

Globalisation and Brand

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Last week I had some house guests visiting from India, they had come over to take part in a presentation of some recent research I have been conducting at Lancaster University into the growth and performance of the Indian contact centre industry. Whilst they were with me I was thinking about my talk this evening. Their visit reminded me of several things in relation to ideas of globality. Firstly the very fact they had hopped on a plane, flown several thousand miles and, without a break were sitting in the Lake District having dinner with me. Why had they done this? Well to spend just a maximum of three hours in a presentation, of which they would probably contribute perhaps 30 minutes. This at least is the rational explanation. We must ask why did they not just video conference their contribution? We will return to this later. Secondly the contact centre industry does in many ways symbolise the economics of the global. A local issue, say an inquiry regarding a telephone bill in Huddersfield is via technology and human systems answered in Bangalore, in doing so enormous physical distances, time zones and social and cultural difference are crossed. Indeed to quote from a colleague of mine from Lancaster University, Professor John Urry, "Time and space are dematerialising as people, machines, images, information, power, money, ideas and dangers are all, we might say, on the move, travelling at bewildering speed in unexpected directions, from place to place from time to time". Indeed our caller did not, when she made her decision to place her business with the telephony supplier, knowingly sign up to ring India at some future date, rather she placed her trust in a set of services or products that formed an integral part of a particular brand and set of meanings. One could go on to ask where did those meanings come from, how are they sustained and did the call to India have any future bearing on the relationship of the individual to the brand? It is these issues we will explore in the next few minutes.

I would like to begin by exploring from where we draw our notion of the 'global'. I would argue that global as we understand it dates no further back than the early 1960's. Prior to this we were obviously well aware of other countries, continents etc, indeed we had taken part in two 'World Wars'. However relatively few of us travelled beyond our borders extensively, the 1960's saw the first real package holidays, so extending and democratising travel and experience. In 1969 the Boeing 747-100, the first Jumbo Jet flew, combining range with carrying capacity. For those that wanted to go a little faster in 1968 the first commercial plane flew supersonic, in 1969 Concorde made its maiden flight. Until the 1960's communications tended to be relatively slow and haphazard and there was not the feelings of interconnectedness prevalent today. However on July 10th 1962 our world was changed for ever - Telstar was launched and later that day live television pictures originating in the United States were received in France, so inextricably linking the global with media representation. Interestingly Telstar was not a government initiative it was corporately funded by AT&T, space and global media were instantly claimed as the province of the commercial. Instant global images allowed us to share experiences as they happened on the far side of the world, images of war; the Vietnam war became a televisual experience. But perhaps the most defining image of globality comes from the Earth Rise pictures taken from Apollo 11 in July 1969 on its way for a live televised landing on the Moon. You will recall, the picture shows a blue, cloud swirling planet Earth rising over the moon's horizon. At the same time this one picture demonstrates the fragility, smallness and complexity of our planet, our globe, whilst defining the development of technology, computing power and the importance of image and broadcast. That one Earth Rise image tells a story of endeavour and achievement yet also is a political and economic statement, the United States won the space race, capitalism triumphed and would go on to become our dominant understanding of the world.

Within just a few years we would go on to have more computing power in our laptops than the entire lunar programme and with the development and mass availability of the internet we would have found a means to connect computing power and individuals to one another on a truly Global basis. The Internet is important not just for its connectivity; rather it also represents the re-democratisation of Global communication. Just as we can see AT&T as a symbol of the commercial control of Global communication so the Internet can be seen to

hand, at least in part, ownership back to the individual. The Internet combined with telephony networks, mobile and fixed, has created lines of communication and information flow that are essential to commercial messages and relationships, yet at the same time allow individuals to challenge and compare the messages and activities of corporations and governments across the globe in real time. So the very sources, the medium of much Brand reach and power, are also the means by which information and imagery can be challenged, sometimes spontaneously or often subject to organised campaigns. Many of these are small scale and remain 'underground' but occasionally they will erupt, quickly moving into mainstream, public media such as newspaper or television broadcast and so take on the form of mass knowledge or imagery. Depending upon ones point of view this might be described as information democracy or perhaps 'information terrorism'. What ever the name the effect is to de-stabilise established positions, possibly Brand positions that corporations may have invested millions of pounds in creating. This is a major subject and beyond the scope of this talk, but what I can say is that Brands will be subject to increasing instability and that all Brand messages will become increasingly difficult to control and sustain.

