Brands and the Pandemic: A Cautionary Tale

Melissa Aronczyk

Abstract
This essay examines the troubling logic of digital media ecosystems, which devalue socially relevant information to maintain brand reputation. At a time when the value of news to provide essential and reliable information is made dramatically apparent, advertising technologies privilege the safety of brands over the safety of individuals. The essay reviews the logic of current digital advertising infrastructure, focusing on the impact of automated technologies on the decline of professional journalism.

Keywords
brands, advertising, journalism

Gaining a critical purchase on brands and their behavior is an elusive task. This is partly because their relentless search for new markets and other paths to profit gives them a shape-shifting quality that is hard to capture in terms of specific practice. But it is also because, as Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello (2007) have observed for capitalism more generally, a main driver of brands’ constant renewal of products and services is critique itself. As we scrutinize and attempt to control their pathologies, brands absorb and recuperate this critique, using failures as creative opportunities to reflexively reorganize categories and classes of behavior. If brands are consistent in any way, it is in their propensity to “exit” unprofitable situations and relocate in more productive spaces (Hirschman, 1970, qtd. in Boltanski & Chiapello, p. 489).

This logic becomes particularly apparent in the midst of crisis, when habits of thought and action are upended (Klein, 2007). The coronavirus has transformed us in unprecedented ways, revealing our global interconnectedness and our individual frailties. As the dust settles over societies after the initial days and weeks of shock and fear, what has become shatteringly clear is how the pandemic is not only a planetary public health problem but also—fundamentally—a market problem. And as a problem of and for markets, the guiding wisdom to sort things out seems to be an interpretive play on the phrase uttered by such disparate figures as Machiavelli, Churchill, and most recently, Rahm Emanuel: Never let a crisis go to waste.

For brands, the immediate crisis response was to shrink from public view. A primary principle of brand reputation is associative: brand owners assume that consumers will associate the brand’s meaning and value(s) with whatever appears in proximity to it. Whether or not this assumption is borne out by cognitive science, it forms the beating heart of advertising technologies, which are trained to avoid placing ads next to news content or search results that are deemed “unsafe,” symbolically speaking, for their client’s brand. Digital advertising and measurement companies like Oracle, Integral Ad Science, and DoubleVerify use content filters and keyword blacklists to ensure that brands are never adjacent to online information that presents a risk to their health.

The effect of this principle of association in the context of a pandemic was deeply ironic. As the pandemic spread, and online news publishers sought to communicate its multiple and far-reaching effects to their publics, the keyword “coronavirus” triggered advertising blocks (Di Stefano & Hughes, 2020; Joseph, 2020). As anxious readers turned to news outlets for accurate reporting and factual information about a global health crisis, blank spaces appeared where banner ads were supposed to be. The default reasoning structuring the economy of digital news—that more eyeballs equals more ad sales—fell apart. Despite the surge in user traffic to digital news media sites, advertising revenue to these sites plummeted (Interactive Advertising Bureau, 2020).

International news organizations tried different tactics to stanch the outflow of advertising dollars. Using the hashtag #backdontblock, British and American news publishers and

Rutgers University, USA

Corresponding Author:
Melissa Aronczyk, School of Communication and Information, Rutgers University, 4 Huntington Street, New Brunswick, NJ 08901, USA.

Email: melissa.aronczyk@rutgers.edu

Creative Commons Non Commercial CC BY-NC. This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 License (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/) which permits non-commercial use, reproduction and distribution of the work without further permission provided the original work is attributed as specified on the SAGE and Open Access pages (https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/open-access-at-sage).
media associations appealed to the ad industry to remove the keyword blocks and support their attempts to inform citizens (GXPress, 2020; Interactive Advertising Bureau UK, 2020). The Australian government drafted a code of conduct for media companies and digital platforms to force them to pay news organizations a share of the advertising revenue they collect for displaying their content (Taylor, 2020). Some digital news outlets such as Newsy took a more conciliatory tack, creating an “ad pod,” a segment with light news fare, to lure advertisers back (Sloane, 2020). This latter concession may be historically familiar, but given the current context, it is disappointingly bleak. In the pantheon of news editors’ efforts to create what advertisers call a “supportive editorial environment” for their products, this one surely ranks low on the scale of moral rectitude.

One need not trot out statistics of journalist pay cuts and layoffs, hamstring or shuttered news organizations, or the broad decline in information quality online to know that the toxic relationship between advertisers and the news industry was faltering long before COVID-19. The pandemic has merely accelerated publishing history, as Amol Rajan (2020) puts it. And this historical tale has a tragic end. In an injection of pathos worthy of a Shakespearean tragedy, the most useful attempts to resuscitate the news organs have come from Google and Facebook, as the Facebook Journalism Project or Google’s Global Journalism Emergency Relief Fund turn the news crisis’ central protagonists into its unlikely saviors. Whether or not these projects support journalism, they should also be seen as marketing initiatives in themselves: protecting journalism is another way to create more content you can view on Facebook (Ingram, 2019).

