

09/12/2021

Coexistent Perspectives Essay

Given the diversification of communication platforms and the exponential growth of emerging technologies, consider and analyse how the relationship between brands and their audiences has changed as a result of the contemporary zeitgeist, and explore the significant culture and theoretical perspectives that have driven the shift

Social media apps have become a significant part of daily life in modern society. What started life as a simple way to “keep in touch and maintain relationships” (Scheinbaum, 2018, p.172) within our geographical areas, has become much more than anyone could have envisaged. Estimates state that 72% of adults in the US alone use Facebook daily (Pew Research, 2021), making the platform’s users a considerable database of easily accessible customers for brands of all sizes. This has led to a significant change in the way brands advertise and additionally changed how consumers interact with those brands. “The commercialization of the online social network platforms [has] turned what was a [by-product] of connectedness—user data, reactions, and connections—into a valuable data mining resource” (Bóveda-Lambie and Lambeth, 2018, p.172). In *Fascinate*, Sally Hogshead outlined that modern “communication faces three enemies: distraction, competition, and commoditization” (Hogshead, 2016, p.35). According to a study conducted by Microsoft, “the attention span of a goldfish (nine seconds)” now “exceeds that of a human” (Auletta, 2018, p.152), meaning advertisers only ever receive around 8 seconds of a consumer’s attention as they scroll through their social newsfeeds. Additionally, given the excessive choice available online and new-found “control” (Auletta, 2018, p.27) granted to consumers through subscription television services and ad-blocking technology, brands have needed to adapt their sales messages to reach above the “noise of the competition” (Kaputa, 2012, p193). Now they must create adverts that potential customers will actively *want* (and *choose*) to engage with. Thus, advertisers developed the “customer-centric” approach (Morgan, 2021) in response to this contemporary zeitgeist.

Customer-centricity is the “marketing philosophy that puts your customers and prospects at the heart of everything you do” (Bluestone, 2020) and therefore asks marketers to consider customer needs when designing advertisements. An example of this can be seen in the Mercedes-Benz “Just Like You” campaign designed by Antoni Berlin to promote the new Mercedes A-Class car. The series of adverts

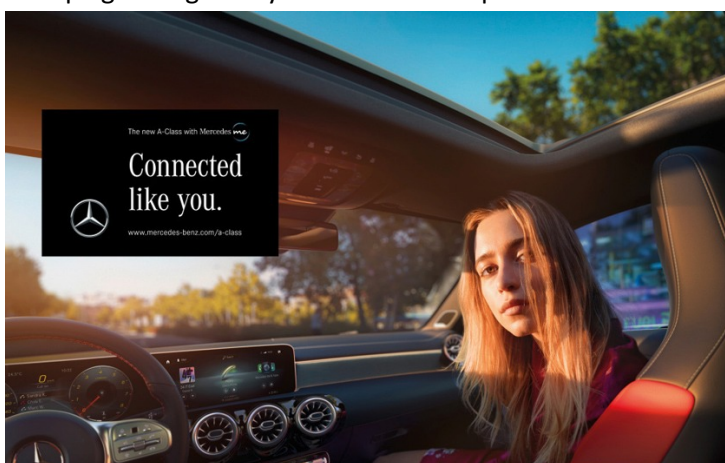


Figure 1: Mercedes-Benz "Just like you" Campaign Advert

focused “on what makes the new car unique, mentioning its ability to reach people who are living in the digital era and to understand their preferences, their needs and characteristics” (Arica, 2021). In 2018, Mercedes-Benz made the shift to “embracing the benefits of digital technologies to make [them] more customer-centric”, which was at that time a “radical departure from

traditional automotive communication agendas” (Sijanta, 2020). This change can be seen in *Figure 1*, where the focus is not on the product or the branding and instead emphasises the young, attractive passenger looking back at the driver. The slogan “Connected like you” references both the voice activated digital dashboard of the car and the assumed connection to the person in the passenger seat. However, the use of first-person perspective is problematic in this instance, and potentially removes the targeted consumer from its message, as it relies on the absent customer relating to or sharing a connection with this young woman. Thus, whilst customer-centricity may be seemingly focused on making brands more human-needs based in their strategies, the introduction of humanised marketing has led to the incidental dehumanisation of those experiencing it. This essay will examine the concept of customer-centricity further, analysing its problematic focus on data, algorithms and statistics. It will aim to prove that a transition away from these methods is essential for brands to avoid detaching themselves further from current and potential consumers in the future.

