

“It’s the Story, Stupid” – Selling the Reality of Products

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In 1966, Robert F. Kennedy delivered a speech which included the following passage:

There is a Chinese curse which says “May he live in interesting times.” Like it or not, we live in interesting times. They are times of danger and uncertainty; but they are also the most creative of any time in the history of mankind.

Little did he know then what interesting times the future held in store. The computer that steered the moon landing a few years later had less processing capacity than an average smart phone today. The Cold War, which dominated the political and cultural activities of the time, did, however, have similarities to today’s challenges when it comes to regaining a common understanding of the truth. The fragmentation of world influence was quite simply split in three: the US and the Capitalist influence, the Soviet Union and Communism, and the Non-Aligned Movement. But the situation started to change at the end of the 1960s with the protests against the Vietnam war, the Prague Spring uprising and student rebellion across Western Europe, best remembered for the 1968 insurrection in Paris, which marked the first signs of fundamental change in Europe.

It also marked the beginning of changes in consumption. After World War II, people had been looking for the security of branded goods as a reassurance of quality and safety. Advertising of the time tells the story of the perfect housewife in the perfect kitchen with the perfect appliances. It was about keeping up appearances. If your neighbor had it, you were meant to want it. The same applied to cars and cigarettes.

Then the younger generation started to change its view of consumption, not wanting to follow the austerity-governed rules, regulations and regimented approach their parents had set up. Their reality was different. As Robert F. Kennedy asserts, this uncertainty can be seen as the fertile ground for creativity.

Change will never be as slow again.

What distinguishes then from now is the speed of that change. Digitalization based on the technical development of hardware is increasing our possibilities manifold. From newspapers and magazines, progressing through billboards, advertising pillars, radio, black-and-white TV and then color TV to the first website advertisement – it took nearly a century to change fundamentally the communication of products and services.

The latest 5G mobile data technology, much debated in 2019, will make the use of augmented reality and virtual reality commonplace. Entertainment, knowledge transfer from education to product information and marketing will take new shapes. Storytelling will also change dramatically. The message has to move with the medium. That movement is ever faster and shows no sign of slowing down.

I VUCA World – Ambiguity Fatigue

The pace at which change is currently happening is putting people under pressure emotionally. The overarching issue is that we live in a VUCA world. The expression is said to have been created

by the US Army War College¹ to describe the situation after the end of the Cold War. VUCA² stands for:

- Volatile,
- Uncertain,
- Complex and
- Ambiguous.

It also very accurately describes the world in which consumers live.

Global politics, whether it involves Brexit or trade wars between the US and China, has led to considerable volatility accompanied by uncertainty about the near future. Decisions, meanwhile, have become very complex, especially due to digitalization – just try finding the right mobile phone contract. More recently, a growing awareness of environmental issues and climate change is leading to a seismic shift in consumer demand.

One of the most impactful aspects of VUCA is ambiguity. The development of products used to be set up over the long term. On average, it used to take a big FMCG (Fast Moving Consumer Goods) company around three years to get a product to market. The main reason behind this extended run-up was to reduce all risk as far as possible, but in the end this approach also often failed to create the next blockbuster.

As Philip Kotler states in the book *Marketing 4.0*: “The flow of innovation that was once vertical (from companies to market) has become horizontal. In the past companies believed that innovation should come from within; thus, they have built a strong research and development infrastructure. Eventually, they realized that the rate of innovation was never fast enough for them to be competitive in the ever-changing market.”³

Today the approach to creating new products has changed dramatically and become far more complex. Small start-ups approach their product through processes such as Design Thinking⁴ or Scrum⁵, giving them the option of developing products very quickly by focusing specifically on consumer needs and co-creation. However, the secret to success is very often found through experimentation.

Most major companies now create homes for such start-ups, for example as incubators, providing knowledge of markets and sales channels in exchange for a stake in the start-up.

The “test and pivot” approach, however, goes hand in hand with ambiguity. Deciding whether to go either left or right is always linked to an emotional impact, because you don’t know which is the right direction. This continuous need to take fast decisions without knowing their long-term effect leads to a new phenomenon called ambiguity fatigue.

¹ US Army Heritage and Education Center (February 16, 2018). “Who first originated the term VUCA (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity)?” USAHEC Ask Us a Question. The United States Army War College.