The response by brands to COVID-19 was predictable if not avoidable. As cultural symbols, brands reflect and shape the conditions of their existence. But as market signals, they are canaries in the coal mine. To be fair, brands’ commitment to their own safety over and above that of human beings is not the only cause of the advertising downturn. Lockdowns, travel bans, event cancelations, and business closures have also contributed to the decrease in marketing budgets. But the experience should remind us that the notion of brand loyalty is unidirectional, created to draw us to them with no social obligation in return. It is also deeply narcissistic. Brands will always value their own reputation over and above any other commitments. Appealing to brands as a matter of obligation, as the #backdontblock movement has attempted, presumes that there are times when self-interest can be overcome. This is a losing strategy. Brands owe nothing to anyone when the chips are down.

This ultimate self-interest is visible as brands begin to creep back into the sea of grim news and coronavirus guidelines, testing the waters with new association ploys. Never let a crisis go to waste: Attempts to reinsert brands into the “cultural conversation” ranged from the banal (Dunkin Donuts’ free coffee for healthcare workers on May 6, National Nurses’ Day) to the opportunistic (Mattel’s new collection of play figures, Thank You Heroes, modeled after emergency medical technicians and grocery store clerks) to the truly exploitative: Johnson & Johnson, desperate to move on from 2019 headlines about the US$572 million settlement it was ordered to pay for its role in the opioid crisis, traded in its image as a manufacturer of dangerous drugs for one as a developer of COVID-19 vaccine. The marketing measurement firm Influential claimed that J&J had strengthened its brand more than any other marketer in March and April 2020 (Stein, 2020).

By way of summary, I want now to attempt to glean some lessons from this set of circumstances. How can media researchers and observers draw on the example of brand behavior in a crisis to think about media in terms of governance, to address concerns of information quality, or to gain greater purchase on the uses of critique?

First, the rules of engagement for both producers and consumers online are constantly shifting. But neither operating systems nor frameworks of analysis have been designed to accommodate these shifts. For instance, news and information sources online are assumed to be subject to mechanisms of attention and aggregation to appeal to advertisers. For news organizations, this has meant designing strategies to increase the number of regular users on the site and the amount of time they spend on it, thereby creating more “valuable” audiences for ads. But when the news turned dire in a global health emergency, this logic was turned on its head. Increased audience engagement and aggregation on news sites was devalued by advertisers as the nature of the content was deemed too risky. The attention economy has points of exit that need to be seen as inbuilt to the system rather than as exceptions to it.

A second issue is the need to sort out competing conceptions of advertising technologies. On the one hand, researchers have identified a troubling online infrastructure of data collection, monitoring and targeting by which consumers and citizens are profiled, surveilled, and manipulated. Audiences are “weaponized” as bad actors like Cambridge Analytica and foreign meddlers rely on what Anthony Nadler et al. (2018) call a “digital influence machine,” which integrates behavioral psychology and targeting technologies to “make advertising—from the commercial to the political—more powerful and efficient” (p. 1).

On the other, commentators call online advertising the latest dot com bubble, suggesting that the advertising metrics intended to evaluate ads’ effectiveness are at best fundamentally misleading, and at worst, essentially useless. Jesse Frederik and Maurits Martijn (2019) argue that when a consumer clicks a link, makes a purchase, or downloads content, measurement firms cannot distinguish between the “selection effect” and the “advertising effect”—that is, whether the consumer would have acted regardless of the ad or whether the ad is the prime mover for the action. This potential for selection bias is heightened with consumer tracking technologies, which partly explains why you see ads for products...
you already purchased or regularly use. One might also consider that since digital advertising is available at relatively low cost to all manner of entrepreneurs, who often use basic and unvarnished templates to create ads, there is frequently a bottom-feeder quality to many of the ads, and this diminishes the overall effect of advertising placements. Even during the worst of the pandemic, as advertising revenue disappeared, some news organizations were forced to suppress ads bearing questionable, dangerous, or outright fraudulent promotional claims from their sites (Slefo, 2020).

The question here is not which of these perspectives is more accurate—both reveal facets of the problem—but what kind of role we assign to advertising technologies and what this means for how we think about controlling them. One key point is that when advertising technologies appear to fail, as when the keyword “pandemic” blocks advertising from being placed on a news site, this is not an accident and it will not be corrected as if it were one. It is not a bug but a feature, as they say in the business. While some marketers have been tempted to explain away the problem by referring to ad technologies as “immature,” a more honest framing is that advertising technologies are designed to exploit fault lines of all kinds, and whether they “work” in converting shoppers to buyers or undecided voters to partisan supporters is less the issue than the fact that they are meant to appeal to certain groups, kinds of content, and types of practice and to exclude others.

The algorithmic gatekeeping of keyword blocking and other content filters is not the product of a technological glitch but a purpose-built ideological orientation. One way to expand our approach to understanding the effects of advertising technology companies and their peers, then, is to recall that these technologies are not brainless and value-neutral automaton but value-driven social agents and knowledge producers. The perspectives of writers such as Safiya Noble (2018), Ruha Benjamin (2019), or Cathy O’Neil (2016) are especially relevant for thinking about how brands are ultimately tools of inequality in all its forms.

