

GOLIN

**digital
recap
2021**

by *hoinaru*



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This material uses dozens of sources of information for the weekly articles that form the basis of the ebook, the most common of which are:

- from Romania: PaginadeMedia.ro, profit.ro, nwradu.ro
- from abroad: SocialMediaExaminer.com, TechCrunch.com, Mashable.com

Graphic design: Alex Constantinescu

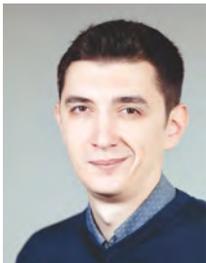
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intro



My last year's intro ended with the following sentence: "My final thoughts go to next year when we will be preparing a special edition of Digital Recap, since it will be the 10th issue of this series. A series started on a Sunday in November 2010, with an article on www.hoinaru.ro entitled "Sunday's Media Recap"."

We had no idea, however, what 2020 had in store for us. It was a complicated year, to say the least, when our patience, creativity and humor were tested.

This edition of Digital Recap was supposed to be different, I'm not going to hide that. I was hoping for an offline event, a lot of analysis about the last 10 years, I had a lot of ideas that needed time and careful planning.

Instead, 2020 challenged us, had us fight for survival. Both in real life and in business. We have adapted, we have changed on the go, and the success of this year is that we have an edition of Digital Recap, one that was made with great efforts.

This year we've also added a section dedicated to the pandemic where we examined the way in which marcomm companies and tech giants reacted during 2020. We considered it useful to have an overview of all the decisions taken, especially when going into lockdown, so that we could understand what to expect in the future.

Alex Ciucă

Blogger @ hoinaru.ro
Managing Partner, Superior Media



For the tenth year of Digital Recap, Alex Ciucă and us had big plans and, especially, offline ones ... But 2020 happened. And everything changed - offline and online alike. So in this edition of Digital Recap we are taking a look at the year past and take out the good, the bad and the evil, but we mostly see what are the take-outs for a future hopefully as "normal" as possible and about which we can already say that it is hybrid.

On the plus side, it should be noted that it was easier than we had ever imagined to go in a few hours from work at the office to work from home. Paradoxically, we got to know each other better that way, living from one screen to another - we saw what our homes, children, life partners, pajamas look like, and many mornings we witnessed the truth about "I woke up like this". Our conversations are now mostly online and we explore in the following pages when and how to join the social media conversations, but also more pressing need for authenticity and ethics in a space dominated by influencer marketing. 2020 was also the year when, more than ever, companies were no longer afraid to address difficult topics in social media and take a stand on critical social issues. Is this a keeper for the years to come or will the corporate voice decrease in intensity and return to good and safe messages?

I invite you to browse the Digital Recap pages together and go all in, bravely experiencing the most promising predictions.

Irina Roncea

Managing Director, Golin

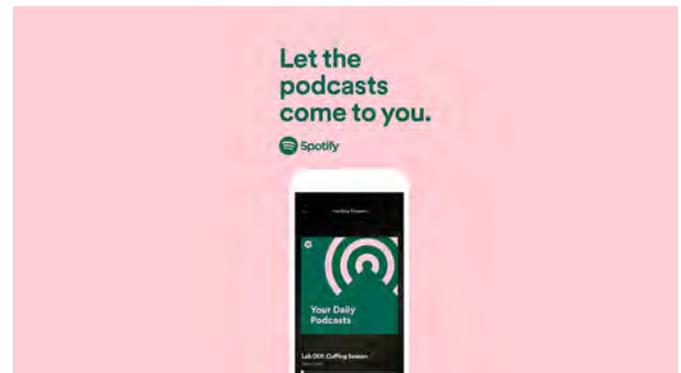
january

Goldman Sachs announces that it will no longer allow IPOs from companies that do not have a "diverse" director. In a changing world, Goldman Sachs, like other "traditional" financial institutions, is trying to stay relevant with this announcement, described by many as a "simple marketing move." David Solomon, CEO of Goldman Sachs, explained that with this decision they are trying to force companies to include more women on their board.

Jeff Bezos' phone was allegedly spied on by a message sent by the Saudi Crown Prince. In 2018, the phone of billionaire Jeff Bezos was infected with a virus which seems to have been sent from Mohammed bin Salman's phone. It was later speculated that the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi was due to this hacking, but nothing has been officially confirmed. However, the incident has affected the confidence of large tech companies regarding Saudi Arabia.

The dispute over Telekom and Discovery over the transmission contract continues. The two sides did not extend the agreement at the end of 2019. Telekom sent a public letter to Discovery

proposing to re-enter the group channels through an additional subscription package. In reply, Discovery added messages on the Eurosport website urging users to ask Telekom operators to introduce the Discovery group channels. Although there was pressure from both sides, things did not change before the end of 2020.



Spotify adds an advertising system and a podcast audience measurement system. The natural step for Spotify, which continued to invest during 2020 in many directions related to podcasting. Ever since the acquisition of Anchor.fm, Spotify representatives talked about a system through which podcast creators could choose their own advertising for their shows and benefit financially from it.

other news in brief

- # Vodafone withdraws from Libra, Facebook's crypto-currency project.
- # Visa pays \$5.3 billion to acquire Plaid, a company that develops financial services APIs.
- # Moise Guran gives up journalism and enters politics for USR-PLUS.
- # Radio UniPlus returns after 30 years.
- # Facebook bans deepfake videos.
- # Evenimentul Zilei appears for the last time in print.
- # Typing DNA receives \$7 million in funding from a Google-initiated investment fund.
- # It turns out that TikTok has a hidden deep fake function.
- # The California Privacy Act comes into force.
- # It turns out that Facebook paid \$550 million in a 2019 lawsuit related to facial recognition, filed in the state of Illinois.
- # It is revealed that Avast tracked the online activity of users and sold the data.
- # UK supports Huawei equipment for 5G.
- # NBC News and Sky News merge.



february

Spotify buys The Ringer, a podcast network with 90 employees, 30 podcasts and \$15 million in revenue in 2018. One of the most surprising news before the pandemic, the \$250 million acquisition of The Ringer was just the beginning for Spotify. Interestingly, Spotify bought for a lot of money an already profitable network, from which it wanted two things: a loyal user base to send to other podcasts and an experienced team.



Mobile World Congress is the first major event canceled due to Coronavirus. The beginning of 2020 saw a lot of confusion and unjustified optimism. All event organizers were convinced that the SARS-CoV-2 virus would not spread too much and that things would be kept under control. MWC organizers were the first to make the difficult decision to cancel the event, a few weeks before it was supposed to take place. The MWC is attended annually by more than 100,000 people who come to Barcelona from over 200 countries.

The CEO of Reddit stated in a conference that TikTok is a parasitic app and that it is "spyware". By early 2020, discussions about privacy and TikTok had been superficial. Although several US officials had raised the issue since 2019, not many measures had been taken and the press had not covered the issue either. With the statements of Reddit CEO, TikTok was caught in the economic war between the USA and China from which it came out with difficulty.

Google is applying for a license to resume cooperation with Huawei. The Trump administration had banned U.S. companies from working with Huawei and other Chinese companies since 2019. In early 2020, Google appeared to be making progress toward overturning the decision, but all they received was a temporary license to send software updates to older devices. New Huawei devices are still not allowed to use Google services, including the app store. The interest is also high for Google, especially since Huawei surpassed Samsung in 2020 and became the leader of the global mobile phone market.

other news in brief

Disney CEO announces that Hulu will be launched internationally in 2021.

Asana plans to list its shares on the stock exchange via direct listing, just like Spotify and Slack.

The LinkedIn CEO steps down from the company's management.

Disney+ reaches 28.6 million subscribers.

Facebook partners with Reuters for a project where the news agency checks videos and news

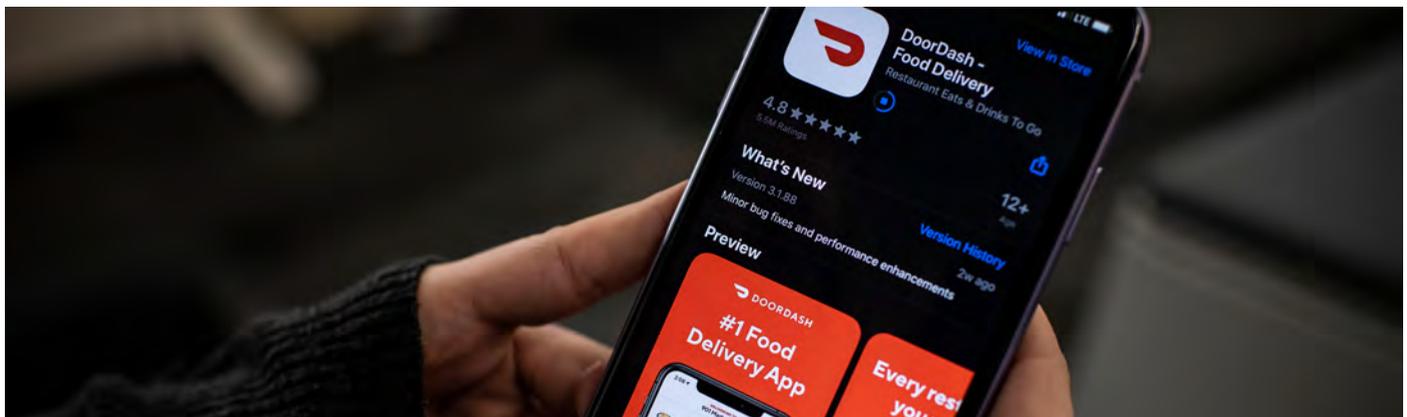
posted by users on the social network.