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Volatility,_uncertainty,_complexity_and_ambiguity.

³ Philip Kotler, Hermawan Kartajaya, Iwan Setiawan. *Marketing 4.0: Moving from Traditional to Digital*. 2017.

⁴ <https://www.ideou.com/blogs/inspiration/what-is-design-thinking>.

⁵ <https://www.scrum.org/resources/what-is-scrum>.

II Looking for Stability and Answers

Taking it as a given that this set of VUCA factors is having an effect on consumers, the latter are starting to look for help. Many feel they have lost the big picture due to the bewildering array of choices. They are losing the thread of their own story. At the same time, companies and marketers are becoming increasingly aware of this problem and are aiming to provide answers.

But the effects of VUCA can be seen even more clearly when it comes to communication via social media (Owned). Parallel to the normal channels of communication for brands, such as the brand's own website, it has become increasingly important for companies to reflect the conversations happening online. This does not only include Facebook, which is seen to have become an "old people's forum," but is now extending into other established channels such as Instagram (with its focus on the visual, through photos and so-called stories), Twitter, WhatsApp (which now offers advertising) and even the latest online craze for the younger generation called TikTok.

As brands become less and less trusted, third-party endorsement (Earned) in these channels becomes more important than the promises that brands make on their official channels or via straightforward advertising (Paid). A new way of storytelling – the influencer – has taken to the digital stage. Think Kardashian. However, this is a two-edged sword. It also means that negative comments on these channels can have an immediate effect on sales. Crisis management has become a major part of the communications job.

As an example, Greenpeace's activities in 2010 against Nestlé in connection with the palm-oil issue were already mainly online-based.⁶ The alleged "wrong reaction" at the time by Nestlé's Corporate Communications department is even said to have accelerated the issue, transforming it from an environmental campaign to a digital communications disaster.

What companies have to do is create the right content and messaging with a storyline that will lead to brand love, reinforcing the positive, feel-good factor. This type of content marketing linked with classical PR and transferred to the social networking channels has become the main way to communicate.

III Storytelling: The Basics

As the saying in Hollywood goes: "There is no good story without a great script." The goal is to use the content created through text, pictures, animation, video, GIF's, etc., to reach the mind and heart of the recipients. With hundreds of media imprints taking place every day, it has become more difficult to reach the individual.

There is a strong, proven link between a story being told and the physical reaction a person experiences when that story has an impact. Why is good storytelling so powerful?

In a TEDx presentation in 2017, David JP Phillips shared key neurological findings on storytelling and the release of neurotransmitters.⁷ He distinguished between two types of "cocktail." The first is the Angel's Cocktail, which builds suspense, launches a cliff-hanger feeling and a cycle of waiting and expecting. The cocktail's first ingredient, dopamine, provides focus, motivation and memory, while creating empathy for whatever character you build in your story. The next, oxytocin, gives rise to generosity, trust and bonding. The third, endorphins, makes you laugh. On the other end of

⁶ <http://edition.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/asiapcf/03/19/indonesia.rainforests.orangutan.nestle/index.html>.

⁷ David JP Phillips. The Magical Science of Storytelling. TEDxStockholm. <https://youtu.be/Nj-hdQMa3uA>.

the spectrum is the Devil's Cocktail. It creates an atmosphere of uncertainty and volatility due to the release of cortisol and adrenalin. A high concentration of these hormones leads to intolerance, irritability, a lack of creativity, criticism, memory impairment and bad decisions.

IV Purpose vs. Attitude

Companies are investing in giving their brands purpose in order to create bonding and trust and therefore an "outpouring" of oxytocin. One example is Unilever, which has been seen as the global leader on sustainability eight years in a row, according to Globescan, a survey of 800 experts in nearly 80 countries.⁸

It is, however, important to be aware of what "purpose" really means. There is a lot of talk today about brands with purpose, or sustainable brands, or meaningful brands. The number of descriptions people use is exceeded only by the different interpretations they give them. Some simply mean brands that support a charity or use "natural" ingredients. At the other extreme, people set up whole companies whose sole purpose is to "do good." With so many terms in use, clarifying the definitions behind the terminology can help.

