

The view from in here: A lesson from 2016

 By [Fran Luckin](#)

24 Mar 2017

I was in Cannes last year when Brexit happened. In a matter of hours, the lazily hedonistic mood of the festivities transformed into an all-pervasive haze of stunned denial.

Everywhere I went, the conversation circled the same plughole: How on earth had that just happened? And just a matter of months later, it was to happen again, when the US election results seemed to take “everyone” by surprise.

It was a rude awakening. In the same way that coming to after a big night out and finding yourself in an ice bath with one kidney missing and a cell phone in your hand with the Red Cross 911 number pre-programmed into it is a rude awakening.

I’m not here to weigh in on whether I think either event was a good or a bad thing. I’m interested in how advertising folk, whose jobs depend, fundamentally, on our ability to understand people’s motivations, desires, and dreams, could have missed such an enormous shift. How did we fail to see it coming?

Because BrandsEye – the industry’s very own online listening tool – called it. [Both times](#). This means that there were many, many millions of social media conversations – public conversations – which made it abundantly clear that significant numbers of people were feeling angry, ignored, and disenfranchised.



Despite sounding zen, living in our own bubbles or echo chambers isn't ideal. Image © Nikki Zalewski – [123RF.com](#)

But judging from the reaction of shocked disbelief to both events from across the ad industry, it seems that by-and-large ad people’s Facebook and Twitter feeds were alight with articles that reassured us that “everyone” felt the same way we did.

Perhaps we were yet to become aware of the echo chamber effect of social media – the way our feeds give us more of what we already believe, like, and want to see.

At any rate, we shared the articles, which were “liked” and “shared in turn by our hundreds of friends, and we drank our kale smoothies, in the serene conviction that all was right with the world.

Is this a symptom of a bigger malaise?

Introspection without reinvention

Advertising is facing enormous challenges. Technology and new media have upended everything we do. Some introspection is called for. But have we become too preoccupied with our own internal issues, so preoccupied with trying to reinvent ourselves without sacrificing any of our beliefs or our traditional turf, that we’ve lost the gift we once claimed was uniquely ours: the gift of understanding people’s lives and emotions and being able to speak to them in ways that move them?

Alexander Thompson, a film director who was head of film for the Leave Campaign, [says](#) that nowhere are people more angry at the Referendum result than in advertising, because the ad industry overwhelmingly backed Remain.

Four of the best agencies in the UK worked on the Remain campaign. But clearly none of the work those great agencies produced managed to connect with the broader public. And when the campaign lost, they couldn’t understand it. Thompson says, “It’s an advertiser’s job to take a step back and understand the emotions that motivate people. But it seems like they gave in to emotion themselves.”

He makes the point that all of those ad agencies and their employees live in London, which could almost be a different country compared to the rest of the UK.

Sound familiar? We love to complain about how tough it is in advertising now. But really, our lives are good. So good that most of us, living in Sandton or Cape Town, live lives that bear very little relation to those of the rest of the country.

Let’s get out of the echo chamber

Let’s stop pontificating and navel gazing and really start understanding what our economy, our businesses, our people need right now. Let’s use research to give us truthful insights into people’s real lives, worries and dreams – not research that’s there to make sure all the jargon boxes on the marketing matrix are ticked so we don’t risk our bonus when the post-campaign report comes in.

Let’s stop theorising about diversity in boardrooms and take a bold bet on some of the thousands of brilliant young creative minds out there who don’t necessarily fit the ad industry mould but will bring stories to the table that most of us couldn’t tell in a million years. Let’s risk being rough around the edges and unprepared for where we’re going – but let’s never, ever get so self-absorbed that we start believing in our own bubble.

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