WhatsApp reaches 2 billion users.

Shopify enters the Libra project as a partner at a time when more and more large companies withdraw.

Revolut receives another \$500 million in funding and reaches a valuation of \$5.5 billion.

DoorDash, a start-up that delivers food at home, files for listing at a \$13 billion valuation.



march

Australia sues Facebook for breach of privacy rules and demands \$529 billion.

The problem started after the Cambridge Analytica scandal, following which the Australian authorities established that data of over 300,000 Australians were sold by the This is Your Digital Life application to Cambridge Analytica, with the permission of Facebook. As a

result, there was a \$1.7 million penalty for each of the 311,127 users. The process is still ongoing, but Facebook has lost a first stage. The Australian court has ruled that the social network is conducting business on the continent, despite defense protests.

Twitter is starting to mark Donald Trump's fake news.

In March, a video Trump retweeted received a "manipulated media" tag from Twitter. In the video, a message of Joe Biden, Trump's opponent in the US presidential election, was truncated. It was the first time Twitter had taken a stand against Trump's slippage. Many more followed (both slippages and sanctions).

Investors discuss the dismissal of Jack Dorsey as CEO of Twitter.

At the beginning of 2020, Jack Dorsey was in an increasingly complicated position, as the social network he was leading had increasingly poor results. For several years, Twitter had not made enough money, it hadn't come up with anything new and it seemed to be running on inertia. However, Dorsey managed to stay in office in 2020 and seemed to secure his position for the time being.



other news in brief

Twitter is testing a short-lived "stories"-type of content format called Fleets.

Quibi is in a legal dispute with Eko over the technology called by Qibi "Turnstyle technology", which allows easy transition from landscape to portrait.

Yandex makes a \$1 million infusion in Yango Romania.

Revolut launches on the US market.

Fox buys Tubi streaming app for \$440 million.

Mona Nicolici returns to the press, after leaving Petrom, with a show on EuropaFM.

Groupon fires its CEO and COO in an attempt to overcome the crisis it has entered.

Waymo, Alphabet's self-driving car business, has raised \$2.25 billion in funding.



april

SoftBank Group withdraws from the \$ 3 billion acquisition of WeWork shares.

Problems continued for WeWork in 2020, after the listing was canceled in 2019 and the scandal following which the company's CEO, Adam Neumann, was forced to resign. SoftBank found a number of legal reasons to get out of the WeWork share purchase agreement, which left the co-working company in a very difficult situation at the beginning of the pandemic.

Prima TV is sold to Clever Media (which also owns Look TV channels).

After more than 2 years during which Cristian Burci, the former owner, tried to find a buyer. Eventually, the transaction with Adrian Tomşa's company materialized, who later appointed Orlando Nicoară to relaunch the station. The actual takeover took place in September 2020 and brought a lot of changes for Prima TV, including many names associated with PROTV over the years.

Quibi, a long-awaited streaming application dedicated to mobile phones, with \$1.75 billion in funding and over 50 original shows, is launched.

At the time, Quibi was promising to revolutionize video streaming, as the funds available and the

management team consisting of Jeffrey Katzenberg (former president of Walt Disney Studios, CEO of DreamWorks) and Meg Whitman (former CEO of HP) seemed to lead to an instant hit. Not only that was that not the case, but Quibi announced that it would close after only 7 months, in October.



Facebook invests \$5.7 billion for 10% of India's largest telecom operator.

Investments in India were a theme of 2020, with Amazon, Google and Apple being the other tech giants involved in major acquisitions or moves. There are two reasons for these decisions: the huge growth and potential of the Indian market + India's protectionist policy on personal data. The tech giants want an official place at the negotiating table with the Indian authorities and they have obtained it through these investments.

other news in brief

Problems for Zoom, after it is revealed that they do not use end-to-end encryption, although they claim to do so.

Xerox discontinues HP acquisition amid pandemic uncertainty.

AirBnb raises new \$1 billion in funding from two investment funds.

Foursquare merges with Factual.

Microsoft Edge outperforms Firefox in terms of market share.

Stripe raises another \$600 million in funding and reaches a valuation of \$36 billion.

Digitap, a game publisher from Cluj, buys Trilulilu with the intention of relaunching it.

The Facebook Gaming application is launched on Android, the iOS version is expected.

Fandango, NBCUniversal platform, buys Vudu video-on-demand application from Walmart.

WhatsApp forwarding limits decrease the viralization of some messages by 70%, according to some studies.

Draft amendment to the Audiovisual Law allowing the National Audiovisual Council to remove or block clips. The project was later withdrawn.



may

Trump threatens to regulate social media platforms after a tweet of his was marked as fake news. Another slippage of Donald Trump on social networks, which continued the war with Twitter until the end of his term. The approaching election complicated matters, but the company led by Jack Dorsey continued to sanction Trump whenever needed.

Facebook has to pay \$52 million to compensate the 11,000 content moderators who developed mental health issues such as depression or various addictions while working on the platform. The announcement brought to the fore the discussion about the health problems that people who spend hours on social networks develop, whether they do it in their free time, or as part of their job.

Kevin Mayer, head of streaming at Disney, becomes CEO of TikTok. ByteDance, the company that owns TikTok, tried its best during 2020 to reach a consensus with US authorities. While the Trump administration has constantly threatened to ban TikTok, the Chinese company was negotiating with Microsoft, Oracle and any other company willing to take over US operations.

HBO Max launches on the US market, priced at \$14.99 per month. Warner Media had long been preparing for this launch,



designed as a T-zero for the group's streaming services. After the launch of HBO Max, other services saw changes: HBO GO was closed in the US and HBO Now was renamed. The same thing will happen in 2021 in Europe, including Romania.

other news in brief

Zoom is trying to solve its encryption problems by buying the Keybase startup.

Lime receives \$170 million in funding from Uber, Alphabet and several investment funds. On this occasion, Jump (UBER subsidiary on micro-mobility) moves to Lime.

UBER Eats leaves 7 markets in the world, including Romania (the others are the Czech Republic, Egypt, Honduras, Uruguay, Ukraine and Saudi Arabia).

Spotify starts testing video podcasts.

Ringier buys TV Mania and TV Satelit.

Disney+ outperforms Hulu in number of subscribers.

Facebook buys Giphy, a platform specialized as a search engine for animated GIFs, for \$3-4 million.

Apple changes its content strategy on

AppleTV+ and starts buying older shows to populate the platform.

Spotify exclusively signed the podcast "The Joe Rogan Experience" on a multi-year deal valued at over \$100 million.

Facebook and Instagram launch Shops in an attempt to bet more on ecommerce.

Walmart will close the Jet.com online store, bought in 2016 for \$3 billion, in an attempt to compete with Amazon.



june

Twitter returns to the public's attention after the social network is intensively used in the context of the #BlackLivesMatter protests. As in other crisis situations, users turned to Twitter to broadcast protests and clashes with law enforcement that took place in several US cities. It was confirmed once again that Twitter remains the social network for breaking news, which is important but insufficient for the company led by Jack Dorsey.



Amazon plans to invest \$ 2 billion in Indian telecom operator Bharti Airtel. The Indian market is huge, and the tech giants' move was a logical step. By the end of 2020, the top 3 telecom companies in India had received investments or negotiated with Facebook and

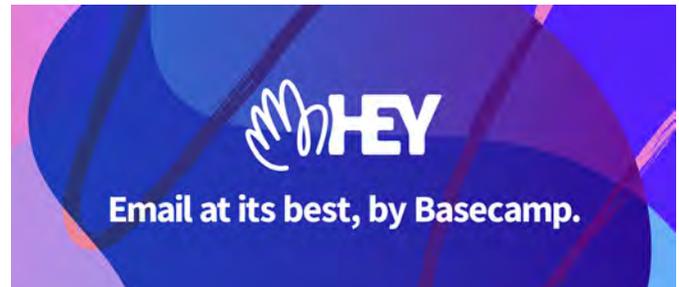
Microsoft (Reliance Jio Platforms, 1st place), Google (Vodafone Idea, 2nd place) and Amazon (Bharti Airtel, 3rd place).

