

Big Tech is not your friend

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When the author was a young man, those a generation older told him that his demographic could effect positive change. Yet here we are, decades later, and **Jack Yan** questions whether that has come to pass—and he has equal concerns about the generation to come

When you see 16-year-old Greta Thunberg inspire other young people around the world to protest about climate change, urging world leaders to get serious and act, you'd think that the next generation, when they reach adulthood, will be wiser than us and save the planet from our misdeeds. I've no doubt many of them will act, and make real, positive, sustained change for our planet. Thunberg herself is probably poised to be a real achiever, and it's heartwarming.

But each generation can look at the next and pin hopes on the young. However, what's really needed is collaboration, mixing experience with idealism.

This is nothing new. It wasn't long ago when middle-aged people looked to my generation, internet-savvy, digitally aware, globalist in outlook, and felt we were the ones who might treat corporate social responsibility as the norm. Thirty per cent of younger voters went for Green (certainly in New Zealand), and if we were to stick to our guns, we'd be the ones who'd usher in a more environmentally friendly political scene by the time we got to the second decade of the 21st century. If that were the case, why did Thunberg and millions of youth in 100 countries find the need to protest, and why do the same establishment parties tend to dominate most occidental countries?

We were told in the 1980s that there'd be a convergence of tastes globally, with the MTV generation all rocking to the same music. The internet, which we gained knowledge of in

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our school years, would unite us. We were supposedly a generation so wised up to advertisers' messages that we had an instinctive 'BS filter' that saw through it all.

And here we are, too, with no real convergence, with Big Tech happy to divide us through algorithms that reinforce our own prejudices, and while there is a higher proportion of older computer users likely to be fooled by "fake news", there are enough of my generation, now middle-aged, who are also taken in by the same, who have no desire to be civil on social media because we've been told that we're right, and the other side isn't.

Those who see that the emperor has no clothes are few in number. Google's repeated attempts to trick users and disobey their privacy settings are a matter of record, as was the mammoth fine handed down to them by the EU for anticompetitive practices, yet it remains the most frequented site on the web, its brand regularly in top 10 lists. (Interbrand puts it at second for 2018.²) Facebook is questionable when it comes to privacy, has bragged about forcing downloads on to its users (potentially under false pretences),³ and has been criticized for live-streaming mass murder⁴ and encouraging genocide.⁵ Yet it is among the most visited sites online, and Interbrand places it at ninth in its brand ranking for 2018.⁶

Youth don't necessarily see through this, as with any other demographic. It's also questionable whether people of *any* age care that some of the world's top brands pay their fair share of tax.

Each year, I mentor one student from my Alma Mater. The student I am working with does see through a lot of the BS. At the time of writing, they're working on an assignment about Facebook and were asked in class whether Facebook should be regulated. It turns out that the majority of the class didn't know about the scandals that had happened, and that most don't even take in the news via traditional newsmedia (including their websites), but get it via social media. In other words, they were quite content to be "bubbled" and fall victim to the subjective feeds provided to them in digestible chunks by social media. They may visit traditional sites, but only when prompted—but not everyone chooses to click through. Other interviews with young people revealed similar behaviour, with social media their primary source of news. They are often as unquestioning over what they see as those who might take a newspaper at its word or TV news as definitive. It seems that for many, they are no better and no worse than the generations that preceded them, just that the medium has changed.

2. 'Best Global Brands 2018 Rankings', Interbrand, <<https://www.interbrand.com/best-brands/best-global-brands/2018/ranking/>>.

3. L. Matsakis: 'Facebook's mandatory malware scan is an intrusive mess', *Wired*, February 23, 2018, <<https://www.wired.com/story/facebook-mandatory-malware-scan/>>.

4. C. Timberg, D. Harwell, E. Dvoskin, T. Romm: 'How social media's business model helped the New Zealand massacre go viral', *The Washington Post*, March 18, 2019, <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2019/03/18/how-social-medias-business-model-helped-new-zealand-massacre-go-viral/>>.