Unstable structures and meanings are I believe one of the key outcomes of Globalisation, I mean this not as a value statement such as 'is Globalisation bad or good?' For what it is worth I regard such questions as misleading, Globalisation was and is an inevitable evolution of us as intelligent human beings. We may argue about its form, such as political or cultural predominations, however these will themselves change over time. Rather I see instability as a fact, an outcome of connectivity. The more that are connected, the faster, more real time these connections are made, the more complex a system is developed and the more difficult it becomes to control and regulate such a system. Indeed as we already are witness to, issues of control and governance are increasing in importance exponentially, be these issues of corporate governance, capital flows, or governmental structure. Our new interconnectivity transcends many of the old physical and institutional boundaries we have depended upon for structure and control. Accompanying this acknowledgment of complexity is our feelings of uncertainty and risk, for indeed as we do more, faster, so in the words of Beck "the social production of wealth is systematically accompanied by the social production of risk". Our awareness of risk leads us to deploy strategies to manage risk; in part Brand use can be seen in this light, we will return to this very shortly. Part of our sense of risk relates to the sheer amount of information we are constantly receiving and broadcasting, often information that appears to be inconsistent or contradictory with other information. We are deluged by images and messages, understanding how these should be decoded and acted upon becomes increasingly difficult, for as Geser says, "we live in a liquid state of permanently ongoing processes of dynamic coordination and renegotiations". A theme picked up and developed in Coupland's classic novel Generation X where he suggests "it is not healthy to live life as a succession of isolated little cool moments. Either our lives become stories or there is no way to get through them". I think this idea of stories and the way we create, indeed need to create stories for ourselves, is very powerful when considering the role of Brand against the background of Global instabilities. However to create stories we have at some level to engage, or attempt to decode the mass images which confront us.

To take an example. In many ways the history of war and conflict coverage can be seen as a study in global imagery and ever more immediate and contemporary coverage. Today we are used to war correspondents 'embedded' in front line action, reporting from the battlefield as it happens. We become familiar with city names, land or townscapes, death and the atrocities of war despite most of us having no physical awareness of such environments or experiences. We become armchair participants. I use the word participant deliberately, because we do become actively involved, through discussion, through our own use of imagery to self-construct the world in which we live, even through political structures, say by voting or even protest. Few of us will forget the pictures of so-called precision weapons in the first Gulf War, where cameras were located inside the missiles. An image more familiar as something from a video game, an image designed to reassure us, to believe that through technology we could both avoid civilian fatalities, so helping us to overcome our sensibilities about death and injury, and achieve mastery and control based on our superior technology. In some respects war without death and mess, just the destruction of targeted buildings. The French philosopher Baudrillard drew particular attention to this war as a media event, for most of us it existed only as a multi-media presentation or show. Despite or indeed because of this we are increasingly aware of the selective nature of the images we are shown, selective either through deliberate manipulation or issues of access. On the one hand these are the images that make the news, that influence us, that we discuss, that in some practical sense we need to

'trust' and yet on the other hand, perhaps in our more reflective moments we are cynical toward, and are not sure just whose 'truth' they demonstrate.

I would therefore argue that today our notion of the global is largely created through media images and that image projection is closely related to technological capability and ownership. As our ability to broadcast images, to send and receive on both a mass scale, one to many, say through the exponential growth in television channels or increasingly on an individual scale, one to one, I am here thinking of texting, MMS or even personal video, there becomes increasing emphasis and awareness of the degree of message control being exercised by the sender. For instance even a simple text is not without control or composition, indeed much of texting's success lies in its ability to protect the sending individual from the emotional difficulty contained in the uncertainties of real-time spontaneous conversation, in other words a strategy for risk management.

Given what I have said how might we therefore attempt to characterise the Global landscape, if you like the environment within which we live, what does it look like? I suggest we view it as landscape painting, with hills, woods, streams and paths crossing it. A landscape of many contours, a landscape through which we as individuals and collectively must cross. Simple enough. However lets introduce one or two other variables. Firstly each of us starts from a slightly different point within the scape, no two views are the same. Secondly we do not have a map, although we may have a compass we are not sure what the compass is pointing at. A further problem is that the features of our scape are changing, hills and mountains, are coming in and out of existence, some time a stream may become a wood, sometimes a tree a mountain. A landscape constantly flexing and mutating not just on its own but with each movement we make, it in some sense responds to, whilst influences our movements. Some features may of course endure longer, others will be transitory. I appear to have described a totally relative, chaotic world. However there is some hope, for from the landscape itself, from this changing form, appear signposts and guides, messages that enable us to move, to make sense of what is around us. Many of the messages take the form of complex networks of communication and relationships with other individuals. Some research in America showed that the average American had more than one thousand inter-personal ties, about half a dozen intimate, about fifty strong, but all acting as "sources of information, support, companionship, and a sense of belonging", these ties might be seen as triangulations, ways of locating ourselves and providing intelligence as to where to go to next. We should not forget that these ties, or messengers emerge from and reshape the landscape. When you think of this, it quickly makes sense of our relationship to the mobile phone, for many detachment means something akin to bereavement, loss of connection, loss of the self, tonight we might say loss of triangulation. There are other messengers and signposts amongst these and of central and I would argue of ever increasing importance is Brand. Brand is both a part, a product of the landscape, of communications and triangulation and a key messenger. It is this that Berthon, Holbrook and Hubert mean when they talk of "The meaning of a brand is no longer the result of a dialogue between a brand and a seller but a multilog". The meanings and messages of Brands are negotiated and understood by reference to multiple communication networks and the shifting landscape of which they are both a product and a factor for change.