Zoom publishes the results for Q1, which shows that it increased by 169% in a single year, exceeding all expectations. The main reason for this increase was obviously the COVID-19 pandemic, which sent the entire world to work from home. However, Zoom was on the rise anyway, with +78% in revenue in the previous quarter. The slow response of competitors Google Meet or Microsoft Teams also helped, as they managed to improve the experience and offer a stable alternative only by April-May..

Amazon buys autonomous car company Zoox for \$1.2 billion. The move is part of Jeff Bezos' desire to diversify his portfolio. Zoox is preparing "robot taxis", which could be launched on the market in the coming years. Even if this kind of service is not related to the rest of the business Amazon operates in, the autonomous car market has a huge potential and every big company wants to be prepared for it.

other news in brief

- # The vlogger Colo investigated by police after inciting violence in several clips.
- # Facebook employees protest the company's lack of response to Trump's posts.
- # Zynga buys Turkish company Peak Games for \$1.8 billion.
- # Selly gets into disguised advertising for the City Hall of Sector 6 - led by Gabriel Mutu (PSD).
- # Paysera offers Romanian IBANs through LibraBank.
- # Snapchat introduces several mini-apps inside their app.
- # Twitter deletes 170,000 accounts linked to one of China's influencing campaigns.
- # Microsoft shuts down Mixer - a Twitch competitor.
- # Twitter introduces audio tweets, currently on iOS.
- # Whatsapp launches in-app payments - currently in Brazil, 4% processing fee.
- # The former Ziare.com team, who had recently resigned, launched a new journalism project called SpotMedia.
- # Facebook deletes a Trump advertising campaign containing Nazi symbols.
- # Basecamp launches Hey, a new email service.



july

Google invests \$ 4.5 billion in telecom company Jio Platforms for 7.7% of the shares. Google CEO Sundar Pichai said that, in the next 5-7 years, the company will invest about \$ 10 billion to increase digital penetration in India. With 700 million internet users, India has only 34% coverage of the total population, so the growth potential is huge.



India blocked 59 applications developed by Chinese companies (including TikTok), followed by Google and Apple, who removed them from their Stores. Modern wars also take place through the digital

environment, with both economic and social implications. The war on India's border with China caused the New Delhi government to make more such decisions during 2020.

Huawei becomes no. 1 in phone sales, surpassing Samsung, according to Canalys. Even in a complicated economic context, marked by the pandemic and the USA-China economic war, which led to a number of embargoes, Huawei managed to surpass Samsung in the number of mobile phones sold. The victory was not a temporary one, as Huawei fell only 5% YoY, while Samsung fell more than 30% YoY.

PRO TV notifies Pagina de Media not to write about employees of the group that were allegedly sick with COVID-19. One of the strangest reactions in the Romanian media in 2020. Undoubtedly a PR blunder, which was later criticized by several journalists' associations. Later, the reason for this notification was revealed: Andreea Esca was infected with COVID-19, an experience that the PRO TV star later talked about.

other news in brief

Facebook closes Lasso, the TikTok clone it launched a year and a half ago.

The YouTube TV subscription increases from \$50 to \$65 per month.

Uber buys Postmates delivery service for \$2.65 billion.

Tinder is testing video chat in several markets, including the US.

The Twitter accounts of Joe Biden, Elon Musk and Apple are hacked to promote a cryptocurrency scam.

Instagram launches the new version of Shop, which also includes the Facebook Pay option.

UK bans Huawei telecom equipment.

Twitter wants to attract more revenue and is exploring different subscription options.

Slack files a lawsuit against Microsoft Teams for non-competitive practices. Microsoft has bundled competitor Teams with the Office suite.

TikTok announces \$200 million fund for major US content creators.

Facebook wants to compete with Youtube and launches a Music Videos area after partnering with the world's largest record labels.

Microsoft would like to take over the TikTok business in the US following pressure from the Trump administration on the Chinese company.



august

Anthony Levandowski, the engineer who stole trade secrets from Google and took them to Uber, was sentenced to a year and a half in prison, in what the press called "the biggest intellectual property theft." The American engineer was one of the founders of Waymo, then left and founded the Otto company, later bought by UBER. Levandowski was pardoned by Donald Trump on his last day in office at the White House, while UBER faces a \$4 billion lawsuit filed by the engineer.



Apple removes Fortnite from the App Store, leading to an international scandal with millions of dissatisfied players. The problem stems from the high commissions that Apple charges all app developers listed in the AppStore. Epic Games,



the company that develops Fortnite, tried to avoid these commissions, which led Apple to delist the application from the AppStore. As a result, Epic Games sued Apple, and many months later Apple agreed to lower the fees, but only for companies with revenues under \$1 million a year from sales in the AppStore.

Trump bans US companies from working with TikTok and WeChat.

Another episode of the USA-China economic war. As a result of this measure, TikTok sued the US government for all restrictions received from the Trump administration. In the coming months, Trump consistently said he was going to ban TikTok and other Chinese applications, but in the end these threats did not materialize.

other news in brief

- # Instagram Reels is launched globally, a TikTok copy on Instagram.
- # Facebook eliminates a network of fake accounts in Romania that were used for the US election campaign.
- # Amazon launches an online pharmacy in India.
- # Twitter suspends access to President Trump's account, after he suggested that most children would be immune to Covid.
- # Scribd buys Slideshare from LinkedIn.
- # It turns out that Instagram had a bug that kept photos on servers even after the user deleted them.
- # Ringier buys Imobiliare.ro.
- # Apple Music Radio is launched.
- # Spotify tests a virtual event feature.
- # Uber and Lyft managed to gain some time in California in the trial where the authorities would like to declare drivers full-time employees.
- # Robinhood receives \$200 million in funding, with a total valuation of \$11 billion.
- # The possibility of Australian publications asking Google for money for news appearing in the search engine is discussed.
- # The CEO of TikTok resigns after only 100 days of managing the company.
- # Facebook pays overdue fees worth \$125 million in France.
- # GoPro is working on its own streaming service.

september

Facebook is threatening to block network news in Australia amid discussions about the fees the platform should pay to the media. The Australian government prepared a bill that could force Google and Facebook to pay some of the revenue obtained in Australia to media companies. In response, Facebook threatened to block all news on Facebook and Instagram across the continent.

India bans PUBG Mobile and 100 other Chinese apps. The movement is part of India's economic war with China. This time, the IT minister said that the applications "threaten India's integrity, defense, sovereignty, state security and public order." In total, during 2020, India banned more than 230 applications from China, the most important being TikTok, PUBG and some of the Alibaba group.

Amazon launches its own cloud gaming application, called Luna. One of the development directions for the big tech companies was the cloud gaming platforms and Amazon could not be a stranger to this market. Thus, Amazon has come to compete here with Google (Stadia), Microsoft (xCloud), Nvidia (GeForce Now) and Sony (PlayStation Now), on

a market estimated at \$140 billion annually.



ByteDance enters a partnership with Oracle and Walmart for the American shareholding of TikTok. After talking with Microsoft and other large US companies, ByteDance reached an agreement in principle to sell TikTok operations in the US. The move is meant to rid the company of the ban used by the Trump administration to threaten the Chinese. In fact, with this agreement ByteDance bought time, postponed the ban and waited for the US elections, which ended with the victory of Joe Biden. Once the Trump administration ended its term, the agreement between Oracle, Walmart and ByteDance was left without clear prospects.

other news in brief

Aleph News, Adrian Sârbu's new TV channel, starts broadcasting.

Facebook launches Campus - a social network dedicated to students only.

Facebook wants to launch smart glasses in partnership with RayBan.

Salesforce announced 12,000 job openings for the next year.

Amazon launches a personal shopping assistant for \$5 a month.

LinkedIn launches Stories feature, adopting this popular format.

Gusti Roman moves to PrimaTV, after having recently left Intact.

Amazon launches Amazon One - the ability to pay by hand when you enter their stores (more precisely, with the palm of your hand).

Asana, the company producing team work software, went public.

Microsoft launches a deep-fake detector.



october

Google will pay publishers \$ 1 billion for access to news that will be included in the Google News Showcase. Over the years, there has been a lot of discussion between Google and the media about accessing news. The press has always held that Google has to pay to get the right to display, while the technology company has always insisted that it does nothing but facilitate access to information. Here, in the end, things start to change, even if not at the level that the press would find appropriate.



