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Portal or police? The limits of promotional paratexts

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ABSTRACT

In this essay I argue that current practices of brand management push the boundaries of the text/paratext relationship. A brand is not (only) a portal through which we gain understanding of how a text or product is made to mean. It is a powerful authority, policing and in many cases articulating the boundaries according to which its objects acquire meaning. The essay reviews the conceptual bases of brands as boundary brokers and boundary makers. I then offer three examples to illustrate how brands acquire cultural and political authority through their imposition of boundaries: as instigators of value co-creation, as intellectual property, and through territorial (nation) branding. The essay concludes by situating the discussion within the contemporary social and political context.

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What emerges as an effect of such “incomplete signification” is a turning of boundaries and limits into the *in-between* spaces through which the meanings of cultural and political authority are negotiated. (Homi Bhabha, *Nation and Narration*, 1990)

Introduction

This article revisits the relationship between promotional paratexts and their media objects, arguing that ongoing innovations in brand management, and the contemporary conditions of our promotional culture, demand sharper critical tools to apprehend media texts.

To be clear, this is not a “takedown” of Gray’s (2010) excellent work; on the contrary, Gray’s conceptual framework for paratexts has already informed and extended critical brand studies (Aronczyk & Powers, 2010). Just as Genette and Maclean (1991; Genette, 1997) showed the power of literary paratexts in mediating the reader’s experience of a literary work, Gray reveals the potential of promotional artifacts to make meaning for their objects. Movie trailers, merchandise, and franchised games are not just “fluff” around a meaningful cultural work—they are part and parcel of the work, constitutive of its symbolic resonance, and vital contributors to the cultural whole.

Indeed, in many respects the meaning-making function of brands is akin to the meaning-making function of paratexts. Both are technologies of identification and

devices of legitimation; both are expressions of faith and portents of desire; both have a vital economic function, managing potential risk; and a heavily symbolic function, assigning reputational qualities to their objects.

Current uses of brand management and marketing complicate the paratextual parallel; however, Genette (1997) and Gray (2010) treat paratexts as “thresholds of interpretation,” in order to describe how meanings are made in the “borderlands” of the text. For brand managers, the interest stops at the threshold. Branding is not ultimately about expanding the terrain on which meanings can be made; it is about closing off interpretive agency. Branding is a form of boundary making, a creation of limits as a way to exercise cultural power. A brand is not (only) a portal through which we gain understanding of how a text or product is made to mean. It is a powerful authority, policing, and in many cases articulating the boundaries according to which its objects acquire meaning.

In the next section of this essay, I review the conceptual bases of brands as boundary brokers and boundary makers. I then offer three examples to illustrate how brands acquire cultural and political authority through their imposition of boundaries: as instigators of value co-creation, as intellectual property, and through territorial (nation) branding.

Brands and boundary work

Symbolic boundaries regulate how we know the world. We make distinctions among groups, people, and objects to establish bonds with some ideas and values and to exclude others (Lamont & Fournier, 1992). Brands have always occupied a boundary-making role. Initially conceived to serve as markers of quality and symbols of ownership, they also function as carriers of distinction and status for their consumers (Klein, 2000).

Although “we will be wary of rashly proclaiming that all is paratext” (Genette, 1997, p. 407), it is undeniable that brands have today vastly expanded beyond their initial roles of labeling and differentiation. They now include structural and systemic functions such as coordination within and across organizations, markets, and media (Douglas, Craig, & Nijssen, 2001); the creation of valuation principles and accounting schemes (Lury & Moor, 2010; Power, 2007); and the international export of business and management strategy. For a corporate entity, adherence to its brand’s values entails a streamlining of internal and external communication processes, which extends to client selection and employee recruitment, office and product design, and futures (scenario) planning (Aaker, 1996; Moor, 2008).

Yet a brand is a fundamentally undefined space—or, in the language of semiotics, an empty signifier. A brand’s purpose is to create signifieds for itself on an ongoing basis, and to establish and manage relationships between itself and cultural elements or ideas. For instance, Pixar’s effort to promote its association with technological innovation leads it to sponsor educational programs or events that focus on “STEM” (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) initiatives (Pearl, 2016).¹ The achievements of students in those programs are rendered as symbolic and economic value for the Pixar brand. The brand also creates associations between cultural elements that have no automatic or necessary connection. For instance, if a character in a Pixar film likes a certain brand of yogurt, Pixar may enter into a co-branding arrangement with the yogurt producer; or even develop its own line of yogurt if it can be made to reasonably fit the brand’s profile.