At Unilever, they say they are in the business of "helping people to live well and live within the natural limits of the planet." They speak about "sustainable living" and "sustainable living brands." The focus lies on improving health, nutrition and wellbeing, reducing the environmental impact of products and helping consumers choose products that are better for them, society and the environment.

The concept of "purpose-driven" brands is not new. Among the Unilever brands, Ben & Jerry's is the strongest example. The company has had a social or environmental purpose at its heart since it was founded on May 5, 1978 in Burlington, Vermont, in the US. The company's "sustainable living purpose" has always been about fairness and equality and has evolved over the years to cover issues of social justice. As Ben & Jerry's grew internationally, so have its campaigns, which included supporting same-sex marriage, protecting threatened voting rights, social inclusion and racial equality.

In 2002, Ben & Jerry's spoke out about climate justice and this has become a key pillar of its campaigning work. The company says: "Climate change is real and it's happening now and, just like Ben & Jerry's ice cream, if it's melted it's ruined."

But in today's complex and interconnected world, having a powerful purpose is not enough. Brands must look at their impacts up and down the value chain and across the public domain. For example, they cannot do social good while harming the planet or improve the lives of consumers while ignoring the working conditions of the people who make their products.

That is why at Unilever a sustainable living brand is defined as one with the clear purpose of helping to tackle a social or environmental issue over time, or which produces products that reduce the environmental footprint and/or improve health and wellbeing or livelihoods.

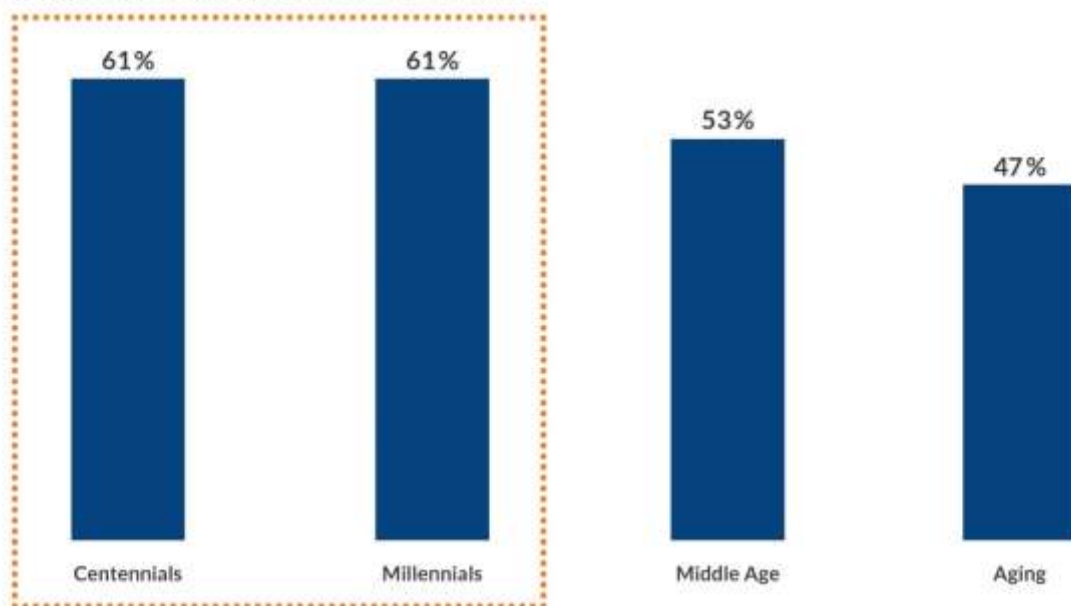
Doing good has a positive business impact. The Unilever sustainable living brands, for example, grew 50% faster than the rest of the business and accounted for more than 60% of the company's

⁸ <https://globescan.com/unilever-patagonia-ikea-sustainability-leadership-2019/>.

growth in 2016. This underlines studies by the Harvard Business School which indicate that purpose-driven brands generally grow faster than others.⁹

Other surveys, notably by Nielsen and the Boston Consulting Group (BCG), have measured sales. An analysis of products in the United States in 2014 showed that 16.5% of US consumer goods were what BCG called “responsible products” and that they were growing by 9% each year, outpacing the market. Furthermore, research by KantarFutures shows that this trend is expected to increase over time. It becomes ever more important for the younger age groups, commonly known as Millennials and Centennials, that brands have a clear point of view. The percentage is much higher compared to the older generations. Support through school strikes for the movement Fridays for Future, led by Greta Thunberg, underlines this.

