



**BLOWBACK  
TO THE FUTURE**

THE

TRENDS

THAT WILL

SHAPE

2017

# ON READING TEA LEAVES AND TRENDS

Good strategic trendspotting requires not only tracking things that are on the radar now, but also developing an intuition about what's just off the radar. It requires a combination of focusing on what's front and center and maintaining a constant awareness of what's flitting in and out of your peripheral vision. The two parts of trendspotting depend on each other. Part one is defining the trends that will have relevance for 10, 20, even 30 years—the “Future Headlines,” as I call them—such as the “ations”: individualization, globalization, hyperlocalization, digitalization, miniaturization, etc. Part two is packaging the predictions, which is probably where most great trendspotters make their mark. These predictions fuel the story of the future; they are our hunch about where we believe or hope we're headed. —*Marian Salzman*

# BLOWBACK TO THE FUTURE THE TRENDS THAT WILL SHAPE 2017

The concept of “blowback” originated with the American intelligence community and was used to describe the harmful unintended or unforeseen consequences of covert operations.

As the affluent, the comfortable and the successful have had a ball throwing around, and profiting from, terms like “innovation” and “sharing economy,” a massive percentage of the world’s population has felt left out and passed over. These same people are starting to suspect that all this fabulous change is coming at their expense. And they are ready to show the people, fixtures and forces they blame what “disruption” is all about.

Even as people all around the world angrily pine for an imaginary time of greater simplicity, prosperity and—sadly—homogeny, they are utilizing the most advanced communications platforms and devices to consume and distribute information that proves and promotes their perspectives.

While unrest and protest around the world are all but guaranteed, the most devastating rioting is happening, and will continue to happen, at the voting booth. Those who feel left behind are more than willing to burn down their own communities in an expression of frustration and despair, but they will be doing it by tapping a touch screen to vote. Or refusing to.

Remember that metaphor about boiling a frog? The theory goes that so long as you bring it to a boil slowly, you can successfully cook it to death. But toss the frog directly into a pot of boiling water, and it’s going to jump out. It’s a terrific metaphor, but it’s not true. At a certain point, the frog feels “enough already” and jumps out regardless. This happens in societies, too, as we’ve seen recently.

As major upheavals like the Brexit vote and the U.S. election hurtle us all toward a 2017 that could define 2016 as the year of “you ain’t seen nothin’ yet” (thank goodness Bowie can’t die twice), we will see several trends that serve as the catalysts of or the commentary on the unintended consequences of major events.

How well brands, businesses, organizations—and perhaps even whole societies—make it through may very well hinge on their ability to recognize what is happening and respond wisely.

# BOILING POINTS

In late 2010 we flagged that people were “mad as hell—and only getting madder,” and so it went. 2016 brought us the Brexit vote in the United (for now) Kingdom and the election of Donald Trump in the United States. Where next? Bolstered and emboldened by events in the U.S. and U.K., both Marine Le Pen’s National Front in France and Beppe Grillo’s Five Star Movement in Italy could see substantial gains—as isolationist nationalism grows stronger in Germany, Austria and the Netherlands, among other countries. Once voters have vented at the ballot box, expect that anger to go off the boil and simmer for a bit as they wait for change. But nobody should expect that wait to be too patient.

Some targets of anger are easily identified, and pushback can be coordinated by well-defined interest groups. For example, the ride-share app Uber has threatened established taxi drivers, and sure enough the service has been banned or challenged all around the world. More recently, Airbnb is being challenged by authorities in various cities in the United States and Europe where the hotel industry is feeling the pinch.

When the source of innovation and change is broader or not so easily pinpointed, the pushback has been more diffuse—but the sense of “enough already” is there to be harnessed by astute commercial, social or political entrepreneurs. Look for many more of these pushback-savvy communicators to emerge as examples of change hit the headlines and the energy of “enough already” spreads.

Some blowback will be personal (think: relationships, lifestyle), but a lot will be on a much bigger scale, and it may not always be pretty: People are more energized to act against what they don’t want than for what they do want.