Importantly, there is no loyalty between the brand and its current meanings. These associations are temporal and contingent. Moreover, branding does not “require or reinforce a linear relation” (Lury, 2009, p. 74) between the brand name and what it represents. Rather, this is the function of advertising: to create a semantic narrative out of discrete cultural fragments. The narratives can multiply to appeal to different audiences—one can imagine a campaign advertising Pixar-branded yogurt to teenagers and another promoting it to parents of small children. Or they can be rewritten or abandoned. If the STEM program is roiled by an educational testing scandal; if the yogurt is used in a recipe for dog food; Pixar can terminate the associations.

In this respect we can see the brand not as an interpretive platform for a pre-existing text but rather as a limited space of action. Like paratexts, brands can code and recode what their text is meant to mean. They are also cultural forms in their own right. As Gray (2010) has pointed out in the case of paratexts for entertainment media, brands are themselves sources of meaning that can fluidly circulate unbound from their material referents. The Pixar logo bears meanings developed over time—technical achievement, innovation, and computer graphics—that do not need to be affixed to a STEM program or a yogurt in order to communicate.

This raises a crucial difference between brands and paratexts. The value of the brand derives from the syntax, not the semantics. In other words, it is the relationships among elements that matter, not the elements themselves. Brands engage in *syntactical praxis* that composes and decomposes associations at will among entirely arbitrary elements (Gasché, 1987). The space of action that constitutes the brand along with the boundaries that contain its object are indeterminate and mutable. But so is the “text” to which it ostensibly refers. Brands “refer” to their products, but the product lines can change without affecting the meaning of the brand. Brands simultaneously “refer” to cultural phenomena, but the cultural elements that make up the brand can be switched out or reorganized.

Brands dissolve the boundaries of their texts. Or rather, they create and re-create texts according to their paratextual needs. The boundaries of text are contingent on the exigencies of the paratext, and text itself becomes subordinate to paratext. In branding there is no longer an immutable text ornamented or regulated by its paratexts. There are paratexts that assemble and spatialize stochastic elements that morph into temporary texts that are constantly subject to transformation.

This is what is meant by a promotional culture: a culture in which paratext overcomes text. Brand positioning—the communication of symbols, metaphors, and narratives reflecting the brand to a predetermined audience—is a performative maneuver that assembles and organizes cultural elements into temporary relationships according to strategic principles elicited from market research. Audiences may make meanings from this assemblage (Lury, 2009)—but the meanings elicited *redound to the paratext, not the text*. The meaning and value created does not enhance the legitimacy of the text but rather accrues to the benefit of the brand.

The “takeover” does not end there. Severing the umbilical cord that tethers text to paratext has political implications. In the transformation of the boundaries of the text lies the possibility for promotional discourse to police the borderlands of cultural expression. I will illustrate this claim through three kinds of boundary work performed through brand management: value co-creation, intellectual property regimes, and territorial branding.

Value co-creation

Value co-creation is a business and marketing principle elaborated in the early 2000s (Zwick, Bonsu, & Darmody, 2008) and now considered fundamental to brand management. The idea is that the symbolic and financial value of a product or brand ought to rely not only on producers' creative efforts but also on those of consumers, whose use of the product or brand, as well as their communication about the product or brand, render them effectively "co-creators" or "prosumers" of the brand's meaning and worth (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010). The emancipatory potential identified by this development in the business world (e.g. Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013) has been met with intense criticism from other corners, since in practice co-creation hardly levels the playing field between producers and consumers.

Instead, consumers create on producers' terms. As Zwick et al. (2008) put it, the underlying philosophy guiding co-creation is that "control over consumers and markets can best be achieved by providing managed and dynamic platforms for consumer practice, which on the one hand free the creativity and know-how of consumers, and on the other channel these consumer activities in ways desired by the marketers" (p. 165). Moreover, the ideas, knowledge, and affect created by consumers in their relationships with brands are only valuable for consumers insofar as they appear to respond to their consumption needs. Consumers' labor is not remunerated nor, of course, is there any type of protection for the various forms of "free" consumer labor that went into producing cognitive and emotional relationships with the brand.²

Though the notion of value co-creation as an emergent business principle is already a bit of marketing spin (arguably consumers have always contributed to the worth of a product through their communicative and pragmatic activities), the concept takes on a different tenor in the context of digital media, amidst the proliferation of branded interfaces that harness user communication and activities. The "communicative capitalism" (Dean, 2009) of so-called social media platforms such as Facebook or Instagram and apps such as Waze and WhatsApp is augmented by the "participatory capitalism" of the so-called sharing economy, where consumers' basic forms of property (home, car, lawnmower) can be leveraged for transaction under the sign of a brand (Airbnb, Lyft, Open Shed) (Schor, 2014; Van Dijck, 2013).