Prefer Brands that Have an Opinion and a Point of View



Source: KantarFutures, 2017 Global Monitor

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Brands, even those with a well-founded purpose, are facing major challenges from other stakeholders. Sometimes it is an NGO saying publicly that what is being done is not enough. Sometimes it is politicians using public criticism, whether rightly or wrongly, to achieve their own goals instead of trying to change things for the better. That debate often results in a tit-for-tat situation best described as the fight between claims of “greenwashing” and “greenbashing.” When criticism is levelled at a product, it may be based on facts, disputed or otherwise, or on “public opinion,” however this might be interpreted. Often difficult to challenge, as it is purportedly “for the greater good,” the criticism creates an environment of uncertainty (about what is really better) and intolerance (you should not buy this product).

V From Crisis Management to Crisis Leadership

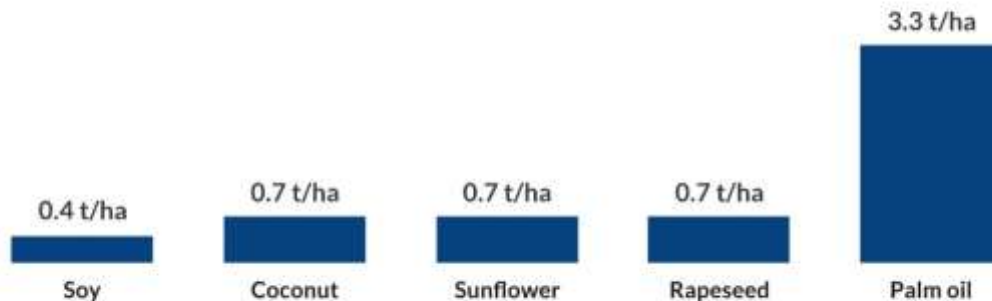
A very good example of such a debate is the one about palm oil, which companies are being criticized for using. The straightforward version of the criticism is that palm oil kills wildlife. Attempts to improve the situation, through the Round Table for Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO), were deemed by NGOs to be not good or fast enough. A boycott, however, would put tens of thousands of people

⁹ <https://hbr.org/2014/05/from-purpose-to-impact>.

out of work, pushing them into poverty, and wide-ranging substitution would need far more land, as palm oil is much more efficient than soy or sunflower, according to WWF.¹⁰

Comparison of Global Oil Yields by Crop Plant Oil Yields

In Tonnes per Hectare (t/ha)



Source: WWF

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In this VUCA setting, the attitude (“this product slaughters orangutans”) will kill the purpose (“we are trying to convert the market to certified segregated sustainable palm oil”) every time.

Simplified answers in the form of an attitude (“taking back control” by Brexiteers or Trump’s putting “America First”) win out over complex answers (what it means to be part of the EU / multilateralism takes longer but can be much stronger). In a VUCA world, it’s the simple slogan that succeeds. “Truth” becomes relative and fragmented. People respond to the one-line summary rather than read the book. The story has been reduced to a catchphrase. In this situation it is hard, but not impossible, to move from crisis management to crisis leadership.

The palm-oil debate in Germany, which started as a fierce and emotional discussion, has become a normal, result-oriented conversation among different stakeholders. One outcome of the crisis was the foundation of the German Forum for Sustainable Palm Oil (FONAP),¹¹ a joint effort by companies, NGOs and the German government to challenge the status quo and aim for such high standards that all stakeholders are satisfied.

VI From Truth Management to Truth Leadership

Setting up a collaborative institution like FONAP was not only a business question, but also an instrument to de-emotionalize the public debate and the fight for the public truth. NGOs were in the clear lead when it came to public opinion and there was only one way out of this cul-de-sac: collaboration with other companies, a public-private partnership, underpinned with a clear purpose and strong KPIs (key performance indicators), which allowed the voices of the other views and truths to begin being heard. From a communications point of view, the expectation is not that everything has already been achieved; the main message is that the journey has begun. The overarching goal of FONAP – reaching a pivotal point in volume demand and having all market players order 100% segregated, sustainable palm oil and palm kernel oil – still has to be achieved.

¹⁰ <https://www.wwf.org.uk/updates/8-things-know-about-palm-oil>.

