

Can brands survive the era of fake news, jaded consumers and robot trolls?

By [Luise Allemann](#)

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One of the key speakers at the recent [Gibs Contemporary Marketing Using Behavioural Science Customer Insights](#) and the [4IR](#) event was future finance specialist at [Flux Trends](#), Bronwyn Williams who spoke about [The New Rules of Marketing Engagement](#).



Bronwyn Williams, future finance specialist at Flux Trends. Image credit: [Bronwyn Williams' Facebook page](#).

Fake it till you make it

Fake news and 'deep fakes' where anyone from CEOs to 'puppet politicians' can be manipulated using advanced facial and voice imitating software means it's harder than ever for consumers to trust anything they hear and see online.

"This technology also has the ability to put brands in compromising positions and do great damage to their image, through the use of fake spokespeople and raises the possibility of brand blackmail and even sabotage."



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Within this virtual marketing minefield, Williams said marketers may also not be getting what they pay for with current stats indicating that 15% web traffic is not from humans. In fact, Pixelate's 2017 research shows 20% of pay-per-click conversions are fraudulent while FraudLogix estimates 50% of ad impressions served on Internet Explorer were for non-human traffic in 2016.



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Consumer backlash

Big data allows brands to make minuscule inferences to sell hyper-targeted products to consumers right at the time and point of need. However, Williams cautioned that big data as a strategy can be dangerous. Firstly, the prospect of consumer backlash in light of the growing pushback against privacy invasion and discriminatory “price diversity” managed by biased bots and algorithms.



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Colin Thornton 26 Nov 2018



“Legal restrictions that limit consumer data collection (e.g. GDPR in the EU or PoPI in South Africa) are also a reality and legislation is in the pipeline that will force companies to financially compensate consumers for collecting and using their data.”



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Williams also pointed out the perils of the platform economy; “By taking advantage of the convenience and connections of big-tech platforms owned by the FAANGs (Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Netflix, Google) and super apps (WeChat and Alipay, which combined, connect 30% of the world’s population), smaller companies need to understand that they no longer own the relationship with their own customers.”



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Data eats the world

She also outlined the concept of unconscious consumerism; “As consumers and businesses increasingly outsource their purchase decisions to algorithms and artificially intelligent voice-activated personal assistants, brands and businesses will increasingly find themselves selling to machines rather than to humans - and, as such, competing in a zero-sum, lowest-cost game.

As “data eats the world”, the advertising, marketing, branding, PR and communications industries find themselves competing for smaller and smaller slices of the same shrinking pie. New industry competitors include AI creative directors and “Social” social media agencies namely; crowd-sourced creative agencies taking advantage of the bounty work economy, such as one-minute briefs.

Social media past its prime?

Williams said society is rapidly approaching peak social media as we know it. “This is where the social media platforms built for and by millennials (Facebook, Instagram and Twitter) have passed their prime (as have the ageing millennials themselves, the first of whom are now approaching their 40th birthday). Soon they could be semi-abandoned wastelands, with only brands left, picking like vultures at the last human laggards left.



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“That said, social media itself as an idea is not going anywhere just yet: the next evolution of social media is in the “spatial web” (or with virtual and augmented reality). Already 1 in 800 humans worldwide can be found playing Fortnite at any given time.”

Going forward, augmented reality games such as Google’s Pokemon Go and Microsoft’s Minecraft Earth will encourage marketers to pay per person, to get augmented reality games to direct human players to the physical places companies want people to visit.



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True authenticity

Despite the fact that top influencer fees have fallen, in order to appear more “authentic”, brands around the world are still increasing their influencer budgets. “Virtual influencers or avatars, that always stay on script unlike their human counterparts, are on the rise. On the negative side, Brand-jacking or “anti-influencing” is a new trend in which activists or competitors, hire influencers to trash bad or competing brands. Ad mules are the drug mules of the influencer industry. These are people who rent their social media accounts to launder illicit ads.”

The emotion economy

The big data economy has evolved. “First it came for our minds, with persuasive hyper-targeted advertising offers and then it came for our bodies, with nudges, or incentives to act in a particular (profitable) way. Now big data is coming for our hearts with the arrival of the emotion economy, where big data is being used to both measure and manipulate human emotions.” (Try the emotion economy yourself [here](#).)

However, the reality is that the emotion economy has taken a toll on society. “Generation Z, the first generational cohort of digital natives, born approximately between 1994 and 2014, have never known life without the internet. They also no longer know the luxury of being ‘off’ or ‘backstage’. Thanks to Wi-Fi, cellphones, public facial recognition systems, wearable technology and all the other conveniences of contemporary life, Generation Z is always on stage.”



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Bronwyn Williams 17 Oct 2018



The side effects of this include: Social cooling or self-censorship to secure acceptance by society, Snapchat Dysmorphia, where young people are getting plastic surgery so that they can look like their filtered and photo-shopped selfies at all times, in real life and *Hikikomori*, the Japanese phenomenon of young people completely shutting themselves off from society due to digital overload.

“As much as brands are complicit in these phenomena, due to the advertising industry’s glorification of often unattainable perfection, brands also have an opportunity to reshape the future in a more positive light. For example, through the deployment of Therapy Marketing, where advertising itself is used as a way to make society better by making people feel better about themselves, both physically and mentally.”

Brand activism

In light of these challenges, and in order to connect with the ever-elusive woke consumer, brands are rejecting the principle of the separation of church, state and business, for better or for worse. “Brand activism is increasing where brands are taking a public stand on controversial social and political issues while morality marketing has seen Brands appointing themselves as judge, jury, priest and executioner by actively rewarding and punishing consumers for good and bad behaviour respectively.

Williams cautioned, however; “As great as the rewards are for calling the zeitgeist correctly, brands need to understand that playing the identity politics game is as perilous as walking a tightrope - even a small, unintentional misstep can have serious consequences.”

For more information e-mail: connected@fluxtrends.co.za or follow on Twitter: [@fluxtrends](https://twitter.com/fluxtrends) and [@bronwynwilliams](https://twitter.com/bronwynwilliams).

ABOUT LUISE ALLEMANN

Luise Allemann is a communications specialist with more than 20 years experience in the media and marketing industries including her time as a newspaper and magazine journalist and editor. She founded Medialnk Communications in 2004 with a primary focus on content generation with a subsequent specialisation in PR & social media and has worked with iconic South African brands such as FNB, MTN and Hollard Insurance and most recently @NelsenAfrica and @Sassda_sa.

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