn't limited to the art world. The **NBA**, for example, sold new digital trading cards to fans. **CryptoKitties** is a site that allows people to buy and breed limited-edition digital cats using cryptocurrency. People have long attached emotional and aesthetic value to physical goods. Here you're buying a feeling. These new commodities can't be held in your hand. Which brings us to **NFTs**. Investors seek riskier and more esoteric places to make money. Take, for example, the **animated cat with Pop-Tart body**, a meme shared across the internet hundreds of million times. It sold for \$600K on Foundation, a website for buying and selling digital goods. What you're getting is an intangible asset, ownership rights to digital art, ephemera or media, an inherently weightless entity which can be easily copied, shared or stolen. You're buying a piece of artwork stamped with a unique string of code and stored on a virtual ledger called a blockchain. It does eliminate the middlemen. Big things in tech often start out resembling toys. But NFTs eat energy. The creation of an average NFT has an environmental footprint of over 200kg of planet warming carbon and accounts for enormous greenhouse gas emissions. Mining for a Bitcoin uses more electricity than Argentina, Sweden or Pakistan. Solving a cryptographic puzzle takes 170 quintillion attempts a second. Greater interest in blockchain will lead to bigger emissions impact, ergo less energy efficiency over time. The Great South Sea Bubble, essentially the same kind of offer, didn't have such a negative environmental impact.

The Anti-counterfeiting World Law Summit reports that the growth of **fake goods** continues to rise at an unparalleled pace, estimated to be worth \$2tn globally. The risks encompass financial, reputational, social and ethical damage. Two remedies may alter the balance: *harnessing game-changing technology* like the blockchain, and *brand collaborations*.

“Words are all we have. Each word is like an unnecessary stain in the silence and nothingness.” - Samuel Beckett

Literacy

It's a largely Republican phenomenon, and it sure looks like deck-stacking and market manipulation. It may violate election regulations. It falls somewhere in the gap between what's ethical and what's technically legal. The **GOP** bulk-purchases books, copies of which are then given away as incentives in exchange for donations. There's no prohibition on such second-party purchases; book advances and royalties are specifically exempted from these limitations. The RNC used \$400K last year to acquire copies through two online booksellers; \$1.5m was raised. It also put the candidates at the top of the bestseller lists. Ted Cruz spent \$154K of supporters funds on copies of his book, and effectively converted campaign contributions to his personal enrichment in the form of royalty payments. Trump Jr. hit the top 10 nonfiction bestseller list following an RNC expenditure of \$300k for his book “Triggered”. In a gesture of support for private enterprise, DT's 2020 presidential campaign made more than \$106K in purchases from *a small book store in a strip mall* in Northvale NJ.

Chronicle Books, facing abysmal pandemic sales, discovered that a 2-year old cookbook by **Snoop Dogg** kept their business afloat. It sold 205K copies, double from the prior year. **Audible**, an audio book producer and platform owned by Amazon, saw a burst of growth.

“I would love for people to know who she became, not who she was.” - Cynthia Jurs

Obits

June Rose Bellamy, 88

A life like hers cannot be invented. Originally known as Yadan-Nat-Mai, or *the goddess of the nine jewels*, she grew up as a princess in the last royal family of colonial Burma. Her father was an Australian adventurer, her mother royalty. Evacuated to India, she was babysat by Indira Gandhi, educated in a convent school in the Himalayan foothills, studied the jitterbug. Her parents encouraged her to marry a WHO doctor, who was soon kidnapped by Burmese student insurgents and held for 20 days; she paid a \$60K ransom. She motored around the world with her husband, and acted as their car mechanic. She hosted a television show in Manila, briefly married the Burmese dictator Ne Win (who threw an ashtray at her) wound up in Florence, Italy, married twice again, started a cooking school. A devout Buddhist, she co-starred in “The Purple Plain”, a romantic 1954 movie with Gregory Peck.