¹¹ <https://www.forumpalmoel.org>.

VII Channels and Echo Chambers (Bubbles)

A differentiation through the product as such is no longer possible. Product communication as such no longer works. A copy of the product can be on the market before the first communication even takes place. Innovation cycles have also become much faster.

What used to be a 1-2-1 communication at the local store became mass media-orientated (TV/radio/print) and has currently culminated in digital communication. Smartphones mean that we are reachable at any time anywhere (24/7 User).

In addition, linear media usage has developed into parallel communication leading to higher complexity and challenges to reach the target groups along the different points of contact. Digital marketing experts estimate that most Americans are exposed to around 4,000 to 10,000 advertisements each day.¹² People thus filter for what they want to engage with and start ignoring brands and advertising messages unless it's something of personal interest. The statistics for other areas around the world undoubtedly do not vary much from the above. As a reaction to this, even more content is being produced, leading to what is referred to as content graveyards.

Under these circumstances, is it important not only to understand the messaging as such, but also to be aware what channels are being used. This is where big data and personas come into play. As much as marketers are trying to create the perfect story, the perfect consumer journey to enable conversation/sales, there are also disruptors that will try to interfere. This can be communication by governments (by announcing new legislation), competitors, NGOs or employees, but also consumers themselves. All are fighting for ownership of the truth. Examples are Dieselgate or Bayer/Monsanto in the glyphosate debate, which has become a litigation battle.

What once used to be a debate among stakeholders in the general media has now become a street battle for the truth on countless channels. What started in the commentaries on normal websites first transferred to Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, and now can also be found on TikTok or YouTube.

Big data, however, working on the basis of selective algorithms, will only feed people with information they believe they are interested in and which mirrors their opinion. This so-called internet bubble or echo chamber distorts and falsifies the perception of the truth. However, having the knowledge about so-called personas gives companies the possibility of shaping their communications and marketing them in such a way that the presumed and supposed truth is used to create a "bonding" experience with the consumer. The story can be tailored to fit the potential consumer. In the pure sense of the word, the communication becomes a "chemistry" meeting – or a work of alchemy. Tools to define personas are now widely available to companies and agencies, making it easy to identify the points of contact. Opinion polls or personality quizzes on Facebook are used to establish, for example, the political leanings of users.

VIII Cambridge Analytica

A personality quiz involving 120 personal questions was the entry tool to which Cambridge Analytica owes its fame (or notoriety).¹³ The survey was used to profile people along five axes, the

¹² <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesagencycouncil/2017/08/25/finding-brand-success-in-the-digital-world/#449178a1626e>.

¹³ <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/may/06/cambridge-analytica-how-turn-clicks-into-votes-christopher-wylie>.

“five factors” or “OCEAN” model: openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness and neuroticism. Collated with the personal data of these people, their real name, location, Facebook friends, likes and a whole lot of computer power, it became possible to extrapolate the data of around 300,000 people to that of around 100 million, making them fully transparent.

The way this was used to manipulate the use of social media during the Brexit campaign, with all the consequences, became a wakeup call for people in the United Kingdom, one that has continued to echo through the years since then. People are learning to analyze and criticize the story rather than swallow it whole.

Cambridge Analytica’s activities copied what is done through digital marketing.¹⁴ Here, methods such as search engine optimization (SEO), search engine marketing (SEM), content marketing, influencer marketing, content automation, campaign marketing, data-driven marketing, e-commerce marketing, social media marketing, social media optimization, e-mail direct marketing, display advertising, e-books, and optical disks and games are used every day.

With so many channels at hand and knowing that there are countless personas to be identified, we see a clear segmentation in marketing, mainly supported by performance marketing.