Quibi, the streaming app for mobile phones, shuts down at the end of the year, after several months of existence. The Quibi case is one of the failures of 2020, an almost surreal story. After spending hundreds of millions of dollars on original shows with stars

such as Steven Spielberg, Jennifer Lopez, Kevin Hart, Guillermo del Toro and Chrissy Teigen, the company got off to such a bad start that they decided to give up after only a few months. The pandemic was officially the culprit for changing consumer behavior, but the real reason is the poor quality of the shows that many specialists have complained about.



IBM divides into two companies: IBM and NewCo. IBM began a reorganization process in 2020, also including layoffs, it gave up the facial recognition business and restructured the company. While IBM will stick with the digital transformations and hybrid cloud part, NewCo will provide IT infrastructure services. The first company has estimated revenues of \$ 59 billion annually, while the second reaches about \$ 19 billion annually.

other news in brief

Waymo performs the first public drives without a driver.

Pakistan bans TikTok claiming it is immoral and indecent, then reconsiders the decision.

Stripe buys the Paystack app launched in Nigeria and enters the African continent.

Zoom launches its own event platform and an integrated app marketplace.

Snapchat launches Sounds - a TikTok competitor.

Disney is reorganizing and focusing on streaming.

Yango leaves Romania.

Facebook launches dating function in Europe.

Facebook prepares a cloud gaming service focused on mobile games.

Ant Group prepares for the IPO and hopes to raise about \$35 billion in what would be the largest IPO in the world.

Under Armor sells MyFitnessPal for \$345 million after buying it in 2015 for \$475 million.



november

Alibaba comes under the scrutiny of Chinese authorities, being accused of anti-trust policies. Alibaba was expecting to make about \$35 billion in the world's largest stock market listing. Instead, they had to face the Chinese bureaucracy. Jack Ma's attempts to put pressure on the authorities had the opposite effect, with the entire group being scrutinized by the Chinese government.



Amazon invests \$2.8 billion in a second data center in India. It is a data center for Amazon Web Services, the company's cloud service. The measure is intended to meet the requirements of the Indian authorities regarding

the internal storage of data and to open new opportunities on the Indian market for Amazon. In addition, the data center will be used by AWS Asia Pacific to develop the entire region.

Telekom sells part of the former Romtelecom, namely the landline telephone services, to Orange and prepares to exit the Romanian market. Rumors about Telekom's exit from the market have been circulating for the last two years, but until November 2020 nothing was public. With the exit from the Romtelecom business (where the Romanian State holds the rest of the shares), Telekom starts the liquidation procedure of the operations in our country.



other news in brief

- # Netflix is testing a linear, TV-like channel in France called Netflix Direct.
- # WhatsApp gets the green light to launch the payment service in India.
- # Twitter hides some more Trump tweets.
- # Google Photos gives up unlimited free storage starting June 1, 2021.
- # Apple introduces the first computers to use its own chip, M1, after 15 years of collaboration with Intel.
- # Airbnb files for IPO.
- # Facebook launches Vanish Mode - a feature enabling messages to disappear.
- # Twitter introduces its own version of stories, called Fleets.
- # Apple reduces AppStore commissions for companies with revenues below \$1 million.
- # France begins to collect taxes from technology giants.
- # India bans another 43 Chinese apps, including some from Alibaba Group.
- # Verizon sells HuffPost to BuzzFeed.



december

Salesforce buys Slack for \$27.7 billion in a surprise super-transaction. Nothing announced this transaction, especially since Salesforce laid off more than 1,000 employees in the first part of 2020. Salesforce later said it plans to hire 12,000 people in the coming years, but the company's development plans were unclear. While Salesforce was on the rise, Slack shares were down, with the company's total value 40% lower than before the listing.



Sony withdraws Cyberpunk 2077 from the PlayStation Store and gives money back to users after several bug complaints. Cyberpunk 2077 was one of the most anticipated games of the year and should have had tremendous sales contributing to the success of the new PlayStation 5. Instead, it

proved to be a product launched with too many problems, a disappointment for the entire gaming community. After Sony, Microsoft had the same approach. CD Projekt Red, the Polish company that developed the game, admitted the problems and promised to fix everything.

eMAG is fined €6.7 million from the Competition Council for abuse of a dominant position. An investigation targeting the period 2013-2019 concluded that eMAG abused its dominant position by displaying its own products above the results of Marketplace traders. eMAG has stated that it will cooperate with the authorities and has already changed the product display algorithm.



other news in brief

- # Facebook buys Kustomer, a customer service company, for \$1 billion.
- # Ant Group, part of Alibaba Group, could still go public, according to Chinese authorities, if they manage to meet several requirements.
- # The cryptocurrency company backed by Facebook changes its name from Libra to Diem.
- # Twitter buys Squad - a screen sharing app.
- # Hyundai buys 80% of Boston Dynamics.
- # US authorities sue Facebook over illegal monopoly.
- # Uber sells autonomous car division to Aurora.
- # Visa and Mastercard block payments to Pornhub.
- # Apple launches sports app called Fitness+.
- # Discord receives \$100 million in funding at a valuation of \$7 billion.
- # Twitter shuts down Periscope live streaming app.
- # Google Music shuts down.
- # Telegram approaches 500 million users and prepares to start monetizing.
- # Amazon buys the Wondery podcast network.



covid update

The Covid-19 pandemic also generated several reactions from technology and media companies. We have selected some of the most important ones, between February and July, as an overview.

02/21

Mobile World Congress is the first major event canceled due to coronavirus.

03/21

Internet providers around the world begin to increase the packages and speed provided during lockdown either at the request of the authorities or on their own initiative.

Shares have suffered the biggest one-day decline since 1987, including Bitcoin.

Google extends the Work from Home recommendation to all of North America.

Netflix reduces the quality of video streaming in Europe for 30 days, at the request of the EU, due to the huge consumption caused by lockdown.

Facebook will post information about Coronavirus at the top of the NewsFeed.

Twitter changes its security policy to ban tweets that could endanger users regarding information

related to Covid.

Slack is on the rise due to the remote work trend.

Facebook announces a \$100 million grant for small businesses consisting of advertising credit and cash.

Coronavirus canceled several important events, including the Facebook and Google (and SXSW) conferences.

Ziarul Financiar suspends the print edition.

Lime temporarily withdraws scooters from around the world.

Amazon Prime Video streams movies and animations for children, for free, without the need for membership, in the context of the pandemic.

Google says it is ready to donate \$800 million in ad credit and loans to help government organizations and small businesses during the Covid crisis.

Spotify adds a fundraising feature.

Ringier suspends glossy magazines.

AirBnb provides housing for 100,000 employees in the anti-Covid medical system.

04/21

Coca-Cola cuts advertising indefinitely against the backdrop of the pandemic.

Amazon has problems with employees in US warehouses who went on strike because of the way the company implemented anti-Covid security measures.

Jack Dorsey, the CEO of Twitter, launches a \$1 billion fund to support the Covid-19 pandemic, using shares of Square.

TikTok gives away \$250 million in the fight against Covid and \$125 million in ad credit.

Whatsapp limits the allowed number of forwards of a message to stop misinformation.

Microsoft announces that it will only hold digital events until the summer of 2021.

Google offers the Meet platform to all users for free, in an attempt to stop Zoom domination.

Youtube introduces fact-checking next to videos in the US, after testing functionality in Brazil and India.

05/21

The government announces it will financially support the Romanian press.

Twitter plans to allow its employees work from home even after the Covid-19 pandemic passes.

Mark Zuckerberg estimates that in the next decade more than half of Facebook's employees will work remotely.

The British government also announces its intention to give money to the press.

06/21

Microsoft gives up most of its offline stores, except in London, New York or Sydney.

07/21

Another strike by Amazon warehouse employees, this time in Germany.

podcast update

POWERED BY  **starcast**

Amazon buys the Wondery podcast network, trying to continue the Spotify chase on the podcasting market.

Spotify starts testing video podcasts.

Spotify exclusively signs the podcast "The Joe Rogan Experience" on a multi-annual deal valued at over \$100 million.

BCR launches its own podcast.

Dan Fințescu launches Murdar Podcast - the first fiction podcast in Romania, Marian Hurducaș is part of the team.

Kim Kardashian has a podcast distributed exclusively on Spotify.

Spotify launches video support for podcasts, initially for selected creators.

Amazon Music adds podcasts, including some of its own shows.

Spotify introduces a podcast format that allows songs to be included.

Audible adds 100,000 podcasts to the platform.

Spotify begins to compete with the radio with a morning show.

Spotify buys podcast hosting company Megaphone for \$235 million.

Spotify is thinking of a podcast subscription.