Raymond Cauchetier, 101

He documented the early films of Godard, Truffaut and other New Wave directors 1958-1968. Self-taught, born in Paris, with no education beyond grammar school, when the Germans invaded in 1940 he fled on a bicycle, joined the Resistance. Assigned to duty as a combat photographer in Vietnam he received the Légion d'Honneur for his battlefield work. Drawing on the fast-paced spontaneity he learned during the French-Indochina war he brought neo-realistic style to the set as young directors rebelled against traditional film conventions and made radical

experimentation with editing, visual tropes. Their narratives reflected the social upheaval of the day; he refused to stand beside the camera, instead captured little known actors, improvised scenes, the absurdity of human existence, directors badgering stars, chaotic street scenes, unguarded off-camera moments. His photos from “Breathless” are classics - Belmondo as broken-nosed tough guy with dangling Gauloise - but they were lost in storage for 40 years. Only a change in copyright law permitted him to retrieve them. His later work, thousands of images taken at the temples at Angkor Wat, were unceremoniously burned by the Khmer Rouge in an act of wanton cultural destruction.

James R. Flynn, 86

Flynn believed that the last century saw a revolution in abstract thinking, brought on by the demands of a technologically robust industrial society. The Flynn Effect became shorthand for an optimistic view of the human condition. He felt that life today required greater educational attainment and an ability to think in terms of symbols, analogies and complex logic, exactly what many IQ tests measure, also what brands are about. He maintained that genes played a large part in determining intelligence; he also said chance factored, like accidents and life decisions. In other words, free will and environment made all the difference in explaining the gaps between groups, whether by racial, class, or gender considerations. Author of 18 books, his final work was 2019's *A Book Too Risky To Publish: Free Speech and Universities*.

Helen LaFrance, 101

An American folk artist, she crafted memory paintings, scenes from her childhood in glowing colors and sharp brush strokes, church picnics and river baptisms, backyard gardens with geese and children racing about, kitchens with bushels of apples and jars of preserves, scenes of rural life in Mayfield KY. Her joyous paintings celebrate the values of family and work. She lived and worked most of her life no more than 10 miles from her birthplace. Extremely self-sufficient, Helen married and divorced five times. In 1990 the film maker Gus Van Sant discovered her and helped her to get into folk art galleries, museums and prestigious collections like Oprah Winfrey's.

Danny Ray, 85

For 46 years he managed the backstage world of James Brown. He was known as The Cape Man. Trim and dapper, usually attired in a three-piece suit and jauntily cocked hat, he served as assistant to The Hardest Working Man in Show Business. He helped manage an entourage of up to 50 people, organized Brown's wardrobe, which included more than 150 suits. He carefully chose the right cape to match Brown's outfit. More delicately he often acted as intermediary between James Brown and his many female acquaintances. He also announced every one of the performer's shows, beginning with the signature question, “*Are you ready for star time?*” The act began innocently one night, when Ray draped a towel over James Brown's shoulders following a sizzling performance. Brown threw off the towel and returned to the stage. Later Ray edged on stage carrying a full-sized cape; it became part of every performance. The act never grew old. At James Brown's funeral he draped a sequined cape one last time.

Charles Saunders, 73

A top practitioner of the literary genre known as Sword and Soul, Saunders reimagined the white worlds of Tarzan and Conan with Black protagonists and African mythologies. His warrior hero Imaro debuted in his first novel in 1981. Saunders moved to Canada in 1969 to avoid the draft, where he worked at the local newspaper; his co-workers never knew he had another life as author of speculative fiction. He had no local friends or relatives, lived as a recluse without phone or internet, and visited the local library once a week to keep up with correspondents by email. Since Spring 2020 his remains have laid in an unmarked grave in Nova Scotia, survivors unclear.

Carla Wallenda, 85

The last surviving child of the troupe's founder, she performed for seven decades as a member of the Flying Wallendas, a career which continued until she was 82. Carla Wallenda made her high-wire debut when she was six weeks old. Her father Karl rode a bicycle, her mother sat on his shoulders, held her up and introduced her to the public. Fatal accidents took the lives of family members, including her husband; in 1965 three relatives were killed while performing; in 1978 her father fell while walking on a high wire between the towers of a hotel in San Juan PR. Her signature was a heart-stopping headstand 100 feet off the ground on a swaying pole.