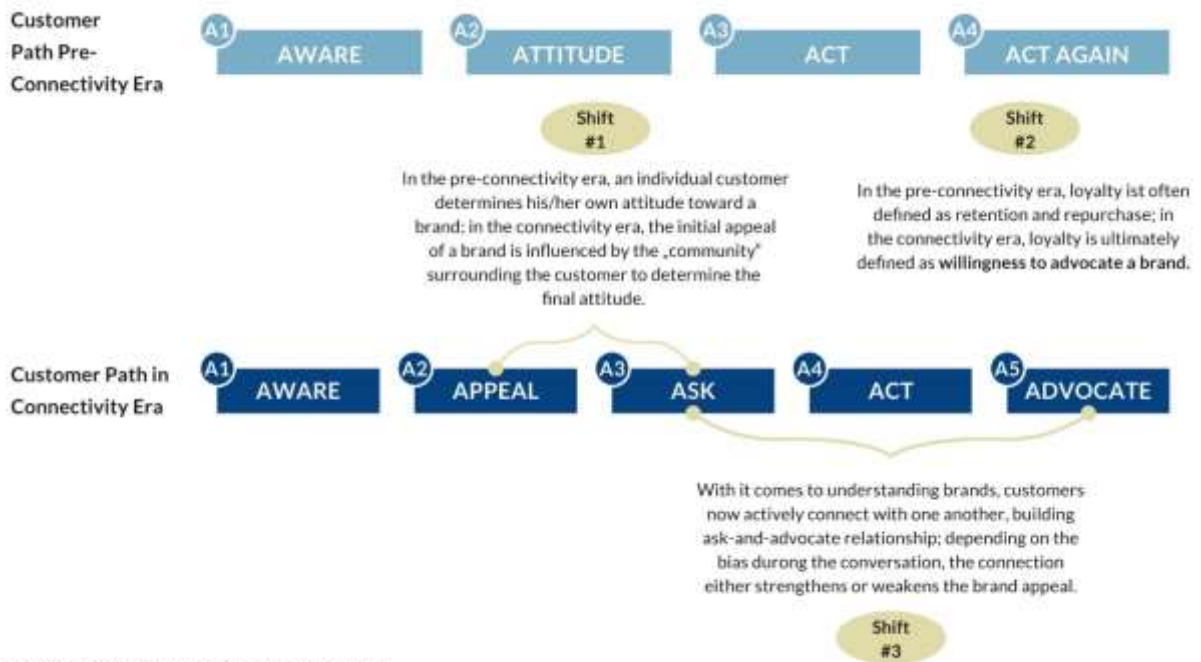
Through mathematical models, the fragmentation of information and therefore the truth can be manipulated. What works and what doesn’t can be identified in real time, for example, through a simple A/B test: If more time is spent engaging with information A and leads to more clicks than with B, the marketing budget will be put behind version A and B will be relegated to the graveyard of marketing content.

This, however, is only the first part of the journey. Digital communication has led to a shift in what is perceived as truth.

In the pre-digitalization era, an individual consumer determined his or her own attitude toward a brand. In times of digitalization, the initial appeal of a brand is influenced by the community surrounding the customer, determining the final attitude towards the brand. What seems to be an individual decision is, ultimately, at its core, a social decision. Hence, social influence is rising in the digital consumer journey. Brand loyalty in the pre-digital era was defined by retention and repurchase. Today, however, the ultimate goal is the willingness to advocate a brand. The framework that describes this road to advocacy is called the 5 A’s.

¹⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Digital_marketing.

The Shifting Customer Path in a Connected World



Source: Kotler, Phillip, Hermawan Kartajaya, Iwan Setiawan. Marketing 4.0: Moving from Traditional to Digital, John Wiley & Sons: Hoboken, NJ, 2017.

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Its steps are:¹⁵

1. AWARE: The consumer is exposed to a brand or related information for the first time. (I know)
2. APPEAL: Key messages or cues create attraction. (I like)
3. ASK: Prompted by curiosity, consumers will research more information online about the brand or ask family and friends. (I'm convinced)
4. ACT: Supported by this information they will pivot into action and decide to buy a particular brand. (I'm buying)
5. ADVOCATE: After a while the consumer will develop a strong sense of loyalty, which ultimately is reflected in advocacy. (I'm promoting)

This means that there is a close connection between consumption and one's own identity, the "authentic self." While identity used to be mainly defined by where you came from, today it is defined by what you consume. The zeitgeist has also become more international in regard to fashion, music, sports and digital influence. In a world of "influencers" whose whole purpose is to persuade people to identify with them and thus with the products that they promote, it has become increasingly difficult for a younger generation to escape the manipulation of the commercial storytellers. There is the ultimate fragmented reality – for now. There are, however, clear signs that increasing numbers are waking up to this and rebelling against it. The "authentic self" is being reclaimed and the whole nature of authenticity challenged. This in itself presents a new challenge for communicators.

