Is AI the virus killing creativity?

Artificial. Automated. Analytical. The AAA of Intelligence is looking to go viral, along with the big data and mobile technology that supports it. But before we rush out and become early adopters of the next big thing, let's remember one scientific fact - that every viral creation is born of a virus that threatens to kill the lifeblood of the very industry it feeds and breeds. In the marketing world, that means creativity.

Creative industry you say? This is how we still see and sell ourselves to clients, right? An industry built on and around the creative execution of ideas for the benefit of consumers and clients. Of course, we don't have to believe in our client's products, but we do have to believe in the creative capital, or creative intelligence, that we own and our ability to use it in a way that resonates with the consumer.

Of late we have been so caught up (or trying to catch up) with the growing possibilities of AI to transform and shape how we reach our audiences that we have lost our focus, channeling our creative energies into the medium at the expense of the message, our art to the demands of science.

Dan Izbicki, creative excellence director at Unilever, seemed to agree when he dismissed much of the marketing profession's creative output as "terrible". In fact, Izbicki wasn't making a case for companies to bring marketing inhouse but rather, it seems, calling on the creative industry to remember their creative USP so that we may resume our place at the branding table. "There's an assumption [in our industry] at the moment that just because everybody has got a camera and access to a YouTube channel, suddenly everybody is a creative director – that's clearly not true," he said. "That's why most advertising is terrible and most films are not very good. [Creativity] is a precious skill."

Is AI science or art?

Put under the microscope, AI behaves a bit like a vaccine. With the right dosage and under the correct supervision, it can inoculate audiences against boredom and can even lead to a healthier body of work being created by our industry. The other side is small pox, or worse.

Why all the science analogies, you ask? Well, science and art used to be one mutually beneficial discipline before it got split down the middle, along with the left and right brain, forever sentencing thought and ideas to their respective, but

equally cramped, "rational" and "emotional" quarters. And it has been a bitter battle ever since, with creatives fighting for more, creative freedom, and the "business science" types pushing for more data, analysis and measurement. In other words, creatives wanted to create the pudding, business wanted proof it exists. And then along came AI, which seemed to present a way to please both parties – creatives could explore new and exciting ways of getting the old messages across and business could feast on a layer cake of data, processes, analysis and measurement. Finally, everyone got to have their cake (or pudding) and eat it. Right?

So why do we still feel a bit queasy about the whole relationship? Is it because we worry that AI is putting creative tools, like Canva, Logojoy and others, into the hands of the insourced and underqualified? Or maybe because large corporates like P&G, Unilever, L'Oreal, Volkswagen, Nike, Nestlé, J&J, Pepsi, Vodafone, etc. are starting to question whether creativity is just another department that should be brought inhouse rather than an industry that actually offers insight and value beyond the technology. A valid concern if you believe creativity is just a science that can be learnt, created and replicated, like a McDonalds burger or Ford motorcar, fresh off the assembly line. If this is your belief then yes, worry.

Philip Mehl, HSBC's former head of marketing in EMEA, certainly has his concerns. He believes that brands are largely competing on how well they target consumers, rather than the quality of their ideas. In other words, "Marketing used to be a creative challenge but it's now a data challenge," as he sees it. Others have gone so far as to create a direct correlation between technological advancement and declining creative standards. With this view, one could argue that we are in danger of becoming a "Re generation" of creatives – re-hashing, re-tweeting, re-posting, re-packaging – big data to fit small ideas that speak the same message in different ways to more niche audiences.

But what if we didn't have to sacrifice science for art, the message for the medium, technology for creativity? Is there not a way to bring these two dichotomies together in service of creativity? Many believe there is. Like James Turner, Aviva's Head of Marketing. "I don't think [the art or the science] are mutually exclusive. With the data comes more scope to be genuinely relevant and do so through great creative," he argues.

Even Ian Liddicoat, global head of data technology and analytics at media agency, Zenith, believes that, while AI will soon permeate every aspect of the customer journey, it doesn't threaten creativity. "My view is that [automation] empowers creative thinking – it does not in any way reduce the importance of a very strong creative idea that's tied to a strategy and then executed through technology and data."

Ironically, one key factor pushing the case for more creativity is the tech-savvy consumer themselves. Being more mediated, fractured and self-empowered than ever before, they naturally demand innovation, creativity and entertainment at every level. And while technology may be a way to catch their attention, keeping it will require greater levels of creativity and its supporting cast of emotion, connection and authenticity.

Maybe it's time to shift the debate from questioning whether AI is killing creativity to questioning how creativity is enabling AI to engage audiences and influence behaviour. This is not the time to forget our creative capital or the reasons we built an industry around them. This is the time to apply ourselves, creatively, to the not-yet-automated task at hand.

- **Brand love, from the inside out** 14 Feb 2024
- **Is 2024 the year we unlock AInternal Communications?** 17 Jan 2024
- **How to** ~~draft~~ **craft an annual report** 20 Jun 2023
- **Tell or sell - how website storytelling goes beyond selling** 8 May 2023
- **Can your EVP drive work-life integration in 2023?** 23 Mar 2023

icandi CQ

icandi CQ is a 31% Black Woman Owned, Level 2 B-BBEE strategically driven full-service digital brand, communication and employee experience agency.

Profile | News | Contact | Twitter | RSS Feed