So amongst this Global, unstable landscape Brand plays an increasingly important role as both a 'signpost' for navigation, for the exercise of choice, as Johnston states "Too many choices can actually overwhelm shoppers and put them off a Brand", and as strategy for risk management. That this should be the case is not at all surprising. Image and representation has always meant more than the simple representation of a thing or place, whether it be the rituals and events of the cave drawings of Lascaux or the 'vanitas' paintings of the 1600's with their formulaic representations of symbols and messages to illustrate the vanity and transient nature of human life. In many ways these paintings point toward modern brands whilst at the same time foreshadow some of the problems that Brands now face. Today many 'vanitas' paintings simply look like still life arrangements of objects. However when Kalf was painting his 'Still Life' in 1659 his 'target' audience understood that the lemon symbolised deceptive appearances and that the orange beginning to swell and rot was a metaphor for the passage of time. Just as with Brands today the painting was in part a story of life. Today for us these paintings are substantially without meaning, we no longer understand the 'code' to unlock the message. This itself is a lesson to Brands of today. The landscape I have described is fluid, Brands themselves fluctuate in meaning often in unexpected ways. Whilst I have no doubt of the increasing importance of Brand, I am equally convinced that the decoding of

Brand and control will become increasingly difficult, this will pose problems for many of our current techniques and practices, not least for our methods of targeting and segmentation, most organisations are already struggling with failing segmentation methodologies.

Given what I have said regarding Globality you will not be surprised that I think the Brand industry whilst huge, and quite rightly so, will continue to be massively important, indeed I suggest it is far from its peak in importance. However I think there should also be more realism about the extent to which Brands can be controlled and I think also more importance given to points of interaction or customer service, if you like the Brand in action or acting locally. I would like to close with a few words addressing these issues.

Much is made of trust in relationship to Brands, let me say that I can think of few Brands that are trusted without reservation, indeed I would argue that most Brands are held in a balance between trust and cynicism. Being cynical is the natural outcome of the trends towards information availability and Globality discussed earlier. To see Brands in a cynical light is reinforced by our ambivalent position towards corporatism and the notions of the market economy. On one hand we want the fruits of the market, yet on the other we will increasingly distrust the motives of the stall holder, ultimately the stall holder is there to make money from us, that is ok, it's the deal, the question is increasingly, is your deal better than the next? And remember we can compare now better than in the past. However the deal is not necessarily about the product it is the value and meaning of the product, in Cambells words "the good that is purchased is an experience rather than a material object". Or in other words does it help me develop the story that is my life. So we look towards Brand as a guide, a not wholly trust worthy guide but a support within a contingent landscape. So do not be afraid of cynicism. However do be afraid of corrosive cynicism. Corrosive cynicism is where either the landscape has changed to leave the meanings and values associated with your Brand being decoded negatively, as for instance currently with McDonalds, or failure has occurred at the level of interaction. To avoid the first requires constant vigilance and intelligence and may still, owing to increasing instabilities, not be avoided. The second is nothing less than a crime and will increasingly undo all other Brand building activities.

The crime of interaction or customer service failure is corrosive in the extreme. It is only when the Brand interacts directly or locally, either through product quality or customer service that it actually lives its values. This is also the point of most significance to the customer. For the reasons developed earlier the 'image' of the Brand is important as sense or meaning making, a signpost, but will always be held in a 'trust/cynicism' balance. Interaction is where this comes alive or dies. Why is this so important? The standard answer might be that it is about delivery, or keeping your promises. Both of these are true. However something deeper is happening, it relates to our thinking about Globality and also tells us why the point of interaction will become even more important. At the beginning of this talk I mentioned the visit of some Indian friends and some of the physical communication changes in the 1960's. These are important, because today, despite all our virtual communication developments we travel more than ever, physical contact remains vitally important to us. Why? Because it represents that that is most authentic or real. In a shifting landscape we seek out the real or authentic, it has increasing importance. For most Brands the closest they can get to this is the point of interaction or customer service. Yet still today in the UK, perceptions of customer service quality are lower than they were five years ago. We have not the time to explore what is authentic service, although for those of you interested I am happy to discuss this later, but one way of looking at it is, as the point at which what was part of the shifting global landscape becomes local and meaningful.

In summary I believe that the role of Brand is set to become ever more important, that Brands will continue to act as key 'signposts' by which we will navigate the Global. That ideas of Globality are created and sustained by the interaction of technology and media and that Brands form an important part of these media messages. Whilst much time and effort is spent debating how Brands will reach customers in this highly fluid and mobile world, the bigger issue is one of Brand control; this will become progressively more difficult. Brands are held in a 'trust/cynicism balance' avoiding corrosion has to be a key goal and that we really have to concentrate far more on the points of interaction or customer service as these are the moments where the Brand will come alive, the moments where Brands create the experiences that enable us as consumers to create the stories that explain and give meaning to our lives.

Sources

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