¹⁵ Philip Kotler, Hermawan Kartajaya, Iwan Setiawan. Marketing 4.0: Moving from Traditional to Digital, 2017, p. 64.

Marketing, by its very nature, mirrors society while also trying to shape it. The “Me Too” movement, for example, has had a clear effect on how women are being portrayed.¹⁶ Official watchdogs are even starting to intervene, moving to ban, for example, the use of stereotypes. The new rule follows a review of gender stereotyping in adverts, carried out by the UK Advertising Standards Authority (ASA)¹⁷ – the organization that administers the UK Advertising Codes. These codes cover both broadcast and non-broadcast adverts, including online and social media. Some columnists, however, are criticizing the rule, saying that society has become oversensitive and that this is yet another symptom of the “nanny state.” But it is not only columnists who are reacting to this. Political parties and individual politicians are using authorities’ involvement in the way communication takes place and the drive for political correctness by media as proof of wanting “control back again” or of media being leftist in its views. It is a classic battle for control of the story.

Global warming is one of the most contested areas. However, Fox News isn’t needed to make a right-wing party big, when a Trump Tweet becomes breaking news around the world.

Tweet President Donald J. Trump



Source: @realDonaldTrump 11:24 AM - Nov. 7, 2012.

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Ben & Jerry’s, on the other hand, created a specific ice cream in the context of the fight against global warming, called “Save Our Swirled – if it’s melted, it’s ruined,” and actively called for climate change action.¹⁸

In this paper, we have looked briefly at what it means to live in a VUCA world, how marketing and social media have evolved, and how very complex the high-speed world of digital communications has become.

There are signs, however, that after a generation of unabashed consumerism, increasing awareness of the fragility of the environment and the threat of climate change is starting to cause the pendulum to swing. For companies that have already committed to sustainability, this is no surprise. It is part and parcel of their story. For others, such as the manufacturers of throwaway

¹⁶ Alice E. Courtney, Sarah Wernick Lockeretz. A Woman’s Place: An Analysis of the Roles Portrayed by Women in Magazine Advertisements. *Journal of Marketing Research*. February 1, 1971.

¹⁷ <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-48628678>.

¹⁸ <https://www.thedrum.com/news/2015/09/07/ben-jerry-s-demands-climate-change-action-new-save-our-swirled-flavour>.

plastic goods or cheap fashion, for whom built-in obsolescence is their modus vivendi, it is bad news.

The students and schoolchildren who are walking out of their classrooms and demanding that we pay attention to what matters to them, the British youngsters who were too young to vote on Brexit who are marching to demand another referendum, German YouTuber Rezzo, who received millions of views when he broadcast about politics for the first time,¹⁹ the young citizens of Hong Kong demonstrating day after day – they are the heirs to the 1968 revolution that changed the approach to communications. They don't want their identity to be defined by algorithms. They are reclaiming their authentic selves.

IX Conclusions and Solutions

Yuval Noah Harari, the often-quoted author of the book *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*, put it simply in a podcast on the subject of truth: "Truth today is defined by the top results of the Google search."²⁰

What can we do in this VUCA world with algorithms activating our emotions towards brands?

The answer lies in focusing on VUCA and the tools that are needed to survive in a VUCA world, both personally and professionally. Leadership seminars train managers on how to lead in this world. In that context, the acronym SLAC (sense-making, learning, agility and creativity) was developed²¹ in response to the elements that make up VUCA:

Volatility, which refers to the increasing pace of change in communication and the fragmentation of truth. It can be countered by embracing learning and supporting education. The whole key to reclaiming control of a person's identity, both political and personal, lies in education. Not just at school, but as a continuous, lifelong process. Through understanding, it becomes much easier to adapt to a new environment or novel situation – the communication situation in general, not just in commercial contexts.

Uncertainty, which is mainly based on the lack of reliable information concerning the future and is countered by creativity. Very often there are no textbook answers and one has to find creative ways of constructing one's own truth. Again, education holds the key. Encouraging the development of creative and critical talents all through life gives people the tools. Some of the most creative eras such as the fin-de-siècle were the result of periods of great uncertainty.