The unpredictability of emotional and psychological impact in humanised branding

Brand humanisation inadvertently leads to the dehumanisation of the customer, as it becomes too wholly reliant on the guaranteed emotional and psychological impact of their messaging. As Bill Bernbach said: “The business of trying to measure everything in precise terms is one of the problems with advertising today. This leads to a worship of research. We’re all concerned about the facts we get and not about how provocative we can make those facts to the consumer” (Auletta, 2018, p.152). This sentiment is particularly salient in light of modern digital communications and data collection. Just as they have always done, advertisers study trends and emotions to develop humanised branding. For instance, companies have recently begun to align themselves with ethical ideologies in response to increasing awareness and public conversations around many of the



Figure 2: Colgate #EveryDropCounts 2016 Ad Campaign

current social injustices. One example can be seen in the Colgate #EveryDropCounts video campaign (*Figure 2*) that encouraged viewers to turn off their taps while they brush their teeth. The brand aligned its products with global concerns of water usage and sustainability, thus establishing itself as a company with positive values and awareness of its impact to encourage change. This is a clever use of “social marketing” (Kotler and Zaltman, 1996, p.1) as the cause relates directly to the product; however, this approach has not always been as effectively implemented. Famously referred to as “the worst ad of all time” (Nicholson,

2020), the Pepsi “Live Bolder” campaign (*Figure 3*) proved that research and data does not always produce successful results for advertisers. The video featured celebrity socialite Kendall Jenner leaving a photoshoot to join a passing peace protest. The ad ends with Jenner handing a can of Pepsi “to a police officer, who



Figure 3: Pepsi Live Bolder Advert 2017

drinks [it] as the crowd cheers” (Handley, 2017). Despite claiming they were trying to show their “authenticity”, Pepsi pulled the ad in less than 24 hours following social media criticism (Nicholson, 2020) that it trivialised the problem of police brutality against black Americans and did nothing to address or support the issue. Notably Bernice King, Martin Luther King, Jr.’s daughter sarcastically tweeted: “If only

Daddy would have known about the power of #Pepsi” (Auletta, 2018, p.162). The advert demonstrates how research does not always produce desirable advertising. Despite containing many characteristics that analysis dictated were relevant and important to millennials at that time, it was inappropriate and fundamentally “unrelated to the product or idea it is meant to promote” (Berger, 2013, p.209). Just as the Evian Roller Babies viral video (*Figure 4*) proved in 2009, relevance is very important when you are creating an advert. Although it was seen as a popular ad that obtained “more than 50 million views... That same year Evian lost market share and sales dropped almost 25 percent” because the advert had nothing to do with the brand (Berger, 2013, p.209). Therefore, advertisers should be aware that substantial research and significant understanding of psychological triggers, such as humour or sympathy, will not always produce the desired results for the brand.



Figure 4: Evian Roller Babies Advert 2009

In addition to research not always being effective, the “data revolution has made consumers more [sceptical] of advertising” (Auletta, 2018, p.100). As a result, consumers are not always as predictable as marketers might assume. Danny Bluestone argues that publishing generic content “to one large target audience... might not be the best use of your time or budget. It may also do more harm than good as

sending an irrelevant message may put people off your product or damage your brand” (Bluestone, 2020). He believes that customer segmentation will “allow you to create relevant and personalised content” and suggests utilising Facebook’s advertising tools for personalised audience creation based on customer profiling. More recently, this form of personalisation has been reduced even further to the “segment of one” theory where brands are encouraged to “treat each one of those within [a targeted] segment as an individual” (Experian, 2021). However, we must continue to be wary that these theories and algorithms are “avoiding human subjectivity” (Smith, 2019, p.8). Segmenting and labelling groups of society is not a fool-proof formula, as it both assumes that all humans are actively using social media and are always being truthful in what they share to their social profiles. Consumers are more aware than ever that:

“... the online and offline world are far from being separate and without consequences... As the online world continues to be more permeable and the offline and online converge, there is the potential for more undesirable outcomes as results of juggling faceted identities... Many individuals have their “friends” from multiple contexts in Facebook, creating the possibility of awkward situations.” (Scheinbaum, 2018, p.177).