5. P. Mozur: 'A genocide incited on Facebook with posts from Myanmar's military', *The New York Times*, October 15, 2018, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/15/technology/myanmar-facebook-genocide.html>>.

6. 'Best Global Brands 2018 Rankings', op. cit.

Those responsible for creating these tools are of my generation and a decade younger, and the fact they allow this to continue shows that we do not have any greater claim to conscientiousness than those who have gone before us.

Thunberg and others are absolutely right to take their stance and to exercise their freedoms in letting us know what sort of planet they wish to inherit. They may know that the tools they use from Big Tech are run by companies with patchy records, but that the ends justify the means. But to me we need to have a conversation about which brands to trust, and if they are indeed untrustworthy—Facebook has had endless reports of gaffes over the last two years—then why are we still giving them our time of day, when we should seek and build up alternatives over time?

What has been happening, as Big Tech grows, is that they are creating big-brand clubs of their own, at the exclusion of entrepreneurs who might have a better idea. Effectively, they've climbed the ladder and are pulling it up. Google News, for instance, once a truly objective service, which ranked the source that broke the news first in a search, no longer does that: traditional media, instead, reap the rewards. Google may justify this by saying that the larger company is more trustworthy, more linked by others; but then the ranking is no longer meritorious, and there is less incentive for independent media to break the news if they aren't being rewarded with page views. Google has also been accused of anticompetitive behaviour and systematic theft, sealing incriminating documents, according to a Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press report, *Uncivil Secrecy*.⁷ Both Apple and Google settled a US Justice Department lawsuit after being accused of collusion over hiring practices to drive down wages.⁸ Other claims against these firms are easy enough to find, including Google's deceptions over its Ads Preferences Manager in the early 2010s⁹ and its attempt to bypass user settings on the Safari browser on iPhones,¹⁰ for which it was eventually fined an eight-figure sum by some US states' attorneys-general, or, put another way, a few hours' earnings.

If indeed these activities are 'systematic', then they really need to be factored in to how these brands are viewed. Aaker's brand equity¹¹ components are an excellent starting-point, but it is the brand associations that somehow need to be tempered.

Act, only to preserve your bottom line

In the most cynical cases, Big Tech's playbook appears to be to generate sufficient positive buzz to overcome any negative press; give lip-service whenever some scandal erupts; and,

7. S. Cleland: 'The evidence Google's systematic theft is anti-competitive', *Forbes*, January 20, 2012, <<https://www.forbes.com/sites/scottcleland/2012/01/20/the-evidence-googles-systematic-theft-is-anti-competitive/>>.

8. D. Rushe: 'Apple and Google settle antitrust lawsuit over hiring collusion charges', *The Guardian*, April 24, 2014, <<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/apr/24/apple-google-settle-antitrust-lawsuit-hiring-collusion>>.

9. As researched over a period in 2011 and blogged by the author. J. Yan: 'Google Ads Preferences Manager issue confirmed by NAI', <<http://jackyan.com/blog/2011/05/google-ads-preferences-manager-issue-confirmed-by-nai/>>.

10. J. Angwin and J. Valentino-DeVries: 'Google's iPhone tracking', *The Wall Street Journal*, February 17, 2012, <<https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052970204880404577225380456599176>>.

11. D. Aaker: *Managing Brand Equity*. New York: Free Press 1991.

in some cases, act only when faced with further potential bad press. These shouldn't make for positive brand associations but to an unquestioning public, they do.

The positive buzz can be anything as trivial as a new feature, or the provision of free tools. (There are schools that rely on Google's free suites of services for their pupils that they become normalized.) But lip-service is cheap, and that is what Facebook did in the wake of the massacre by an extremist in Christchurch, New Zealand, on March 15, 2019, who live-streamed the killings. It claimed they would act on hate-speech groups, yet netizens reporting them were told that their activities were permitted as it was 'counter-speech'. When the country's privacy commissioner, John Edwards, asked Facebook if it had done anything to its live-streaming system a few weeks later, he was told no.¹²