Complexity, which means that the truth has many interconnected parts and variables. The information that is available might be overwhelming in nature and volume. It can be countered by employing agility, one of the most used words when it comes to working and living in a digitalized world. It means not being afraid to explore beyond the digitally-imposed boundaries. It means remaining open-minded with regard to the information one receives and not immediately forming an opinion, but also considering other information and views. It means learning how to get the best out of digital resources – again a lifelong learning curve.

¹⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Y1IZQsyuSQ>.

²⁰ <https://samharris.org/podcasts/reality-and-the-imagination/> - Podcast 68.

²¹ University of Sydney Business School. Sydney Business Connect Magazine. October 2017.

As Angela Merkel put it in a speech at Harvard University in early 2018, referring to finding answers to the questions that new technologies bring:²²

I have learned that answers to difficult questions can be found if we always see the world through the eyes of others; if we respect the history, tradition, religion and identity of others; if we firmly stand by our inalienable values and act accordingly; and if we do not always follow our initial impulses, even with all the pressure to make snap decisions, but instead stop for a moment, keep quiet, think, take a break.

Ambiguity, which means that what used to be taken for granted needs re-thinking. It can be countered by taking time and effort to make sense of things or by the ability to interpret and see the potential of new technologies, and unleashing the imagination to envisage what the world will be like as emerging change unfolds.

X Recommendations

The answer to the VUCA world of truth could be SLAC. To counter volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity, you need to promote sense-making, learning, agility and creativity.

How can we support SLAC?

One of the main factors is and continues to lie in education. Education, that is, in the broadest sense of helping people to understand the modern world of communication and giving them access to the knowledge that can allow them to make sense of it all. In our modern world of schooling and further education, however, one of the main factors making this difficult is the loss of creativity that often goes hand-in-hand with the focus on facts and figures. Current curricula are warped and need reforming and expanding, so that learning prepares people not just for an agile working life, but also an open-minded cultural future. Learning is for life.

As the creativity expert Ken Robinson says in his TEDTalk from 2006 (one of the most viewed TEDTalks with around 60 million views), we have to radically rethink our school system in order to cultivate creativity and acknowledge multiple types of intelligence.²³ Beyond multiple types of intelligence, it is even more important to look at the different levels of media savvy of the generations which will follow the centennials and millennials. Of course, the younger generations are very much aware of what is happening around the net and in social media. They also, however, live in their own echo chamber. Everyone needs the capability to think outside the box. Tools such as virtual reality and whatever other technical wonders which are still to come should be used to expand horizons, broaden perspective, inspire creativity and promote tolerance.

Creativity goes hand in hand with being able to understand and look at the perspective of the other person. The so-called “end of liberalism,” proclaimed by Vladimir Putin in an interview with the *Financial Times* ahead of the G-20 meeting in Japan in June 2019, would also drastically reduce the scope of creativity. Putin also proclaimed the “end of multiculturalism,” a cornerstone of western society. Liberalism should not just be seen as a trend in western culture that has dominated since World War II, but also a much broader attitude which creates space for other views.

Knowledge is power. Any attempt to limit it amounts to disempowerment. Having knowledge and attitude and an open mind to other people’s views will give you the possibility to take in all the

²² <https://americanrhetoric.com/speeches/angelamerkelharvardcommencementenglish.htm>.

²³ https://www.ted.com/talks/ken_robinson_says_schools_kill_creativity/up-next.

factors that will influence the truth. In the end, there might be several “truths” to choose among. People must be given the tools that enable them to make these informed choices.

As Terry Pratchett, author of the book *Interesting Times* and a man who could tell a story like few others, once said:²⁴

The phrase “may you live in interesting times” is the lowest in a trilogy of Chinese curses that continue “may you come to the attention of those in authority” and finish with “may the gods give you everything you ask for.” I have no idea about its authenticity.

It’s another case where the truth, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. The truth can be inconvenient. It can be hard to find. But truth will find you out and “alternate truths” eventually will be exposed for what they are – convenient lies.

The job is to work, through sense-making, learning, agility and creativity, towards an informed consensus to define a particular truth. If a story is told based on lies, the realities sold will crumble to dust. The product or policy may soar like Icarus for a brief period, but the glare of scrutiny will bring it crashing down, and its reputation with it.

Google can’t distinguish between truth and lies. Wikipedia just might.

²⁴ <https://www.azquotes.com/quote/1107010>.

XI References

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