In a study conducted by Adriana M. Bóveda-Lambie and Kaci G. Lambeth published in *Why Facebook Users Display Their Desired Self*, a sample of thirty female and ten male Facebook users all disclosed that the self they showed on Facebook was not an “accurate representation of themselves nor did they believe they were accurate representations of others” (Bóveda-Lambie and Lambeth, 2018, pp.178-81). If Facebook’s users are “actively filtering out significant parts of their actual selves that are not considered “positive” for online viewing” (Bóveda-Lambie and Lambeth, 2018, p.181), marketers should be wary of relying on the data gathered from these curated profiles to target their messaging. This information is not guaranteed and makes humans less predictable than Facebook audience building tools might suggest.

Customer-centric marketing cannot be wholly reliant on technology or those that design it

In addition to concerns around the reliability of humans to be predictable and honest, brands have become too reliant on problematic technology to produce truly humanised marketing. Campaign assurance on large data sets can inadvertently lead to separating companies further from their customers. “Advertisers assert that targeted ads serve consumers information they desire, and this would be impossible without personalized data” (Auletta, 2018, p.90); but what if that data is incorrect? As mentioned, people will adapt their public views to best suit their social groups. Therefore, data on social profiles can be assumed untrustworthy and, if ad targeting algorithms are dependent on this data, then it is fair to conclude that brand messages are not necessarily reaching the correct audience for desired results. Notably, Elaine Moore remarks that “According to Facebook, my advertiser-friendly interests include rugby union, family, greetings cards and Gothic fashion. Beyond family — and who isn’t interested in their family? — these are all wide of the mark” (Moore, 2021). Therefore, if we can prove that the information being stored about us online is incorrect, then this data is not a true reflection of human behaviour and potentially brands are wasting large amounts of their advertising budgets on these ineffective models.

Moreover to the problem of reliance on honesty amongst users, the technology that allows marketers to target their brand messaging is based on artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning algorithms. AI has many applications in customer-centric marketing, including chatbots and applications

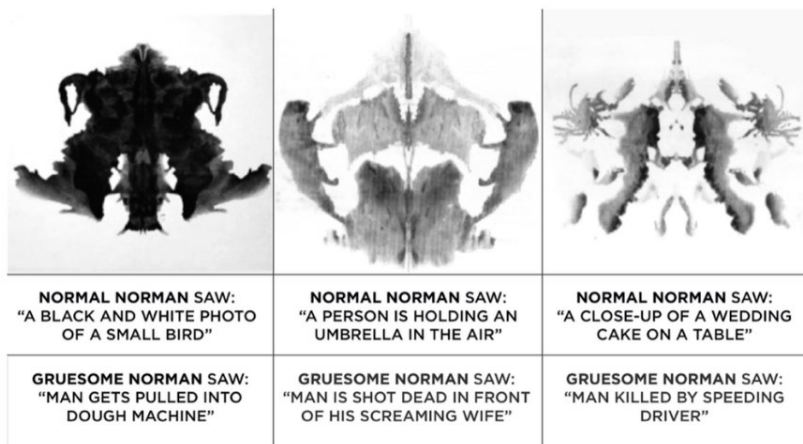


Figure 5: Norman AI Experiments

that could scan for emotional triggers in advertisements. Whilst the development of AI has played a huge factor in our further learning and understanding of human behaviour, reliance on this technology is potentially hazardous. For example, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) conducted an experiment using its computer system, Norman, named after Hitchcock's famous psychopath Norman Bates (Wakefield, 2018). Researchers fed it an algorithm of either negative or "normal" images, then showed it a series of Rorschach inkblots and asked it to determine what it could interpret from them. The study yielded two very different results, as illustrated in *Figure 5*, where "Gruesome Norman's" outputs were overtly gory (Aral, 2020, p.132). This highlights that, whilst technology has the ability to process and adapt to produce messaging based on human behaviour, the end results are not always desirable. Professor Iyad Rahwan, who helped develop the Norman technology said: "The fact that Norman's responses were so much darker illustrates a harsh reality in the new world of machine learning... Data matters more than the algorithm" (Wakefield, 2018). Therefore, this study outlines the fundamental flaw in relying on these types of systems, as machine learning will adapt to negative messages just as easily as positive. In *The Hype Machine*, Sinan Aral reminds us of the story of "Tay, the AI-powered chatbot Microsoft launched on Twitter in 2016" which was programmed to "learn" from her interactions.