"Carthago delenda est." alt. *'Delenda est Carthago'.* (Carthage must be destroyed.) - Cato

Place Branding

Officials from **Hudson Yards, Manhattan** consulted with psychiatrists and other suicide prevention experts after a third death plunge from The Vessel, a 150 foot structure with 154 flights of connecting stairs, which is billed as an interactive artwork designed by Thomas Heatherwick. Its future is uncertain, though it reopened with improved railings and now prohibits single visitors. Another design by the same architect, Little Island - a billionaire-funded \$250m artificial island folly at Pier 55 - was intended to contribute to the local community. It's an elite one-way street which meanders through plantings and plazas. Reservations and tickets needed.

Covid-19 reached **Mount Everest**. The virus disrupted the annual climb and reached other popular peaks. An outbreak at Everest Base Camp meant 17 confirmed cases were evacuated by helicopter to a Kathmandu hospital. Nepali *officials denied the cases* and reported lively sales of climber permits equal to last year's record number.

In an effort to limit the flow of young tourists inundating historic districts just to smoke marijuana, **Amsterdam** is limiting the use of its notorious coffee shops to locals and Dutch residents. The city will aim to reduce the number of shops in the capital city. It's also an effort to undermine the criminal organizations that control the drug trade. Since the law makes it illegal - beyond personal consumption - to produce, store or distribute pot, the only source for large quantities is the flourishing underground drug economy, gangs who battle as well for cocaine and amphetamine markets, and assassinate rivals on the streets.

Elephant herds are widely considered to be peaceful. In Kruger National Park, **South Africa**, a *breeding herd of elephants* trampled a suspected poacher to death. There's been a significant drop in poachings during lockdown, where one rhino a day are killed for their horns. Three people had entered the park carrying poaching equipment; one escaped, one was arrested, the third encountered the elephants, who clearly did not appreciate the interruption.

"If only we could see in advance all the harm that can come from the good we think we are doing." - Luigi Pirandello

Privacy

Experts say traditional cybersecurity is failing because of weak technologies and human error. **Ransomware**, considered the leading cyberthreat, maximizes financial gain for the bad guys, offers bigger returns for their efforts, the allure of a quick buck and no real repercussions. Criminal affiliates conduct attacks, then share proceeds with the ransomware's developers. The average lifespan of a malware sample in 2020 was 3.4 days, necessitating continual adjustment to new IT upgrades. More automated ransomware will be used to seek out fresh victims. Legacy solutions do not keep pace with the increased sophistication and frequency of new threats. The **Colonial Pipeline** ransomware attack shut down the flow of 45% of gasoline and jet fuel to US East Coast, and temporarily halted all operations. It caused a run on gas stations, long lines at the pump, an increase in the cost of gas, and disrupted the lives of millions. Just a moment, DarkSide. You did say, "we only attack companies that can pay the requested amount," "we do not want to kill your business," "we will not attack hospitals, schools and universities, nonprofit organizations and the government sector." And what's your position on traumatizing the general population, guys?

"I should say, love is wise, hatred is foolish." - Bertrand Russell

Social Media

Biden's media team pursued a **winning social strategy**, going against the presumption that the internet will not reward anything uplifting or nuanced. The orange dude persisted with the usual outrageous attention-grabbing statements loved by the algorithms of FB. Yet Uncle Joe won the election with fewer followers and less social engagement. Some advantage came from 45's mishandling of the pandemic. But the Democrats leaned on influencers and *validators*, people trusted by the kinds of voters the campaign hoped to reach. They chose to emphasize topics like courage and vulnerability and drew on the followers of popular figures like the actor Dwayne (The Rock) Johnson. The campaign worked with lesser known influencers, created a TikTok presence, forwarded positive headlines from Fox News, and appealed to FB Moms who spend a lot of time sharing cute kittens and uplifting content. The campaign also posted virtual signs in Animal Crossing, on hit Nintendo games, and placed a "Build Back Better" map in Fortnite. They sought to increase social trust, avoided energizing divisive fare and closely monitored memes that went viral. It became clear that traditional ads were far less effective, that higher production values did not resonate. Instead the campaign reverted to cheaper-to-produce, impromptu, behind-the-scenes clips of regular voters talking into smartphones - realer, granier, more

credible footage. It proved that a kinder, gentler version of the internet they believed did exist - and could be reached.