From the vantage point of my critical research on brands and on promotional culture more broadly, I have often noted how promotional industries are rarely treated as media industries in their own right. As we have seen, this has a great deal to do with the historically entrenched separation between editorial and advertising, where marketers and their output are understood as commercial supports to media instead of producers of media. This affects how we think about them and what we propose to do about them.

Just as Phil Napoli (2019; Napoli & Caplan, 2017) has argued for treating technology companies as media companies, subject to the same regulatory standards and codes of conduct, so might we consider classifying promotional companies as media companies to recognize their cultural and economic power and make more lasting claims to rein them in. Indeed, “tech company” and “promotional company” are sometimes the same firm, as in the case of the behemoths like Google and Facebook. The change in label from promotional to media is as much conceptual as it is practical: when the public interest is at stake, there is no room for brands to protect their own safety at the expense of those they serve.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests
The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD
Melissa Aronczyk https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9619-6188

References
Benjamin, R. (2019). Race after technology. Polity Press.
Boltanski, L., & Chiapello, E. (2007). The new spirit of capitalism. Verso.
Di Stefano, M., & Hughes, L. (2020, April 22). Google criticised by news publishers over coronavirus ad blocking. Financial Times. https://www.ft.com/content/672911e1-de6a-444b-a5f0-09df9ce06460
Frederik, J., & Martijn, M. (2019, November 6). The new dot com bubble is here: It’s called online advertising. The Correspondent. https://thecorrespondent.com/100/the-new-dot-com-bubble-is-here-its-called-online-advertising/13228924500-22d5fd24
GXPress. (2020, April 8). UK and U.S. publishers unite in #backdontblock call. https://www.gxpress.net/uk-and-us-publishers-unite-in-backdontblock-call/cms-12506
Hirschman, A. O. (1970). Exit, voice, and loyalty: Responses to decline in firms, organizations, and states. Harvard University Press.
Ingram, M. (2019, March 22). Facebook: We care deeply about journalism. Please believe us. Columbia Journalism Review. https://www.cjr.org/the_new_gatekeepers/facebook-journalism.php
Interactive Advertising Bureau. (2020, April 15). Coronavirus: Ad revenue impact on publishers & other sellers. IAB Proprietary Research. https://www.iab.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/IAB-Coronavirus-Impact-Buy-vs.-Sell_4.15.20FINAL.pdf
Interactive Advertising Bureau UK. (2020, April 2). #Backdonthit campaign to support journalism launches. https://www.iabuk.com/news-article/backdonthit-campaign-support-journalism-launches
Joseph, S. (2020, April 24). Publishers continue to see coronavirus coverage blocked by advertisers. Digiday. https://digiday.com/media/publishers-continue-to-see-coronavirus-coverage-blocked-by-advertisers/
Klein, N. (2007). Shock doctrine: The rise of disaster capitalism. Random House.
Nadler, A., Crain, M., & Donovan, J. (2018, October 17). Weaponizing the digital influence machine: The political perils of online ad tech. Report: Data & Society. https://datasociety.net/library/weaponizing-the-digital-influence-machine/
Napoli, P. M. (2019). Social media and the public interest: Media regulation in the disinformation age. Columbia University Press.
Napoli, P. M., & Caplan, R. (2017). Why media companies insist they’re not media companies, why they’re wrong, and why it matters. *First Monday*, 22(5). https://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/7051

Noble, S. U. (2018). *Algorithms of oppression: How search engines reinforce racism*. New York University Press.

O’Neil, C. (2016). *Weapons of math destruction: How big data increases inequality and threatens democracy*. Broadway Books.

Rajan, A. (2020, April 16). How coronavirus infected publishing. *BBC News*. https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-52299925

Slefo, G. P. (2020, March 7). Why the New York Times shut off programmatic ads for its coronavirus newsletter. *Ad Age*. https://adage.com/article/digital/why-new-york-times-shut-programmatic-ads-its-coronavirus-newsletter/2242936

Sloane, G. (2020, April 17). As brands block coronavirus, streaming app newsy opens an ad slot free from bad news. *Ad Age*. https://adage.com/article/digital/brands-block-coronavirus-streaming-app-newsy-opens-ad-slot-free-bad-news/2250611

Stein, L. (2020, April 23). AT&T, Amazon and J&J among brands impressing consumers the most amid coronavirus. *Campaign US*. https://www.campaignlive.com/article/at-t-amazon-j-j-among-brands-impressing-consumers-amid-coronavirus/1681237

Taylor, J. (2020, April 19). Facebook and Google to be forced to share advertising revenue with Australian media companies. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/media/2020/apr/19/facebook-and-google-to-be-forced-to-share-advertising-revenue-with-australian-media-companies

**Author Biography**

Melissa Aronczyk (PhD, New York University) is associate professor of media studies at Rutgers University.