Apple allows podcast embedding.



key topics in 2020

Investments by tech giants in India

Amazon, Google and Facebook invested heavily in India last year, and forecasts for the coming years are similar. India is an emerging market with huge potential, and it is not ruled by a totalitarian regime as is the case in China. Against the backdrop of the US-China economic war, it appears that India is the main beneficiary, which will greatly accelerate the country's digital development.

However, all 3 companies also targeted an extremely important secondary objective by investing in telecom companies: a seat on the boards and, automatically, a seat at the negotiating table with the New Delhi authorities. The concern is linked to India's increasingly stringent regulation, so Amazon, Google and Facebook want to make sure they can negotiate certain privacy measures directly.

US-China conflict (with TikTok in the forefront this time)

Throughout 2020, US authorities and several tech leaders spoke out about TikTok's alleged privacy concerns. A number of solutions were proposed, and officials from ByteDance (the company that owns TikTok) negotiated with

Microsoft, Oracle and Walmart a sale that would have helped them not to be banned from the US market.

It all ended (at least for now) when Donald Trump lost the presidential election. Currently, the Biden administration is negotiating with TikTok representatives, but it's expected they will reach a result without the need for a ban.

The Trump vs. social networks conflict and fake news

2020 was the year when Donald Trump had more and more slippages. The pandemic and the economic war with China contributed to this situation, but the main reason was related to the presidential election. Trump tried to secure his second term, while Twitter seemed to put its foot down.

We will never know if it was a political calculation, however it is certain that the former US president constantly had his tweets hidden or marked as fake news. At one point, Trump even threatened to regulate social networks, which of course did not happen. However, a premiere will go down in history: the official communications of an American president were verified or even hidden because they were untrue.

#blacklivesmatter

Once again, large-scale events have demonstrated the power of social media, and of Twitter in particular. Throughout the #blacklivesmatter protests, citizen journalism returned to the forefront and managed to reveal the abuses committed by law enforcement.

Spotify investments in podcasts

Spotify aims to dominate the podcasting market and has made serious investments in this direction in the last 2 years. 2020 was the year they bought The Ringer network for \$ 250 million, signed Joe Rogan exclusively for \$ 100 million, introduced the video part (to attack the part occupied by Youtube). Moreover, they exclusively signed with Kim Kardashian for a podcast (for an unknown amount) and paid another \$ 235 million for the podcast hosting company Megaphone. And yet, the latest financial results from Spotify seem to show that this bet is not a winner, at least for now.

Talks between Facebook and Australian authorities

The Australian government has taken more and more steps towards regulating the digital environment, and giants Google and Facebook have had to give explanations (and money). First, there was the trial on personal data used by Cambridge Analytica for which the Australians demanded \$ 528 billion. Then, there was a bill up

for debate on whether Facebook and Google should pay for the news they take on their platforms.

ANT problems with the Chinese IPO

Jack Ma's company was preparing at the end of 2020 for the largest stock exchange listing in history, from which they had hoped to obtain over \$35 billion. Then the Chinese authorities took action, wanting to check alleged anti-competitive policies. Jack Ma publicly criticized these checks, then disappeared for a few months, during which time the ANT Group had to give a lot of explanations. The listing on the stock exchange could still take place, however, if the Chinese giant manages to meet certain requirements.

The race for cloud gaming

Google, Microsoft, Amazon and even Facebook have entered the area of cloud gaming, as Mark Zuckerberg's network is the only company that focuses exclusively on mobile games. The others compete with traditional players like Nvidia or Sony. Cloud gaming is a trend for the future, and the fight at the moment is for a larger market share. 2021 and 2022 will probably be decisive years for establishing a leader.

The battle of app creators with AppStore commissions

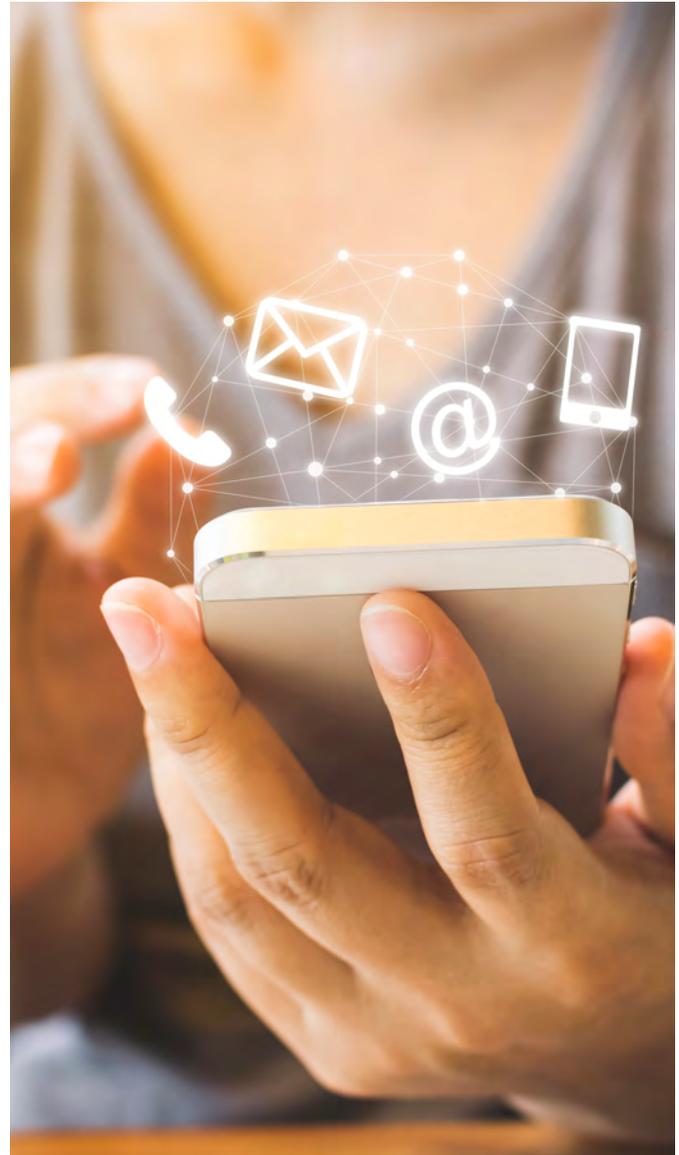
Epic Games set the tone last year in the fight

against Apple on AppStore commissions. Before the pandemic, Apple took 30% commission for any transaction that took place through the AppStore. In the context of the pandemic, Facebook demanded a decrease of this commission, but they faced the refusal of the company led by Tim Cook. Subsequently, Epic Games found a way to avoid commissions, and Apple banned Fortnite from the AppStore. Eventually, some sort of compromise was reached with Apple reducing the commissions for applications with revenues below \$1 million per year.

The pandemic

Undoubtedly the most important topic of 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic, has changed the lives of us all. In media and digital, we had several months when companies competed in providing grants and loans for small entrepreneurs. But after July, that solidarity between companies seemed to disappear, even though the hard times had not only not passed, but were deepening.

2020 was the year where companies that facilitated work from home grew exponentially, while others saw their life-long work lost in just a few months.



the fine line between ethics and authenticity in influencer marketing

“A brand is no longer what we tell consumers it is - it is what consumers tell each other it is”, says Scott Cook, Ebay and Procter & Gamble Director¹, which brings us to the importance of the influencer marketing component in brand communication strategies around the world.

Perhaps because it is one of the most current and discussed areas of communication, it also raises the most numerous questions both ethically, as well as in relation to the authenticity of endeavors and of the created content.



What is influencer marketing²

Long ago, it seems as if in another age, influencer marketing was limited to celebrities and nothing more.

Originally, influencer marketing is a form of social media marketing that uses recommendations and mentions of products, services, etc., from influencers. Initially, influencer marketing functioned based on the trust that they had in their community and that some of them continue to have today.

Influencer marketing is also an emerging area under the scrutiny of both marketers and advertiser, as well as authorities.

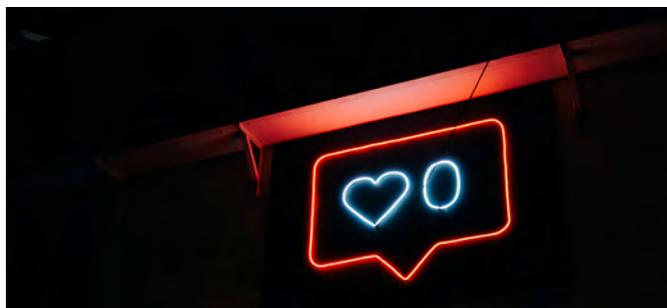
What are the most important aspects of influencer marketing?