Eventually, she had to be removed from the site as "she started spewing a steady stream of racist, sexist, violent and derogatory tweets" (Aral, 2020, p.131), including a post about smoking marijuana in front of the police (*Figure 6*). These two experiments clearly prove that whilst we may strive to develop technology that will make our marketing more appealing and relatable to our customers, we must always remember that this technology is only as reliable as the information that is fed into it and it does not have the capability to



Figure 6: Tay Twitter Bot post share in The Guardian

make decisions based on judgement. Plus, as shown, this technology has the ability to become very flawed and potentially damaging to a brand's persona.

In addition to the issues of untrustworthy data and unreliable technology, brands and marketers are also putting their faith in to the hands of companies like Facebook and other algorithm-reliant social media platforms to be transparent with their data and privacy practices. The common belief is that brands can no longer be dishonest, as "from tax to diversity [and] equality, from privacy to working conditions, we



Figure 7: KFC apology advert 2018

regularly see businesses having to manage their reputation amid intense scrutiny" (Cox, 2018). This phenomenon of openness has arguably contributed to brands introducing humanisation strategies in their marketing as an attempt to appear more honest to the consumer. An example of this new form of honesty marketing can be seen in the tongue-in-cheek KFC "we're sorry" advert in 2018 (Figure 7), which used humour to apologise for the closure of 900 stores across the UK when they ran out of chicken (Topping, 2018). This ad embraced human integrity, making the brand more accessible and, in turn, the error was quickly forgiven and forgotten. However, this form of marketing leads many to believe that platforms like Facebook also hold themselves to this level of honesty. Whilst customer data might seem open, free and accessible using back-end advertising tools on social media websites, it is still gated

and controlled by the platforms themselves. We are only shown what Facebook wants us to see and there are many reported incidents and accusations of Facebook not being truthful about their data and privacy practices. A major example was "the Cambridge Analytica controversy, in which a political consultancy used stolen Facebook data on 87 million Americans to target political ads", which resulted in the European debate about Facebook's "power of mass persuasion, use of personal data, and lack of control over misinformation" (Aral, 2020, pp.50-51). This event opened up discussions amongst many Facebook users about privacy and the misuse of information. Additionally, in October 2021, Frances Haugen, "a former Facebook employee... accused the company of putting profit over the public good, after coming forward as the [whistle-blower] who leaked a cache of internal documents... [and] showed the company was lying to the public that it was making significant progress against hate, violence and misinformation" (Paul and Milmo, 2021). As more news about Facebook's inappropriate practices come to light, it is inevitable that it will continue to influence public opinion, and may even impact their decisions to use the products and brands associated with Facebook in the future. If Facebook is struggling to control "safety and

misinformation” (Milmo, 2021), then it could certainly be argued that a brand that openly aligns itself with the platform by choosing to advertise with them is also not concerned about being truly *customer centric*.

Ever-changing technologies and cultural shifts could have severe implications on humanised branding

Adding to the aforementioned concerns around the reliability of technology and data when using a humanised approach to marketing, advertisers should also be wary and prepared for potential market, technological or regulatory changes that might impact them. “Customer experience is continually evolving as technology and customer demands change. Just because a company was once customer-centric doesn’t mean it still is in 2021” (Morgan, 2021). A notable example of changing technology and customer demands is evident in the emergence of “influencer marketing”. This is considered an “effective marketing [ploy] to reach younger consumers” (Auletta, 2018, p.47) on platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, YouTube and, more recently, Tik Tok. This type of advert is “natively woven into the platforms, and we’ll consume them without even knowing it” (Auletta, 2018, p.162).

Theoretically, social influencers had everything necessary to be the next big marketing tool for reaching customers in a way that made brands seem more human. Influencers rely on the phenomenon called *social proof*, where it has been repeatedly observed that when “we don’t know



Figure 8: Shay Mitchell Influencer Advert

the right answer... we often look to what other people are doing and follow that” (Berger, 2013, pp.139-140). Products and brand messaging tested this theory by utilising paid partnerships with social media accounts that boasted large and engaged audiences as a means to drive sales amongst their followers. Brand products became naturally integrated into social feeds and this form of advertising was praised for being cost-effective, clearly human-centred and easily measurable. Thus, the “market value [of influencer marketing] has more than doubled since 2019, standing at around 13.8 billion U.S. dollars as of 2021” (Statista, 2021).