Brands as property marks

The common denominator, or cultural logic, of these branded environments is ownership and control. The difference between "official" and "unofficial" paratexts, according to Genette (1997), is authorial intent. Of course, authorial intent does not mean the author/publisher controls all interpretations of the work. But a sense of property and ownership obtains in the author's putative reach over certain paratextual elements. Bringing this into the realm of production and value, we can say that for a paratext to be official, it must be *owned* by the producer—literally, as in the case of copyright or trademark; or figuratively, as in the assumption of responsibility for the creative output.

In transferring the text/paratext relationship to promotion, we tend to transfer the notion of official/unofficial categories. Trailers, directors' cuts, cast interviews, stunt secrets, or character paraphernalia stamped with the film's or its producer's logo, have

an authoritative aura that does not normally extend to fan-produced “vids,” websites, or commentaries, owing to a combination of lack of resources, lower sophistication, and restricted circulation.

Something else happens when brands are primary meaning-making elements in a promotional culture. A brand is a paratext that always has the authority and control over, and authorial responsibility for, its text. If, as we have seen, the paratext is the code that regulates the standards according to which the text is made legitimate in a given context, this code becomes especially powerful in the realm of legal authorship and ownership, where even “unofficial” paratexts like fan sites or reviews can be regulated by the property regimes of “official” ones. As Rosemary Coombe writes,

“Owners” of mass media signifiers may well permit the social production of significance when it mints meanings with potential market value (indeed, through market research, they may well mine the public sphere for such value). On the other hand, they may also prohibit the circulation of connotations that contest those valences they have propagated in the public sphere. In this way, intellectual property laws play a fundamental role in determining what discourses circulate in the public sphere and how these “languages” are spoken, while providing both enabling conditions and limiting obstacles for those who seek to construct identities and compel recognition. (1998, p. 134)

Expanding the brand into spaces of everyday life is less about brand as metaphor for the politics of image and language in contemporary mediatized discourse (e.g. the Trump brand) than it is about expanding the very rationale of brand management into the public sphere. In a promotional culture, the logic of property rights obtains even if actual intellectual property regimes are not in place.

Brands function as property marks in another way: as digital media interfaces. Brands such as YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, and others do not merely enable public communication; they shape and strategically manage it (Gillespie, 2010). These brands are characterized by their conflation of communicative and promotional functions. At once technical platforms for communication and branded spaces of action (Vitali-Rosati, 2014), every “Tweet” harnesses user expression to brand value, further complicating distinctions between texts and their paratexts.

Narrating the nation in a promotional culture

Narratives of the nation—that is, the textual performances of the national form—are typically constructed to present the nation as stable and immutable. But this stability is continually challenged from the “outside,” as paratexts multiply and rearticulate the borders. The margins of the nation are therefore a site of struggle and contestation. In this contestation of meaning lie sources of political possibility, but also the seeds of the nation’s demise.

A nation is clearly not reducible to a product or a film. But, like a film, the “scripts” of national identity demand narrative structure, target audiences, primary protagonists, and a distinctive ideology. Indeed, the fundamental tension inherent to the nation form is created through the historical tendency to read the nation as a linear and teleological narrative. The modernity of the nation is hidden in the insistence on both the relevance of inhabitants’ ancestry and the conviction that all evolution is forward moving and progressive. National belonging is constituted by the origin tales designed to define good citizens and set them apart from those outside its borders. These master narratives carry a

political and pedagogical weight that frequently smother insertions and deletions to the text. Cultural difference and alternative politics are not always read as inevitable dynamics that may enliven or complicate the narrative but more often as unwelcome intrusions that throw the plot off course.

In previous writings (Aronczyk, 2013) I attempted to document the incompatibility of cultural and political alterity to the nation-concept via a close examination of the nation branding industry. Nation branding is certainly not the only form of narration germane to this discussion, but it is especially relevant here as a case that reveals the limits of the paratext.

Nation branding is a phenomenon whereby the tools, techniques, and expertise of commercial branding and marketing are applied to the nation form. The government representatives who engage these services seek a “new and improved” national image for international consumption. A key rationale for the adoption of nation branding techniques is to make the nation continue to *matter* in a twenty-first-century context of global media, migration, and mobility. Branding consultants craft paratexts for the nation that ensure its continued authority and legitimacy in the face of challenges to cultural and political power by urban, regional, and transnational entities.