# ECHO CHAMBERS



## SIGHTING

Our ubertrend for 2016 was “uneasy street,” and, oh, how right that sighting was. Familiarity feels safe, so watch for nostalgia as one antidote to fear. That’s why brands (and what is President-elect Trump if not a brand?) reinforce their relevance to today’s nervous, highly emotive consumers with constant connectivity. Today, intimacy—real or faux—makes people feel safer, so watch as brands hug their targets and surround their customers.

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Idealists imagined the internet as a space for different people to share differing ideas. Instead, the trend has been for similar people to huddle together and share similar ideas. 2016 marked the high point (so far) of this echo-chamber trend.

With the unexpected success of Brexit in the U.K. and Donald Trump in the U.S., we have witnessed the power of loud voices to tap, express and even manipulate fears and frustrations and then foment and coalesce audiences online. Even though a diversity and plurality of insights and opinions is only a click away, nobody is listening to anyone with a different POV. Of course, this is only a problem for those who lose. For the winners, it is the power of people coming together to effect change. (One of those winners—and a big one—is conservative American news site Breitbart News: The Trump campaign was steeped in its communications strategy and messaging, and its executive chairman Steven Bannon has been appointed as the administration’s chief strategist.)

Don’t expect these chambers and bubbles to get any less powerful or entrenched. Regardless of political leanings, would-be influencers will be wise to resist the power of the dark side and to start engaging with and seeking out other voices.

# GOING ETHNOGRAPHIC



## SIGHTING

Creativity is as sexy as ever, but it's rooted in science: intelligence, data and, yes, also the unique, seductive ways that data can be harnessed. In order to survive, PR has had to become the most agile of the communication arts, excelling in using modern tools to make sure brands and their audiences truly connect. Those of us who practice PR with any real success have said our goodbyes to tradition.

Among the key takeaways of 2016: Even the most sophisticated opinion surveys and sentiment analyses can turn out to be way off, and it's not only articulate urbanites who shape events. And for those who still feel that all insights can be divined by the magic wand of digital, 2016 should be a serious wake-up call. The people who most affect and influence an outcome may well be the ones who are off digital's radar—or most reluctant to share their true thoughts with the opinion-makers and surveys that inspire suspicion and frustration.

From the U.K. to the U.S., France and beyond, people who are looking to market their ideas or products are realizing that remote sensing doesn't cut it. When real insights are needed, there's no substitute for close personal contact with ordinary people in ordinary places. (This has been a growing focus of our work for several years now.) Expect a lot of new interest in developing deep market intelligence for business and politics—and a premium placed on organizations that balance global networks and local insight.

# DR. JEKYLL TECHNOLOGY

Sputtering to a halt: the sweeping “don’t be evil” utopian messaging of tech evangelists that drove digital for more than a decade. Even though we’re already toting the sort of technology that once was the stuff of sci-fi fantasies—with innovations like virtual reality poised to become much more sophisticated and common—a wariness is growing.

For many, there is a sense of being sucked into our screens in ways that have all the empty, repetitive twitchiness of addiction. Tech addiction was looming large on our radar this time last year when we put together our trends report. This awareness is especially acute for parents raising the first post-iPhone generation. As more and more of us see the compulsiveness and irritability triggered by screen usage in the developing minds of our littles—and increasingly seek guidance on how to manage it—there is a deepening sense of unease about tablets and smartphones.

Our use of devices, and willingness to upgrade, will stay strong—but the sneaking sense that there is a very insidious Mr. Hyde lurking within this Dr. Jekyll of technology will grow. And as the more fanatical and tin-eared tech evangelists continue to champion innovation’s ability to replace real workers—from drivers to bookkeepers to medical professionals—they risk welding that suspicion to the economic uncertainty of declining jobs. If large sectors of workers begin to sense that their jobs can be outsourced to the cloud just as easily as they can be to a low-wage country, the pushback could be intense.

# CELLPHONE HEALTH SCARE



## SIGHTING

As mindfulness becomes increasingly marketable (and we acknowledge that we are all too busy and pretty much addicted to our mobile devices), we are told that inner peace is just a matter of taking a moment to tap an app—one of the growing number of meditation apps available to suit every taste.