However, whilst influencers like Shay Mitchell were being paid to post adverts like the one seen in Figure 8, you will observe that nothing within the post makes that known to the consumer. As a result, regulatory systems were forced to react given public concerns about the deception inherent in this form of advertisement. In the UK, this resulted in the adaptation of the 2008 Unfair Trading Regulations Act and the

government emphasised: “Amongst other requirements, it is a banned practice falsely to claim or create the impression that a trader is not acting for purposes relating to his trade, business, craft or profession, or falsely representing oneself as a consumer” (Competition and Markets Authority, 2020). Following the changes, influencers must now clearly indicate contracted brand affiliations by adding the “AD” hashtag to their posts (Tait, 2020). This highlights a tradition of regulatory awareness to adapt to brand manipulation



Figure 9: John Lewis “Let Life Happen” Advert

or dishonesty. More recently, in October 2021, the FCA banned the “*Let Life Happen*” John Lewis advert (Figure 9) as they believed it was misleading. The advert showed the “joyful depiction of a young actor getting carried away with his performance, oblivious of the unintentional consequences of his actions” (Rawlinson, 2021). However, these “actions” were not covered by the home insurance the advert was trying to

sell, and as such the FCA responded by imposing the ban. Brands should learn from these examples when designing human-centred marketing campaigns and avoid deception at all costs, as failing to do so will lead to consequences from banning to fines.

Of course, whilst there are many examples of humanised branding failing, there are some companies that have created excellent campaigns that embrace new technology and human behaviour effectively. For instance, the Hendrick’s Ministry of Marginally Superior Transport campaign (Figure 10) is a perfect example of modern humanised digital marketing done correctly. Hendrick’s Gin created a two-week promotional campaign that was entirely consumer-focused, whilst also clearly establishing themselves as a distinguishable brand. The unique and entertaining online campaign was inspired by research that discovered a trend of commuters to post daily complaints about their journeys to Twitter. Described as a reactionary campaign, they endeavoured to “bring moments of peculiar delight to their everyday journeys” by posting “over 120 films, tweets



Figure 10: Hendricks Ministry of Marginally Superior Transport Campaign

and inventions to better their journeys” (Gravity Thinking, 2018). As a result of the campaign, “Hendrick’s Twitter account grew more in one day than in the whole of the previous year and, during the campaign, the brand channel had over 5.5m views” (Gravity Thinking, 2018). This advertising humanised the brand as it made it more relatable by acknowledging genuine and often familiar human issues in a humorous way. Additionally, due to its early 1900s historic, vintage style of branding, costumes, sound and props, consumers were able to clearly differentiate it as an advertisement. As a result, viewers felt as though they were part of the joke and showed their appreciation by sharing and interacting with the brand. This illustrates that consumers and regulators are becoming more aware of customer-centricity marketing, meaning brands should be more mindful in their humanised campaign developments.

Fundamentally, brands must remember that the human is the human and the brand is the brand. They are not one and the same, but a clear dichotomy. Whilst some brands attempt to capitalise on this dichotomy, others are doing everything possible to blur the boundaries further. In October 2021, seemingly in response to the previously mentioned whistle-blower scandal, Facebook announced that it was rebranding its overarching parent company to: “Meta” (Milmo, 2021). This technological change could greatly disrupt the future of humanised advertising, blurring the boundaries between human and brand even further. We have “barely glimpsed the impact of virtual reality on the world of marketing” (Auletta, 2018, p.100), but Meta is looking to change that by developing technology that humans can apparently interact within as if it were a real place they can physically visit (Paul, 2021). It is not clear what this virtual reality (VR) future of the internet will look like (Wakefield, 2021), but advertisers will need to think carefully about how they will adapt to this new form of socialisation. Additionally, they should begin to question how Facebook will integrate brands within this new proposed virtual model. Potentially, brands will no longer be able to place themselves within newsfeeds in a similar shape and form to traditional posts if this feed is going to be a digital visual unlike anything before it. Perhaps Meta might be looking to create virtual shops with digitised shopkeepers, returning to a more traditional form of shopping in a virtual landscape. The possibilities are endless and it has been argued that this next phase is entirely unpredictable. In 2020, driven by the pandemic, social media platforms unexpectedly became:

...indispensable sources of human connection, timely medical information, social support, outreach, pandemic fundraising, free impromptu concerts, collaborative art projects, and real-time updates about the spread of the virus... Social technologies connected humanity when the planet was



Figure 11: Meta's vision for virtual reality

forced to disconnect (Aral, 2020, p.15).