Feel free to take out your handkerchiefs and shed a few tears of sympathy for the poor misunderstood Millennials. The pandemic has given a better insight into the digital lives of others and we clearly perceive a new social media **generation gap**. It's no longer useful to clump Millennials and Gen Z together as shorthand for youth. Gen Z and Millennials, two different stories, *get it straight, Mom*. Two different takes on life. Millennials (b.1981-1994) are fast approaching middle age and suddenly are taking a lot of teasing from l'il bro and l'il sis. Teens = generation of no illusions. Millennials = old fogies. The Zees can read the signs. They heap disdain on the distorting downward-pointing camera angle that their elders consider flattering. They register barely an iota of interest in basic adulting tasks, earnestness or emojis. They regard emails as stiffly formal, and why bother to use them when messaging apps make them redundant? They're aware that their online privacy is likely to have been compromised from the start by parents and grandparents and criticize the blithe willingness of older generations to hand over photos, locations and other personal information to social media companies. It's indisputable that the Zees are adept at online activism, that they're unusually interested in social justice, that data security and online honesty are essential to them. And those aged 18-24 are most emotionally connected to *entertainment brands*. So far, companies fail to distinguish between the generations. FB knows that it is losing favor fast, and that fatigue is setting in. And within 50 years dead people will outnumber the living on their pages. Generation Zuckerberg, are you getting the picture?

The creator economy is the fastest growing category of small business, and the leading exponent in the world is a man named Jimmy Donaldson, 22. He goes by the stage name **Mr. Beast**. A megastar you've never heard of, he speaks daily to 91m subscribers. His videos have been viewed 13 bn times. His primary YouTube channel alone generates \$3.1m a month. Donaldson's early videos and posts were criticized for their use of slurs and offensive jokes. He initially cycled through different genres of videomaking to crack the algorithm; he live-streamed himself reacting to videos and eventually rebranded himself as YouTube's biggest stunt philanthropist, a genre more aptly labeled *prank generosity*. Today his empire encompasses a lucrative mobile gaming app; a ghost kitchen chain where you can order burgers through local delivery services - Jimmy doesn't even touch a bun; he is advisor to a financial network that provides business tools to online content creators, and is making deals with a bevy of firms to distribute his content across a range of social media platforms. Advertising runs alongside his videos, and he sells containerloads of branded swag: socks, water bottles, t-shirts. Of course there is backlash: several former employees said working conditions at his companies are rife with favoritism and bullying. Fans who lost significant amounts of money on a cryptocurrency scheme he promoted and invested in are up in arms. Jimmy now employs 50 people, a cadre of writers, editors and production assistants who work tirelessly to pull off new stunts. At his current rate of growth, he could become the most subscribed creator in the world. "Once you know how to make a video go viral," he says, "it's just about how to get as many out as possible. You can practically make unlimited money."

Someone attacks you on a *gripe site*. The hostile posts proliferate quickly and the results are devastating. You've fallen victim to the **slander industry**, where unverified claims appear on obscure, ridiculous looking sites, to which automated search engines give the impression of credibility. It's especially galling because the amateurish websites won't go away. Ads appear next to the ugly comments, plumping reputation management services who offer to help remove image-trashing content. Just pony up \$700-\$20K depending on how numerous the harmful posts and maybe, just maybe, there's a chance to remove it. The service is less effective for images. But according to the NYTimes, there's an insidious and symbiotic relationship between those facilitating trash talk and those getting paid to remove it. It turns out the same people running the slanderous sites are the ones offering to clean them up.

The significant **drop off in happiness among teens** correlates directly to social media use. Teen depression and suicide rates have been rising for over a decade, and the links are clear. Teens who spend more time on social media apps are more likely to exhibit poor mental health outcomes, especially those who are on their phones more than 1-2 hours a day. Emergency room admissions for self-harm among 10-14 year olds tripled in the past year. The statistics are up on kids who report sadness or hopelessness, seriously considered suicide, made a suicide plan, attempted, or injured themselves in a suicide attempt that had to be treated by doctor. Yet in his testimony to Congress, Zuck said, *"I don't think that the research is conclusive on that."* FB continues to work on expanding its offerings to even younger children, including a version of IG aimed at users under 13. FB claims to be speaking with a range of experts who study algorithms and virality. The object: create systems that keep people on its platforms. This may be the one thing on which Democrats and Republicans agree, despite scant government funding directed toward studying the effects of these platforms. Kids that age simply are not equipped to navigate the challenge of having a social media account. FB's success is dependent on keeping people engaged and selling advertisements based on that engagement. What can kids do to undermine the business model? 1. Spend less time on line; 2. Don't follow strangers; 3. Definitely don't passively scroll through any random feed that's suggested to you.