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For years, we've been expecting cellphone use to impact health—specifically, brain health, as a result of radiation. We were worrying about it in 2010 already, and now more than 90 percent of American adults use cellphones, but still very little is known about their safety.

Though a major new study in May has reignited cancer concerns, this trend pertains to more straightforward physical problems (and not just the Mr. Magoo, funny-not-funny Pokémon GO injuries that made headlines in 2016). In addition to the heartbreaking lethality of texting while driving, which caused more than 17,000 deaths in the first six months of 2016 alone (an increase of over 10 percent from 2015), there is also growing awareness of texting thumb syndrome, cellphone neck and eyestrain. With the number of smartphone users worldwide currently over 2 billion and growing, there's a massive market shaping up to investigate and treat the ailments that will certainly emerge.



# REDISCOVERING PRIVACY

For years we've been living and flagging up the growing yin-yang tension between privacy and transparency. In 2016, as the shifting political winds ironically transformed Edward Snowden from traitor to hero, many have taken his warnings about surveillance and secrecy to heart. Expect the demand for greater privacy to grow, much to the benefit of those brands and businesses that get it and help facilitate it.

More than ever, people recognize that everything from personal information to high-level data is an open book to hackers backed by foreign powers and bad actors. That won't diminish usage of those social platforms that profit by selling our data (Facebook's user base for Q3 of 2016 was a staggering 1.79 billion active monthly users, even as it has been forced on its heels for its role as a primary propagator of incendiary fake news). But it will mean a serious embrace of privacy measures that keep the details about who we are safe and what we do secret. As cybercrime grows, privacy will become an even hotter—and more volatile—topic among people of all political bents and perspectives.

# SCATOLOGICAL GETS LOGICAL

It was only a matter of time before all those pictures of meals about to be eaten and feet on the beach would meet in the middle. On one hand, it's almost shocking to see people smoking in the media or to hear the N-word in public. On the other hand, we now see feature pieces on how women runners relieve themselves. Menstruation, urine and poop transplants are all part of today's media diet now. A couple of years ago, we were just beginning to talk dirty about gut health.

In a look-at-me media environment, our inner workings are all part of the selfies, and savvy newscrafters must be prepared to push boundaries a little further than we used to. Although we'll likely refrain from public F-bombing for quite a while yet (unless it suddenly starts making an appearance in State of the Union addresses), the scatological will be increasingly logical content for platforms looking to tap a growing audience of people who aren't afraid to see what's up down there.

# CONFUSED MEN



## SIGHTING

There isn't just one masculine brand but a whole range, and it's not inborn but develops and changes over time.

The word "metrosexual" has outgrown its origins and now transcends narrow stereotypes to describe a whole range of traits. And the metrosexuals themselves are now men who don't unquestioningly assume that there's just one way of being a man.

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Thirteen years ago we called out metrosexuality, and two years later we witnessed the rise of ubersexuals (not to mention that überhandy German add-on, with or without the umlaut). Then, around 2010, came two schools of yesteryear-revisited retrosexuality—the clean-cut, sharp-suited “Mad Men” look and the flannel-shirted urban lumberjack stylings of hipsters. What's with all the chopping and changing? The big trend driving all this: men's underlying anxiety about what is manly now and who the heck decides.

From man buns and beards in the world's Williamsburgs to the retro-sexist return of traditional gender roles (an attempt to make sense of fragmented and limited economic opportunities), the malleability of manhood is being put to the test as we find what will work when many can't find work at all.

# CONFUSING WOMEN



“Feminism is not a rulebook but a discussion, a conversation, a process. The point is not to give girls the answers and not even give them permission to find the answers themselves, but hopefully inspire them to understand that they can give themselves that permission, they can ask their own questions, find their own answer. Women are complicated, women are multifaceted. Not because women are crazy but because people are crazy and women happen to be people.” — Tavi Gevinson

On one hand some women are calling men out on sexist behavior: mansplaining, manspreading, groping and public sexual harassment. On the other hand, in November 2016, a majority of women voters in the United States effectively shrugged and muttered, “Boys will be boys.” There’s even a growing muttering of voices ’round the world, many female, saying that feminism is old-fashioned or even obsolete and that the central tenet of feminism—women’s right to self-determination—can and must include a woman’s right to return to the gender roles of an earlier time.