I. Responsibility

Along with visibility, comes the responsibility that an influencer has when it chooses to do it part time or as full-time job. At that time, an influencer must ask themselves a few basic questions:

- How does your content influence the audience it will reach?
- Do you fully know your partner's values? Do they match with your values and the values of your community?
- Do you take the responsibility for the brand that you communicate for 100% regardless of the situation?

Every influencer is free to choose how they build their personal brand, how they communicate and what brands they work with, what values they promote, but they should not overlook the responsibility they have for so many people they talk to, who can be influenced by them.



II. Transparency

We've said it before, and we will continue saying it. The level of transparency used by influencers and content creators to communicate partnerships with various brands makes them more credible in their community, and the brand sees them as upstanding partners, making them eligible for future collaborations and public

image associations.

Of course, each influencer must pay attention to the brands they choose to communicate for and how they do it. Too much or too little brand communication can be a red flag for both companies, as well as agencies.

III. Accountability

We have witnessed over time various situations where either influencers or brands have denied the collaborations that they have had over time for various reasons that shall not be mentioned here since this is not the point of the article.

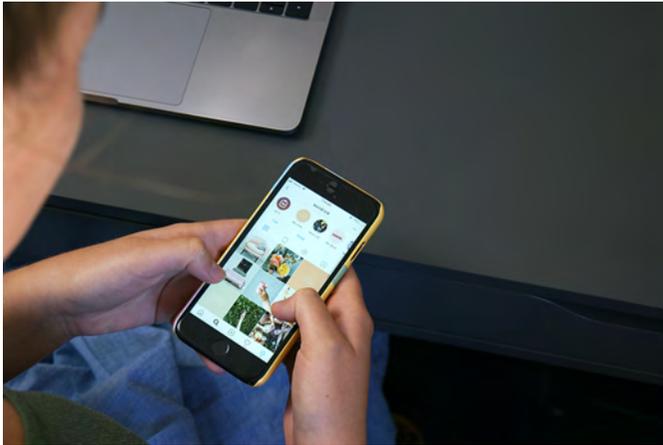
In addition to dedicating material, temporal and human resources, each influencer must be accountable for every message they communicate to their communities, whether it is a personal opinion or an opinion belonging to a brand they support.

Beyond the implied morality, we also discuss here integrity and credibility, two of the main pillars of a partnership between a brand and an influencer, a topic we discussed at length below.

IV. Do's and Don'ts³

For years, the FTC (The Federal Trade Commission) has imposed on influencers a number of measures to signal branded content which was not taken into account until recently, when the phenomenon grew and the focus shifted to several types of relationships between

content creators and the brands they promote online to their communities.



a) Do's

- Any form of promotion of a product where the influencer has some benefit, not necessarily financial, must be indicated in such a manner that users can make the distinction between branded and organic content.
- Moreover, when influencers recommend a product that they have purchased, the FTC's recommendation is not to make it clear that their recommendation is not supported by that brand.
- Indication must be visible and not hidden among other hashtags that are platform specific, mixed in the text or, even worse, at the end of the article where many users do not even get.

- Any association with a brand either through a tag, pin or mention, is a form of endorsement that must be indicated accordingly.
- If the brand promotion is done through a video, the recommendation is that the partnership mark should be placed in the first 30 seconds of the material.
- For a live material, signaling is done repeatedly so that participants can have access to information regardless of time they join that live event.

b) Don'ts

- It is not enough for influencers to indicate only partnerships based on a contract and a financial agreement. For example, even collaborations based on personal relationships (such as family relationships) and professional relationships (employee-employer) should be reported as such.
- Don't promote a product/service that you haven't tested.
- If your opinion about a product is negative, do not base it on stories and rumors, regardless of how you receive remuneration from the brand. Stay authentic and honest with your audience.
- Do not promote products that they need more information to be used unless the brand has this information (e.g. clinical trials).

While FTC fights for the full transparency of the campaigns that influencers communicate on their social media channels, SAG-AFTRA (Screen Actor Guild and American Federation of Television and Radio Artists) announces a new influencer agreement that allows anyone who is paid to promote a certain brand / service to be covered by the union.

„The Influencer Agreement was created in response to the unique nature of Influencer-generated branded content and offers a new way for influencers to work under a SAG-AFTRA agreement. We want to be able to support both current and future SAG-AFTRA members in this space and for them to be able to access the benefits of union coverage”, said SAG-AFTRA President Gabrielle Carteris for Backstage⁴.

According to a SAG-AFTRA representative, the new agreement will categorize branded content generated by influencers as a recognized form of advertising, and the SAG-AFTRA members who use this agreement will qualify for benefits related to health and retirement. At the same time, the agreement classifies *„branded content generated by influencers”* as anything that is generated and posted by an influencer. The material must be created and posted on the influencer’s platforms, but the advertising campaigns that they host for another company do not fall under this category, SAG-AFTRA having a separate agreement for this type of content⁵.

V. 2021 Trends in Influencer Marketing⁶

a. Long-term partnerships

Brands will increasingly turn to long-term partnerships with influencers and content creators for several reasons. From the association the consumers do between the two parties, to effectiveness in communication, credibility is the most important, and when the content of an influencer consistently includes a brand, they are certainly more appreciated and credible in their community.

b. Expanding communication in new social networks

2020 was, undoubtedly, the Tik Tok year, but also the year when we realized how much room there is on the social networks market. Thus, we already mention frequently **Twitter Spaces** and **Clubhouse** which are just some of the new platforms we have in focus for the next year, but we expect other news as well.

Since we got here, let’s talk about the Clubhouse phenomenon, hottest topic of the moment in the marketing and advertising industry.

Clubhouse is an audio social network to which users have access only by invitation, as it currently is available only for iOS. We went through this experience when Instagram was launched, when, for the first two years, the app was available only to iOS users, but we hope that this time the platform will be available soon for Android users⁷.

Beside the invitation received from a user, you can also request access by downloading the application and setting a user name, but you won't know when you have access, so the first option is the preferred one for the time being⁸.

It is an app organized in chat rooms where discussions are held on various topics, as the interaction is by voice only. Each user can create rooms on topics they want to discuss with other people, or join already created chat rooms.



The chat rooms are organized as follows:

- Each room has a host
- It may have one or more moderators
- Audience

The host and the moderators are those who organize discussions and give the floor to members to participate in the discussion. Does

the system sound familiar to you? It reminds me of my school years when teachers told us not to speak without being asked and, if we wanted to take part in the discussion, we had to raise our hand and wait to be allowed to speak. The action takes place online, and the conversations are not saved, therefore, once the discussion is over, the chatroom is automatically deleted.

Launched only last year, Clubhouse was originally designed as a platform for Silicon Valley technology industry elites, but it has quickly become popular and, although it's in beta version for the moment, it already has delivered the first millions of users.

Over time we have witnessed such stormy launches that have not withstood the test of time and at the moment we have no certainty about the success rate of Clubhouse. Industry voices say it could remain a niche platform, but it remains to be seen how trends will evolve⁹.

c. New niches to exploit

If we do an exercise in imagination, we can visualize influencer marketing as an archipelago consisting of several islands representing the areas of activity of influencers and content creators.

If until now we focused on general areas or on the broadest themes such as parenting, travel, beauty, food, lifestyle, etc., from now on we will have more and more in mind the business, animals, CSR, memes, craft and DIY niches and many others that will surely emerge in the future.

d. Focus on authenticity

One of the most important aspects of influencer marketing is authenticity, something that both people in agencies as well as ordinary people are becoming more careful about. This is due to the interest that communities have for authentic and natural content with which the creator also resonates, managing to convey their message beyond images, videos and other types of content.

Authenticity has two main pillars: credibility and integrity. Credibility is what makes the content creator keep their audience close and gain engagement. Integrity is a quality that the brand notices in their partner, and this strengthens the collaboration relationship between the two parties.

e. Examining data

If until now we could say that brands were still getting used to partnerships and communicating through influencers, now we already speak of a strategic aspect relying increasingly on important metrics of social media. Thus, brands will develop projects with influencers where they will establish from the very beginning their goals and their outcomes whether in terms of awareness, engagement and other key metrics.

f. CGI influencers¹⁰

Computer Generated Imagery or virtual influencers are not necessarily new, but for now

it is an area that's being timidly tested, even if we are all aware they represent the new breakthrough in influencer marketing.

One of the most powerful advantages of a virtual influencer is the unlimited audience. They can promote any product in any country, they can speak any language and address anyone.

Real influencers have an advantage that virtual ones cannot achieve: human touch, something so important in communication, even in a digital world. Therefore, virtual influencers will not take the place of real ones, but they might meet some needs they cannot cover or would not be effective in doing so.