It seems that companies are looking to develop technology to respond to this new digital need and demand for social platforms as replacement for safe socialising and post-pandemic work environments (*Figure 12*).

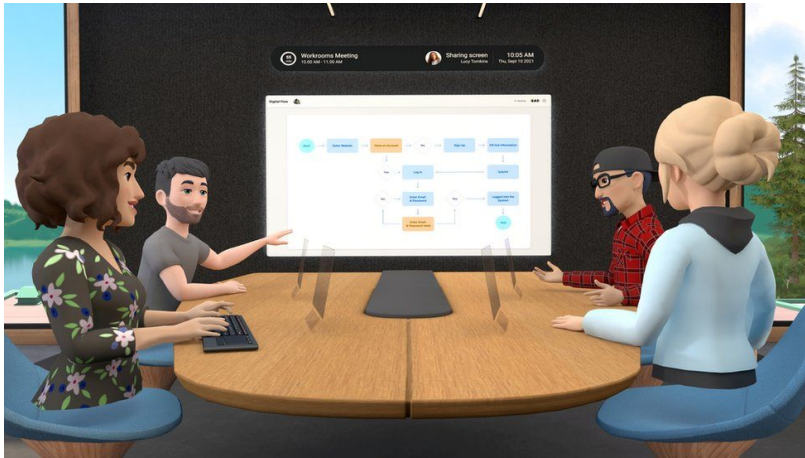


Figure 12: Meta's vision for virtual reality corporate meetings

Therefore, it is inevitable that advertisers will soon need to adapt once again to new cultural norms and create new forms of “cyberbranding” (Kaputa, 2012, p.193). Whatever those might be, it is clear that brands and market disrupters like Meta will need to remember the consumer in their creation. Humans are more than data and algorithms as we have

previously shown. Furthermore, public awareness to technological changes could impact human-centric marketing practices. As Facebook whistle-blower, Frances Haugen highlighted:

I think there is a meta problem at Facebook which is that over and over again Facebook chooses expansion in new areas over sticking the landing on what they have already done and I find it unconscionable that, as you read through the documents, it states very clearly there needs to be more resources on very basic safety systems (Milmo, 2021).

Therefore, it is very important that brands analyse and monitor government and social sentiment towards previous and future Facebook controversy and carefully consider their usage of social media to reach consumers. If they do not challenge their own behaviour and practices when writing, developing and sharing their advertising campaigns, it could have large implications on their brand perception in the future. This lesson has been clearly learnt from Facebook’s own problematic brand journey.

It is clear that public opinion, safety and humanity should be at the heart of all conversations around brand and technology in digital areas moving forward. As Bill Bernbach, famously said:

However much we would like advertising to be a science, because life would be simpler that way, the fact is that it is not. It is a subtle, ever-changing art, defying formularization... what was effective one day, for that very reason, will not be effective the next, because it has lost the maximum impact of originality. (Kaputo, 2012, p.67).

We have clearly seen that brand humanisation had led to instances of the customer becoming dehumanised. This form of marketing is too reliant on segmentation and emotional psychology being guaranteed when it is proven that social media data is not always an accurate depiction of the user’s true self. Instead, social representations are designed in the image of what users find most appropriate to share among their social groups and, as such, is unreliable from a marketing perspective. Additionally, brands are too reliant on problematic technology that could inadvertently lead to them being further separating from

the customer. Humans are not data, and platforms such as Facebook, as it has been suggested, cannot be entirely trusted. Lastly, technology and regulations surrounding advertising are continually changing and not in a way that a humanised approach will necessarily adapt to. Advertisers can only begin to assume how brands will fit in to the future world of a virtual social reality. However, it is certain that those that master the art form of appropriate human marketing techniques while not reducing their customers to research and data will undoubtedly thrive in any future version of digital reality.

Word Count: 4246

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Essays:

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