As we have seen, paratexts can have a political power of their own. Their purpose is to exert authorial control over boundaries; to create and maintain a regulatory code; and to establish symbolic and economic value for themselves over and above any value that may accrue to their object.

In the case of nation branding, this political power has dramatic consequences. A nation brand does not serve so much to acclimatize its various audiences (as in Genette’s vision) or extend the meanings of its text (as in Gray’s) as to assemble those cultural elements that stabilize a particular interpretation of it—that of its owners. They recreate the boundaries of the nation according to a determinate set of needs. These needs are at least partly economic, oriented toward attracting foreign investment, tourism dollars, and international media events. But beyond the market incentive nation branding also reinforces a particular understanding of the nation form rooted in the logics of control and ownership.

When urban mayors in Italy call for limits on “ethnic” restaurants in their cities (Vogt, 2016), or Swiss towns prevent the building of minarets (Guggenheim, 2010) in the name of “heritage protection”, when consultancies develop asset calculations that rank a nation’s image according to perceptions of “security” (Brand Finance, 2016), when social media feeds designed to encourage talk of the nation are “curated” for propriety (Christensen, 2013)—these paratexts set normative standards for “good” and “bad” interpretations of national belonging. They extend the boundaries of what can be owned even as they dictate the limits of who can own them.

The appeal to “value co-creation” also comes into play here, as residents are asked to respond to brand surveys, participate in brand workshops (Aronczyk & Brady, 2015), or perform as “brand ambassadors” to help identify and bring certain national values to life. Such narratives demand loyalty from national citizens in the name of upholding cultural standards. “Living the brand” comes with guidelines and codes of behavior. These can fail, as with the sorry example of bigots taking over Brand Sweden’s Twitter feed (Hill, 2012). In such cases the excess of meaning has to be reined in. When they do fail, the blame is more likely to be put on the consumers’ (citizens’) “irrational” impulses

than on the rationality of the brand itself. After all, if we are all co-creators, are we not all responsible for the text's legitimacy?

Conclusion

In this short essay I have explored how brands determine the limits of their object. In so doing they create an inverse situation to the paratext/text relationship. The paratext is transitive, an "instrument of adaptation" constantly shifting to accommodate "the text's mode of being present in the world" (Genette, 1997, p. 408). As such the paratext is parasitic on its text. Even if paratexts circulate independently, as with transmedia events, crossovers, and so on, paratext and text remain two parts of a same whole. Brands, on the other hand, use texts and contexts to make meaning for themselves. Brands deploy texts as their instrument of adaptation, assembling and reassembling them to suit immediate and future-oriented purposes.

There are boundaries to brands. Some are intentional, as when brand managers advocate strategic limits to what a brand is made to mean in order to increase its value as a form of identification. Some are unintentional, as when brands' intertextuality takes a turn brand managers cannot anticipate. In recent years brands have had to increase their budgets for crisis management as online platforms for action offer unforeseen forms of "co-creation." Disgruntled airline passengers can use brand platforms to talk back to the carrier; an American president can create a disastrous scenario for brand managers with a single Tweet.

Some have characterized this brand new world as evidence of the collapse of public language (Heller, 2016), pointing to Orwell's (1946) observations that careless public speech signals a decline in social conditions. Yet the social and political role of brands exceeds these prophecies; the situation calls for more than anxious restatements of the divorce of language from action and the rise of self-referentiality (Baudrillard, 1995; Lefebvre, 1971). If it is true that the social lives of brands are now inextricable from our everyday lives, if it is true that brands are sources of meaning and rules for living, our task is to reflexively evaluate the political implications of our own parasitic dependence. It is not just about making words meaningful again; it is about assessing what it is about these words that is holding us captive, and developing an orientation toward new templates for everyday action.

Notes

1. It is worth noting that Pixar's brand identity is itself contingent on boundary work to separate its offerings from those of its former parent, Disney. See Brookey and Westerfelhaus (2005).
2. See the excellent writings of Andrejevic (2004), Arvidsson (2006), and Lazzarato (1996) on various ways that the "free" labor of consumers is made productive for brands.

Notes on contributor

Melissa Aronczyk is the author of *Branding the Nation: The Global Business of National Identity* (Oxford, 2013) and the co-editor of *Blowing Up the Brand: Critical Perspectives on Promotional Culture* (Peter Lang, 2010).

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