Alexandra Ion

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why the future in social media belongs to purpose-driven companies

Context

2020 global backdrop, defined by climate changes - wildfires in Australia and North America, pandemic, US Police brutality leading to BLM protests, organizations challenged to address social and political issues that weren't, perhaps, a priority at that time or that were found, overnight, on everyone's agenda. The tendency of companies to address difficult issues in social media isn't new, but in the light of the latest major events, it has become a priority for many companies to come up with social measures and start conversations in social media regarding the most salient societal issues. This kind of engagement won't go unnoticed: according to the Deloitte survey on Millennials and Gen Zs¹, 60% of respondents expressed their intention to buy more products and services from large companies that cared for their staff and had a positive impact on society during the pandemic.

Ever since the COVID-19¹⁹ outbreak, global businesses have been faced with huge challenges, the pandemic disrupted operations and profoundly impacted supply chains, sales, incomes and staff on an unprecedented scale².



Nevertheless, many companies managed to cope with these circumstances by putting people ahead of profit, by creating and

strengthening partnerships, redesigning products and supporting communities. These companies are purpose-driven and focus on social matters. The future is theirs, even more so as 72% of the respondents in a Sprout Social survey³ said they expected brands to have a positive contribution to society.

What defines a purpose-driven campaign?

The Deloitte Report - 2021 Global Marketing Trends identifies **purpose** as an important pillar in digital marketing and talks about organizations which know WHY they exist and WHOM they serve, whether clients or workforce, regardless of what they sell. When a company puts the „why“ to the core of their business, the purpose can be amplified and expanded both inside and outside of the organization. The reason why brands exist is solving a problem or meeting a societal need, and this purpose is assimilated to the vision, mission, story, visual identity of the brand, to decision making and many others⁴. Purpose, however, is not something one can feign in social media and simple statements are not enough. Pressured by the pandemic, many brands joined the various conversations in social media but, given the lack of an alignment between brand identity and engagement towards clients, employees, suppliers or communities, their communication was perceived as phony and was sanctioned.

Many companies have prospered over time without a clear purpose, however, just as Richard Branson was saying, the brands to prosper in the

following years are the brands with a purpose going beyond profit. Strength of Purpose, a global survey based on answers from ⁸⁰⁰⁰ consumers from 8 distinct markets⁵, shows that for 94% of the consumers it is important that organizations they interact with have a strong purpose, and 83% declared that organizations should have profit only if they also have a positive impact. Two major tendencies result:

- The world is going towards social enterprise: their mission combines profit with impact on society. This direction is given both by CEOs who think that is the measure of a company's success, and by Millennials and Gen-Zs who, as mentioned, will support companies which share their values and will distance themselves from those which don't share those values.
- People turn to businesses for solutions: according to Edelman Trust Barometer questioning 34,000 people from 28 countries, people see businesses as the most competent group to solve global problems, even more so than NGOs or governments⁶.

Chief Executives - agents of change in social media

Nowadays, chief executives are seen as agents of change and consumers expect them to take initiative. The purpose and the mission of a company must spread up-to-bottom. 81% of the respondents in the Strength of Purpose survey⁷ think that the CEO, founder or owners of a



company are responsible for generating purpose. More than three quarters (77%) of consumers believe the leader of a company should incorporate the purpose and the mission of the brand in their personal life. Consumers expect these leaders to really believe and live these values.

It has become a must in social media for CEOs to interact with consumers on social and political topics⁸. Even though there are diverging views

regarding the alignment of opinions between companies and CEOs, what's certain is that the latter are expected to share their personal experiences and beliefs on social and political matters. An example of action in this sense is of Expensify CEO, David Barrett, who emailed the ¹⁰ million clients of the company urging them to vote for Joe Biden in order to protect democracy⁹. That was a controversial move which charted the position of the company within the extremely polarized American society and, even though the message came from the highest level, it reflected the consent of two thirds of employees. Moreover, Barrett didn't burden the social media teams with this move, he encouraged people to write to him directly on Twitter. This is a clear example of *walking the talk* and owning the position of agent of change, even if this might not please everyone.



Communication strategies of socially impactful brands

People expect brands to have strong voices on social and political topics and generate change using their power and financial resources. In 2021, brands need to develop or rethink social media strategies and connect them with business operations and strategies of the brand, matching them with the company's mission and purpose.

How to execute strategies in social media?

1. Align with all parts involved regarding strategy

Consumers expect responses from brands, but not on every topic. Before taking a social stance, consult with all stakeholders to identify the real, authentic purpose. Brands with strong motivation joining the relevant conversations and engaging in actions that amplify their messages will have a real impact.

2. Use social listening

Only by going through this process can one have a deep perspective on the needs and expectations consumers have from your brand and from your industry at large. Social listening helps in identifying opportunities and having a conversation with your consumers.

3. Set a workflow for crises communication on social media

Communities consist of individuals with very diverse beliefs. A certain stance one takes can be popular with some of them and cause violent reactions with some others. The point is to be prepared to react to any feedback from consumers. To this end, a workflow must be set up between relevant teams/departments (social media, marketing, legal) and everyone must have access to procedures and documents they can consult in real time.

4. Develop a set of C-level instructions

People often equate the opinion of a company with its leaders and, more than that, they expect them to provide reactions on social media. In order to respond quickly and confidently in various situations, it might be a good idea for leaders to adopt a social media conduct and learn how to connect at a human level with their audience.

5. Encourage employees to become company and brand ambassadors

Consumers want to know the human face of brands and that is not limited to top leaders. As long as opinions align, help employees to become brand ambassadors who support and amplify its mission on social media. This way, messages get more exposure and are more credible.

These strategies help all stakeholders to strengthen brands that navigate confidently in a world in a continuous change and to have a positive impact on their way. The future in social

media belongs to those who listen to their communities and advocate for the causes they care the most.

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when and how to join social media conversations - social listening for dummies

Context

2020 is the year that cannot be referred otherwise than the “pandemic year”. All plans that were outlined before the end of February, beginning of March, were cancelled one by one and replaced by a rollercoaster of emotions. Uncertainty and fear dominated the first months of the pandemic and found people locked inside, far from their loved ones and, of course, behind screens captured by the same messages about uncertainty, care, distance, closeness despite separation and fighting together against the novel coronavirus. Sounds familiar? The Every Covid-19 Commercial is Exactly the Same¹ clip probably reached the feeds of some of us as it shows a perfect summary of ads during lockdown. Eventually, local brands started communicating almost in the same way.

Brands found themselves threatened overnight by the new health situation which started shutting down many businesses given the imposed restrictions. The need to put forwards a message that shows (some critics would say *mimic*) compassion and to maintain the brands alive in the mind of the consumers was urgent and it sometimes disseminated cliches that were



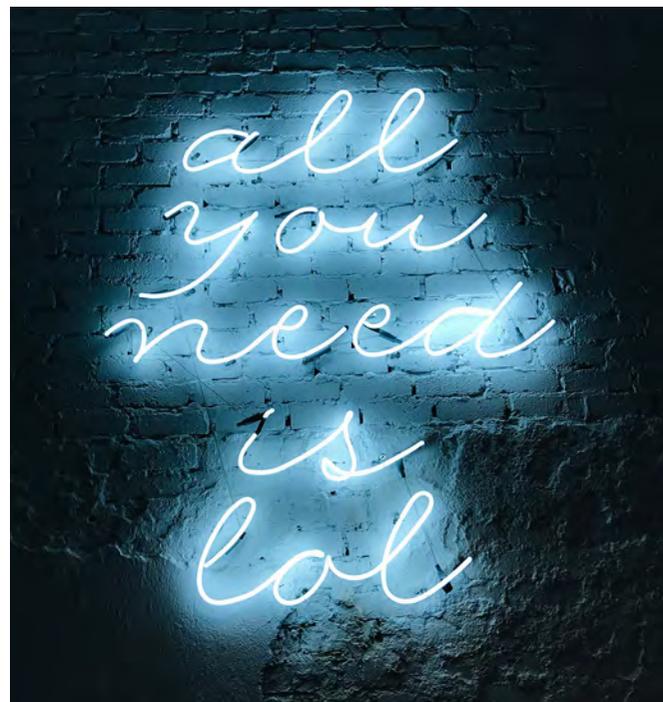
more tedious than all fear-mongering news and conspiracy theories emerging from the dark web. In extremis there were brands who chose, however, to stop their marketing actions for 2020, but continued to listen and interact with their communities. At the same time, in the middle of the pandemic, certain brands ignored the voices of their consumers and chose to communicate in a way that was disconnected from reality. Such examples found their rightful place on *#crazycreatives* or *o parte din reclame*. There's no point in going deeper on this matter, it's not the time, nor the place, but we all know what this is all about.