In 1668 an English philosopher named John Wilkins proposed irony marks, diacritical indicators for clarifying intention in written statements. The idea never caught on. To this day written language remains imperfect. Facial expressions, gestures and vocal tones transmit deeper levels of meaning and subtext. Those with a range of neurological differences including autism, spectrum disorder and dyslexia say they have trouble deciphering subtle clues associated with sarcasm and flirtation, especially in web-based messages. Hence **tone indicators**, new paralinguistic signifiers added at the end of statements to help readers fill in the blanks, a written shorthand for the poster's intent and emotion. Consider /srs for "serious," or /j should you want to signal a joke. These informal hacks push back against platform limitations, though they may veer into the zone of patronizing. But they do reflect shifting linguistic norms, which may have had its origins in identity representation and communication seen in the subcultures of anime and K-pop fandom.

We're talking a new take on governance when transnational corporations overtly compete for power with democratically-elected leaders. Recent pronouncements by Twitter and FB instantaneously reshaped the American political landscape when in the course of a few hours they simply marginalized the loudest figure in the history of social media. The newly-empowered **FB Oversight Board** banned the Orange Don for 2 years. The Board swears it follows its own rules, as well as those championed by international human rights law. It underscores the depth of unchecked power social media companies hold over the public debate and public safety. The Board's head-scratching started with decisions on topics as varied as nudity, hate speech, the consequences of amplified content, and the discussion of how AI can identify different nipples in different contexts. Founded last May with a \$130m endowment as an independent trust it indicates the price tag to shield Zuck from having to make controversial public choices or statements on our collective behalf.

"We need to stop speaking Hebrew and start speaking Yiddish." - James Carville

Vocabulary

autogolpe - In Latin America, a military coup initiated or abetted by a country's elected leader, especially in order to establish absolute control of the state.

CBDC - Central Bank Digital Currency

competitive authoritarianism - a system in which elections still take place, but skewed to entrench autocrats.

consensus algorithm - a digital mechanism that allows users or machines to coordinate. All agents in the system must agree on a single source of truth, even if some agents fail. (see also: *Byzantine Fault Tolerance*).

dark patterns - manipulative marketing practices, especially in online political fundraising; a classic technique of the genre called *deceptive design*

imposter syndrome - feelings of intellectual fraudulence that override any feelings of success

lonely cow notification - FarmVille clickbait catchphrase designed to attract inactive players

the money bomb - the cleverly concealed pre-checked box, an online political fundraising trick which automatically defaults donors into making unwitting additional contributions

neopronoun - a term created to avoid expressing gender

neurodivergent - modifier referring to people with a range of neurological differences including autism, spectrum disorder and dyslexia. Abbreviated *nd*

presentism- uncritical adherence to present-day attitudes, especially the tendency to interpret past events in terms of modern values and concepts.

stonks - intentional misspelling of 'stocks' by WallStreetBets and Robinhood day traders

thermopolium - Pompeian term for snack bar, dating to A.D. 79.

the theory of thermostatic public opinion - arguably the most robust model of public opinion change, which holds that survey responses are meaningful political signals

transphobic invalidation - harassment or discrimination by those fearful of gender nonconformists

"You don't appreciate the fact that madmen are very lucky." - Luigi Pirandello

What Is A Brand?

We ask brands to take on the responsibility we need to shoulder ourselves; to clarify understandings; and to make problems go away. We hold unrealistically high expectations about what brands can deliver. We assign to brands the hardest tasks handed to us, and we expect them to work miracles.

A brand is a consequence.

As the world reopens, keep your eye on the horizon and think positive.
Let's check in together in December!

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