While that doesn’t include the silencing of voices or limiting of opportunity in society—especially when women are more empowered and able to be heard—it is bolstered by the belief that raising families is not only extraordinarily challenging work, but also more critical than ever in a complex world.

Add to that contradiction the realization that diversity in the workforce—especially for global brands that engage with wider audiences—is a strong, measurable business asset. So what do women expect now and what do they feel is expected of them? How they align, balance and reject those answers will form a roiling, ongoing dialogue. With millions of voices pitching in online and off, the confusion will grow.

# DRESSED FOR ZUCKERBERG SUCCESS

When Clark Gable took off his shirt in 1934's "It Happened One Night" and revealed a bare chest, the sales of undershirts—once a staple of men's dress—plummeted by 50 percent. While no data was available on the sales of hoodies after Mark Zuckerberg wore one to meet IPO investors in 2012, the outrage it sparked already seems like the product of another era. The more billionaires and tech stars wear T-shirts and jeans, the more even a vest and open-collar dress shirt look like last-century throwbacks. Remember the quaint daring of casual Fridays? Increasingly, the main reason not to come to work in shorts is not dress code; it's that air-conditioned workplaces are too cold.

And as working from home becomes more common, there's no need to get dressed at all beyond pajamas or T-shirts and boxer shorts. But that doesn't mean men at home aren't dressing for work: Many are, as an effective easer of the anxiety that comes from such dramatic changes in how and where we do our jobs.

# SUGAR SHOWDOWN

The anti-sugar movement isn't new, and it's confused a lot of followers along the way as the first sugar backlash led to the rise of aspartame and other artificial sweeteners, which were then deemed to be even more evil than the real deal (not unlike the butter-to-margarine-and-back-to-butter-again journey so many have taken). However, now that more of us are 100 percent clear on the fact that sugar substitutes are not a healthier replacement for real sugar (with the possible exception of stevia), we've started to face the fact that avoiding it or eliminating it all together needs to be the new normal.

The public's burgeoning interest in "clean" food has left even less room in our diets for "dirty" sugar. And some local governments interested in stemming the diabetes and obesity epidemics are even implementing a sugar tax: Philadelphia's soda tax is all set to go into effect on Jan. 1, 2017, and four additional cities passed similar taxes on Nov. 8: San Francisco; Oakland, California; Albany, California; and Boulder, Colorado. And because our favorite sugar-sweetened beverages will have to be replaced with something, look for plant-based waters to climb in popularity, with watermelon and birch waters joining coconut waters on the shelves of many supermarkets.

# PLEASED TO MEATLESS



## SIGHTING

Cauliflower isn't just sprouting up in restaurant dishes across the country: In stores, brands like Green Giant are capitalizing on the trend by making the vegetable readily available in new formats (think riced, tots and mashed), and Pinterest data shows the trend exploding online as well, inspiring 40 percent more searches than kale.

Not eating meat is still a minority concern in many countries, but for how much longer? As concerns about the environmental impact of raising animals for meat and the health impact of eating them increase, so too does the percentage of vegetarians. Just 1 percent of Americans were vegetarian in 2009, but now it's 5 percent. That rate of increase is likely to steepen as cultured meat emerges from labs and into stores. There are big bucks waiting for companies that can satisfy the appetites of burger aficionados with a conscience. Dutch scientist Henk Haagsman (author of *Cultured Meat: Producing Meat Without Animals*) is one of a growing number who's betting it won't be too much longer before menu options include "non-animal meat."

# UNSTOPPABLE E-TAIL

With Amazon reporting five consecutive quarters of growth, with net income rising from \$92 million in Q2 2015 to \$857 million in Q2 2016, and a relentless focus on customer satisfaction, the e-tail powerhouse has reported daily figures as high as 74 percent of all e-commerce market share. And it seems to be leading a strong migration to digital purchases of everything from electronics to household goods.