So what is it to be done to avoid this paradigm and be different, in 2021, from all other brands that share with you this playground called social media? The solution is to learn when to take a sit, listen or interfere. If you cannot manage to do that, consumers will slam the door in your face.

What do consumers actually want

Absorbed by the race for consumers' attention, many brands forget they were not the first here and, immersed in their own egos, they've ceased to meet the needs of their communities and have a conversation with them. According to the "Hootsuite Social Trends 2021" report, 68% of subjects don't believe that brands or companies share interesting content, and 32% of Gen Z, Millennials, Gen X or Boomers use social media to find entertaining content². Are people just avid consumers of fun on social media or do they have deeper needs that brands need to start addressing? 64% of consumers want brands to create a bond with them, while 49% expect brands to unite people under the same common goal³.

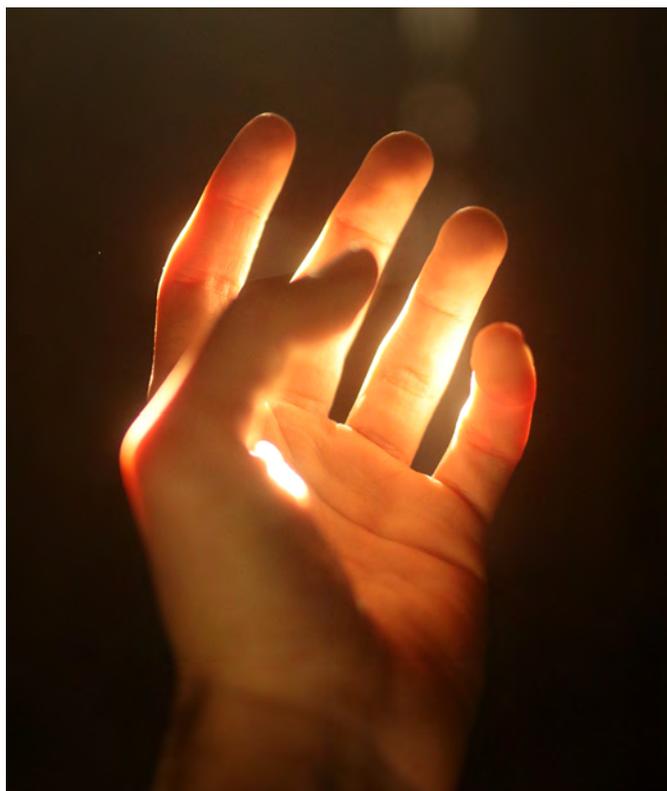
In a strongly polarized society, consumers want brands to create bridge with those who don't share their values, contrary to those livid comments that would be an indication of the fact that people are not willing to learn more about those with different points of view. The care of brands for this need of people to belong to a community contributes to the reinforcement of the relationship with consumers and creates loyalty. 64% of consumers say their loyalty for a



brand increases when they feel a connection.

44% of consumers say they feel a stronger connection to brands that facilitate, host or are part of the conversation. The «Sprout Social» study shows that, even though consumers want information on products and services, they actually want to know more about what makes that brand unique. Furthermore, they're interested in knowing social initiatives (46%) and who are the employees behind the brands (39%). Of course, we came across this social media communication pillar before, the *human approach*, but it shouldn't remain a desideratum, it should materialize in true strategic actions..

It seems we're at a turning point when brands need to go through a brutally sincere assessment and become truly relevant for their communities: "In 2021, the smartest brands will understand where they fit into customers' lives on social media. And they'll find creative ways of fitting into the conversation instead of trying to



lead it, creating content that breaks the wall of indifference"⁴. The key to hours of brainstorming for generating content ideas seems to be in the hands of the consumers and it bears the name of *social listening*.

What we talk about when we talk about social listening

Social listening means tracking and analyzing conversations and tendencies both within the universe of the brand, as well as in the brand's industry⁵. Insights help brands develop relevant content strategies for their community, outline future campaigns and consolidate strategic partnerships with influencers and not only.

The process involves two steps:

1. Tracking and scanning social media channels: mentions of the brand, competitors, products and key words for business, communities, ratings and reviews as well as user-generated content;
2. Analysis of obtained insights and actions based on conclusions. It may well be simple things - responding to or repaying a customer - but also complex actions that can even extend to a brand repositioning.

It's important to differentiate between the two steps since *social listening* does not only mean monitoring, but when monitoring ends, action starts, therefore the social insights picked up by listening begin to take shape. The process must have both steps completed, one cannot act without scanning those key areas, just as it's not enough to monitor how your brand or your competitors are spoken of without acting based on discovered insights.

Why we need social listening

In the beginning of the article, I outlined the current backdrop (in case there's anyone still wondering what's going on exactly) and the brand consumers' expectations, shaped both by general uncertainty generated by the political environment, as well as by current health context. Consumers show us that today they



want courageous brands that take a stand in social and political matters and do it honestly. It is the brands' responsibility to decide strategically when to involve relevant audiences in matters that they care for or in which they invest resources. Social listening is essential to identify the needs and expectations that consumers have in relation to your brand and, generally, to your industry.

Social listening facilitates:

- **Interaction with consumers**

Whether it's about a positive feedback or a customer service request, people will most frequently turn to social media, and that gives you the possibility to interact with your audience and address right away their requests. Brands such as Nike have set up dedicated accounts to offer customer assistance (@teamnike pe Twitter).

- **Crisis management**

Certainly, we all want to see in our monitoring reports a 100% positive sentiment, but reality proves us the opposite most of the times. If the negative feeling shows a concerning increase, social listening is crucial in preventing the ball to roll faster. Examine the cause behind these figures and take measures quickly. You might have said something wrong at some point or you're facing a quality problem. Don't wait until you're buried in negative reviews.

· **Track competition**

It is beneficial to know what people say about you, but it's just as important to monitor what consumers say about your competitors, as well. That gives you insights on your positioning on the market relating to them and to what they are doing in real time. Maybe they launch a new product or feature, they might have a new marketing campaign or, in turn, they might be facing an online crisis. Social listening reveals such information that help you respond in an appropriate manner.

· **Finding pain points**

This is closely connected to the first two points above. Monitoring conversations provides new perspectives also on what is not working for consumers. Feedback in social media is valuable and sometimes more efficient than focus groups. After drawing the line, you can quickly adjust and even go back to where it began.

· **Identifying influencers and brand ambassadors**

Monitoring conversations in the entire brands universe contributes to identifying the most relevant and powerful online voices influencing the choices of hundreds of thousands and even millions of consumers. Moreover, you can identify those *friends of brand*, your fans who act as brand ambassadors. You can thus establish genuine credible partnerships.

The steps you need to follow

Even if it seems overwhelming going on the social listening path and you think you'll get lost in so much data, this path has been walked by other pioneers who developed various instruments to help you in the process.

Therefore:

1. Set up your goals

Why is social listening important for your brand? Are you interested in better understanding your consumers? Do you want to examine the competition? Do you want to identify the industry tendencies that may help in outlining the next marketing campaign?

2. Pick a tool

Do a thorough research and determine which would be the best tool to meet your needs. You can choose locally developed solutions or go to internationally used platforms.

3. Choose data sources

As tempting as it might be to want to extract data from all possible sources, however for starters you only need to filter information, otherwise the process will really become overwhelming. Choose platforms where your consumers are most active.

4. Establish key words and topics of interest

It is important to build from the start the search list that needs to include: brand name, products name (including spelling mistakes), competitors' names and products, names of key people from the company, name of campaigns or related key words, your hashtags, of your competitors and of your industry.

5. Set real time alerts and notifications

This helps you quickly identify conversations taking place and decide if and how to join them. In fact, this is the most difficult part, deciding on how to act once you have an overview on these discussions.

6. Answer to customers' requests

Given that 70% of people are expected to send companies more customer service messages in the future⁶, an answer is also to be expected. Also, don't let positive experiences go unnoticed. Thank every time you get the chance to do it.

7. Take measures

To complete the social listening process, you need to act upon your newfound perspectives deriving from monitoring. Take a step back and see if those individual comments are part of a wider story. The new campaign is a little unclear for your audience, the product you expected to be a hit is not really to the customers' taste or an older controversial statement is visible again

through new conversations. If the situation demands it, completely change the communication strategy and be responsive to your consumers' needs.

Instead of conclusion

2021 is a year of high expectation for everyone, as if it had the answer to all our issues. However, it's healthy to take a look at our own brands and reinforce those vulnerable areas in communication that last year revealed. Social media does not forgive and forget. Maybe it's time for brands to genuinely regain their place in the conversation. Let's be genuine!

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- 2) <https://www.globalwebindex.com/reports/social>
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