The state we are in

By Dion Chang, Khumo Theko   7 Jan 2019

The year 2020 is seen as a landmark for various global policy and technology developments, even as the world struggles to recalibrate from the political, economic and socio-cultural upheavals of 2018. So, while the world moves from "diversity" to tackling "inclusivity", there is a more ominous threat looming: a disturbing confluence of technology, business and government.
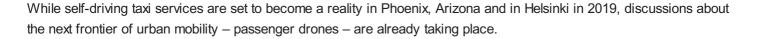

Dion Chang, founder, Flux Trends.

Things are about to get more complicated.

Using the T.R.E.N.D.S acronym, Flux Trends provides a glimpse of the key trends for 2019 across six sectors. These are a sample of a broader selection of trends which Flux will unpack at its annual trend presentation, *The State We're In*, which kick-starts the new year.

The 2019 edition of our presentation is entitled, *Aftershocks and blowbacks – adapting to bombardment stress*. It's a follow-on from the 2018 edition, *Through a Different Lens*, which centred around issues of identity like gender, race and culture.

TECHNOLOGY: Urban air mobility

While self-driving taxi services are set to become a reality in Phoenix, Arizona and in Helsinki in 2019, discussions about the next frontier of urban mobility – passenger drones – are already taking place.

In a report titled, *Unmanned Traffic Management,* Airbus is already assessing the increase in commercial air traffic in the next few years. By the end of 2017, approximately 15 companies had already completed test flights of their passenger drones (aka air taxis). Airbus is working on not one but three models, while another company, Liberty Pioneer, offered pre-sales of its model last year.

So, while we won't be seeing airborne taxis in 2019, it is the year legislators, city planners and developers actively plot the future of urban air mobility. Uber is working with NASA on its air taxi service, Elevate. NASA will use Uber's data to simulate how small passenger drones navigate urban air space, specifically in LA and Dallas, the two cities that have agreed to host early tests of Uber's air service.

The Indian government has also approved a passenger drone policy, making Mumbai the first city in India to accommodate air taxis. In Miami, property developer Dan Kodsi has started modifying a new 60-storey high-rise to accommodate a roof-top sky port, in preparation for VTOL (vertical-take-off and landing, the technology all flying taxis use). Urban rooftops are set to become a prized commodity for property owners and developers.

Khumo Theko, researcher and cultural identity trend spotter at Flux Trends.

RETAIL: Morality marketing

The era of brand activism is evolving. Fast. Brands are no longer showing their socio-political stance as a reaction to an event or crisis. Instead, brand value and reputation are now being built via a very different customer experience.

Last year, UK football club Chelsea FC began reprimanding fans for bad behaviour. The club announced that any fan found guilty of anti-Semitic abuse would be given "the opportunity" to visit a concentration camp for an educational rehabilitation course or face being banned from attending matches for three years.

After his much-publicised kneeling protests during the national anthem at US football games, Nike anticipated its Colin Kaepernick campaign would unleash a social media storm. The reactions were unsurprisingly extreme, with applause on the one hand and condemnation on the other. In a humorous response, the brand released a safety guide for people who wanted to protest by burning their Nike merchandise.

These responses show how brands are becoming unapologetic about their social stance regardless of the backlash. It's no longer a case of sticking one's neck out, but rather a moral anchor in a world with complex and ever-changing undercurrents. Move over brand activism, and say hello to #MoralityMarketing.

ECONOMY: Digital services tax

The worlds of business, technology and politics collide as governments threaten a digital services tax (DST) for the world's tech giants. Many of these companies use loopholes in international tax systems so they are taxed in jurisdictions with low tax rates. As an interim measure before it embarks on sweeping reforms, the European Commission plans to tax tech companies with total annual worldwide revenues of €750 million or EU revenues of €50 million. The 3% levy will be collected where that revenue is generated, rather than where the companies are domiciled for tax purposes.

But not all EU members agree. While countries like Ireland, Sweden and Denmark are opposed to the proposal, arguing

that a DST would exacerbate trans-Atlantic trade tensions as many of the tech giants are American, other members argue that the levy should be increased to 5%.

The UK and Spain are already forging ahead with their own frameworks. The UK plans to introduce a temporary service tax from April 2020, post Brexit, while Spain plans to implement a 5% levy on foreign and Spanish companies' digital services, making it the first country to implement a legislated digital services tax.

NATURAL WORLD: The war on plastic

2018 will be remembered as the year we finally realised just how devastating our single-use, plastic habit has become. In 2019, the battle escalates into a war. The narrative around plastic now shifts from consumer awareness to government legislation.

The French government plans to implement a law by 2020 that will ensure all plastic cups, cutlery and plates will be made of biologically-sourced material which can be composted. African countries Rwanda, Morocco and Kenya, are gradually reaping the benefits of legislating a ban on plastic bags. Currently regarded as a harsh measure, Kenyans found to be using, selling or producing plastic bags, now face four years in prison or a fine of $40,000. Other east African countries such as Tanzania, Burundi and Uganda may follow suit.

This in turn forces brands to take a stronger stance on their contribution to pollution and sustainability, specifically their packaging. But while plastic straws and products containing microbeads were targeted in 2018, this year sees other plastic products we seldom think about - from contact lenses to balloons – pulled into the war zone.

DIPLOMACY: Surveillance state

Do you always feel like somebody's watching you? That uneasy feeling is now a reality. While we've realised that we've become "the product" in data exchange with tech companies, governments are now jumping on the personal data bandwagon – and the trajectory is dystopian and terrifying.

China leads the way, aiming to document each of its citizens via facial recognition by 2023. Zimbabwe also plans to use facial recognition at its border posts.

If you're entering New Zealand, be prepared for a "digital strip search". Their new customs law requires travellers to not only hand over their devices if asked for, but also to grant access to them. Refusal comes with a $5,000 fine.

Interpol has started amassing an international voice biometrics database that will be shared among global police agencies.

There is however, growing resistance to these developments. Various organisations are calling for the regulation of facial recognition as well as for people to retain ownership of their data. Microsoft has called for the US government to start implementing laws on the use of facial recognition, while there's been a backlash against Amazon for selling its facial recognition program, Rekognition, to the US government.

The digital privacy and data ownership uprising has begun.

SOCIO-CULTURAL: Identity Politics

2017 was the catalyst and last year was the social-cultural awakening (*WOKE to wide awake,* as Flux Trends put it). In 2019 the call for inclusivity, individualism and safe spaces will grow louder.

In reaction to the #MeToo movement, tech innovators are creating consent apps for sexual intercourse. Apps like uConsent, YesMeansYes and LegalFling ask the user to confirm they consent to sexual activity with another user. A passion killer, but one of the harsh realities of the zeitgeist.

In terms of gender politics, apps are being designed to assist people in unlearning gender stereotypes by altering key words via predictive text.

Many people communicate differently to children depending on their gender, which means that girls, specifically, are likely to have internalised gender stereotypes by the age of six. Finnish child rights organisation, Plan International, in partnership with Samsung, is trying to change that with their predictive text app, Sheboard. The app's by-line, *Raised by Words*, aims to increase awareness about the impact of gendered speech as you type.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dion Chang is the founder of Flux Trends and Khumo Theko is a researcher and a cultural identity trend spotter at Flux Trends. The full 2019 "State We're In", trend briefing will take place in February 2019 in major centres in South Africa. For more: www.fluxtrends.com.

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