

No Logo at 20: have we lost the battle against the total branding of our lives?

Dan Hancox, Wed 1 Jul 2020 17.24 BST

In 1999, Naomi Klein wrote a book to forwarn people about brands and advertising and their crawling way into people's life. 20 years later, Dan Hancox reacts to it.

What strikes me, rereading the book now, is not that Klein was wrong in her diagnosis, but that the changes she was documenting are so much worse than we could have ever predicted – what with PepsiCo exploring the idea of broadcasting its logos into space. We have reached an audio-visual climax of total brand dominance, as if Piccadilly Circus or Times Square were simply laboratories for how our world would look in the 21st century. (...)

The critical moment for the global justice movement, when it was perhaps still to reach its full potential, arrived with the 9/11 attacks in the US and the wholesale change in the political conversation that quickly ensued. While our minds were elsewhere, the superbrands ramped up their cannibalisation of every aspect of our cultural lives. Logos hover everywhere we look, like spots in our peripheral vision. Where once we might have seen Jerry Seinfeld ostentatiously drinking Pepsi and wearing Nike trainers in an episode of his sitcom, we now have Pepsi Max TV and Nike TV channels on YouTube, producing their own content: not just adverts, but short documentaries, featurettes, competitions and interviews, with viewcounts often in the millions. (...)

“The biggest change since *No Logo* came out is that social media has given us the tools to market ourselves non-stop.” It is functionally harder to live life away from 2019's insatiable tech super-corporations, and some of the superbrands Klein covered in 1999 seem almost quaint in their aspirations to be part of our lives. It is certainly much easier not to buy a fizzy drink or eat at McDonald's than it is to function day to day without helping generate profits for one or all of Google, [Facebook](#), Amazon, Apple or Microsoft. Proud of yourself for not buying books or gifts from Amazon? Fair enough, but it is also the largest cloud service provider, with a 32% market share; your favourite activist website is probably using Amazon Web Services. (...)

There is, however, one small part of our relationship with brands that the internet and social media have perhaps democratised – the ability to control the memes of production. **“In *No Logo*, in the ‘adbusting’ chapter, I was writing about a few daring guys with ladders, defacing billboards,” she laughs, “and now you have millions of people able to do parody ads and share them with everyone, instantaneously.”(...)**

Perhaps it is a function of age, but recalling the world *No Logo* described when I was 18 does feel like harking back to a more innocent time. It would be easy for me to get a Uber to a WeWork office, order some Deliveroo and finish this article on [Google](#) Docs, while I stream Spotify, taking a break to browse Facebook and Instagram on my Android phone, finesse my personal brand on Twitter and wonder where the *No Logo* revolution all went wrong. (...) The stakes are higher now than they were in the 1990s and this time, thanks to books such as *No Logo*, we can't say that we didn't know.