However, Facebook has shut down more trivial features in the wake of bad press. For many years, it was forcing downloads on to users by claiming their computers had malware, although, as many discovered, by using a different name to sign on to Facebook, there were no such warnings. It was easy to conclude that Facebook was targeting certain users and encouraging them to install software that sat in a hidden directory, potentially gathering information. Facebook stopped the "malware warning" downloads after I managed to get a *Wired* journalist to write about them in 2018,¹³ two years after unsuccessfully approaching tech journalists at other publications, and one month before the revelations about Cambridge Analytica using Facebook users' data without their consent.¹⁴ The difference appears to be the bottom line: Facebook benefits financially with live-streaming, but there were relatively fewer benefits to deceptive software downloads that affected millions.

When I first joined Medinge, the brand that had fallen from grace in a big way was Enron, caused by the misrepresentation of financial performance. The wrongdoings are not of the same ilk, but where do we say that one brand deserved to fall because of its activities and the others deserve to prosper?

To me, Google and Facebook, in particular, have plenty of negative brand associations, played out in the media—though perhaps not often enough to sully their reputations. A relatively safe story such as the malware warnings potentially helped millions but perhaps too few journalists had the cojones to take on a giant. Yet when Edwards publicly calls Facebook 'morally bankrupt pathological liars',¹⁵ and a *#DeleteFacebook* campaign trended on Twitter, then surely those positive associations must diminish?

12. 'Privacy commissioner: Facebook are "morally bankrupt pathological liars"', *Stuff*, April 8, 2019, <<https://www.stuff.co.nz/technology/111863918/privacy-commissioner-rips-facebooks-mark-zuckerberg-says-livestream-should-be-cut>>.

13. L. Matsakis, op. cit.

14. C. Cadwalladr: "'I made Steve Bannon's psychological warfare tool': meet the data war whistleblower", *The Observer*, March 18, 2018, <<https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/mar/17/data-war-whistleblower-christopher-wylie-faceook-nix-bannon-trump>>.

15. 'Privacy commissioner', op. cit.

The fear I have with the next generation of consumers is that their dependence on Big Tech means that they won't think about the manipulation that goes on behind the scenes. For instance, does Facebook, in its algorithmic curations, share bad press about itself? Google would not let me post links about its data leak on its own Google Plus service. Even if youth have better detectors of BS than we do, will they begin asking the questions if they see nothing to worry them about the brands they rely on?

Whose line is it anyway?

In that case, is it up to us in the branding profession to redress the balance? But then, am I in the minority? If only Edwards and other commentators are sounding warning bells, we are hardly the majority, and in such rankings, these brands don't deserve to be taken down. Why should our voices hold any greater sway?

I'd argue that these matters are hardly trivial and point to corporate cultures that are dysfunctional. Some might argue that the dysfunction will eventually lead to the brands' downfall, and nothing needs to change about the ranking methodologies. But I wonder if they are doing too good a job of covering themselves, if they are the gatekeepers of how we perceive them? We are looking at a generation that doesn't give much time to news reported outside of social media, where only those who are inquisitive go beyond accepting it at face value. And the internet has so many varied viewpoints, confirmation bias is all too easy.

The answer could be in greater education of digital literacy, so we can make more informed decisions about which brands we choose to associate with. In this digital world, our usage is our endorsement of their ongoing activities. Finland leads in a list of European countries most resilient to disinformation, according to the Open Society Institute of Sofia, training citizens to be critical at a young age.¹⁶ However, will people encounter enough news about Big Tech to even start inquiring? If these platforms censor bad news about themselves, then they certainly won't.

It then comes down to making the best use of what each generation has to offer. We should do better with our personal environmental footprints while governments should act and accept Thunberg and other protestors' concerns about the well-being of our planet. But some youth should also consider that there is merit to going beyond social media for information. Dialogue and mutual respect, as always, go a long way. We need to be having these conversations, in real life, and the more, the better.

16. E. Charlton: 'How Finland is fighting fake news—in the classroom', *World Economic Forum Agenda*, May 21, 2019, <<https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/05/how-finland-is-fighting-fake-news-in-the-classroom/>>.