But there are other factors powering the move as well: Online shopping preferences are increasingly going mobile, helped by faster wireless connections, bigger mobile screens and consumers' virtually umbilical connection to their devices.

At \$12.7 billion, American spending through mobile devices in the 2015 holiday season significantly outstripped expectations. Knowing that consumers always have their mobiles on, retailers will increasingly be using in-store beacons to deliver promotions and offers to browsing shoppers. App-based shopping has already overtaken shopping from browsers in China, Mexico and the United States.



# HUGE HYGGGE

As the world turns darker and more threatening, more and more consumers are turning inward—craving the warmth and comforts of food, friends and connection that the Danish call hygge. That’s pronounced hügge, like “huge” with a hard “G” sound. For the many fans of Nordic niceness, hygge is a reigning buzzword.

But don’t mistake hygge for simple comfort foods, good wine and a roaring fireplace. There is a deeper meaning to the word that connotes a sense of longing for a mythical state where things work, relationships are harmonious, pleasures are simple and the living is easy whatever the season. Our quest for this is perhaps one reason why “Make America Great Again” resonated the way it did.

# PEDAL POWER TO THE PEOPLE

In gridlocked cities around the world, growing numbers of mayors and residents are trying out pedal power as a smart way to tackle their mobility problems—and get a little exercise at the same time.

It's not just in the usual-suspect cycling cities such as Amsterdam and Copenhagen, where 52 percent of the population use a bike “because it's the fastest way of getting around in the city.” Paris is building a network of express cycleways; Bogotá in Colombia has made bike lanes part of new city planning; and cycling has experienced massive growth in the U.K. In the U.S., “It” cities like Austin and Nashville—booming, and bursting at the seams with new residents—are championing bike-to-work days and expanding rentable bike stations around the city.

# LIFE HACKS

Kudos to Gina Trapani, who founded the website Lifehacker in 2005. The site has grown, and the idea of life-hacking has grown far beyond the site. Now, no matter your question (How to fold fitted sheets? How to get rid of unwanted guests? Como ganar mucho dinero? Comment nettoyer sa voiture?) about pretty much any basic aspect of life, there are thousands of “how to” hacks to choose from.

Not only does this inspire consumers to explore and rethink ways to use products—enhancing and extending the purchase buzz and relationship—but it also gives brands a new way to engage and understand what customers want and need. For marketers, tracking life-hack searches has to be one of the smartest new product hacks available.

# THE (ELUSIVE) BEAUTY OF SIMPLICITY



Even the call for simplicity on the homefront has elicited some pushback, seen in the rise of bohemian maximalism in eclectic pads across the country. Leading the movement is designer Justina Blakeney, author of the *New York Times* bestseller *The New Bohemians*. Pile on the potted plants, vibrant textiles, and all the rattan and wicker your local flea market holds, and you've got what Blakeney (and thousands of other Instagrammers) call “#jungalowstyle.”

It makes sense that in an always-on digital world, where people are digitally tethered to everything from their jobs to an increasingly jarring news cycle, consumers continue to long for simplicity as an ideal—but still end up living with messy complexity. Over four years in, it's still so crunchingly true that, as we told *The New York Times* in 2012, “We all have this desire to simplify our lives, but we don't know how to do it.”

It takes steely determination to follow the principles that make life simple: to declutter and tidy your home Marie Kondo style, to apply the *Getting Things Done* methodology of David Allen and cut through distractions with Cal Newport's *Deep Work* focus. But more and more people are at least drawn to accept the challenge.

This trend is about craving and attempting simplicity rather than attaining it. It's about buying Dave Bruno's *The 100 Thing Challenge* rather than actually owning only 100 things. And, let's face it, that's good news for marketers. If simplification were to become a trend in practice rather than in aspiration, a lot of brands would find their business drying up.



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**“Let us not seek the Republican answer or the Democratic answer, but the right answer. Let us not seek to fix the blame for the past. Let us accept our own responsibility for the future.”**

*—John F. Kennedy*