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BY RICHARD ELLIS

# The Manu-fact-uring Industry

## HOW BUSINESSES INVENT TRENDS AND THEN MAKE THEM SEEM REAL

In 2016, I ghostwrote for a company that wanted a reputation for combatting "digital addiction." Their smartphone app was supposed to make phones less addictive by turning the lock screen into a home page that only displayed apps related to productivity. In theory, people would be less likely to chain-swipe on Facebook if their lock screen routed them to text messaging, the calendar, or to-dos only.

Smartphone addiction wasn't a trending idea yet, and my job was to help change that.

I came up with an idea inspired by the party game, "Would you rather?" To play, you give a group of people two alternatives like, "Would you rather fight one horse-sized duck or 100 duck-sized horses?" Each participant chooses and then defends their decision.

Well, I thought, what if we surveyed people with would-you-rather questions about digital addiction?

I wrote up an online survey with questions like, would you rather give up alcohol for one month, or give up your smartphone for one week? Would you rather give up all sweets for one week, or use a "dumb phone" for one week? Would you rather fast for one day, or give up social networking for a day? We also included some more risqué questions, which you'll have to ask me about another time.

About 350 people took the survey. We crunched the numbers and wrote up a press release with a headline like, "Sweets or Smartphones? 49% of Americans Choose Their Device." It was catnip for reporters.

In essence, I designed a survey to establish the "fact" that many people are addicted to their phones. That is the Facts Industry in action. Businesses hire members of this industry—analysts, pollsters, PR firms, ghostwriters, and even academic researchers—to make it seem as if the problems a business solves are widespread and important.

The key to creating a fact is to control the questions and possible answers. That's why I used would-you-rather questions. They locked survey respondents into a hypothetical, unrealistic choice that favored the response we wanted.

Others in the Facts Industry ask questions with a predetermined list of vaguely worded answers and allow participants to answer affirmatively to as many they wish. The outcome is an armory of statistics like, "56% of business owners say they currently use or plan to use AI for customer service." In this example (pulled from a real survey, reworded), customer service was one out of ten options in a list guaranteed to get yeses.

In this case, the publisher of that fact—a legacy media organization




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masquerading as an analyst firm—included embed codes for sharing all the accompanying charts and graphs. They want people to share these facts everywhere possible because they might attract readers who become subscribers or clients. Plus, says an Editorial Note, "We earn a commission from partner links," as in, if you subscribe for an AI service chatbot, they may get a cut.

Inevitably, the stats end up in clickbait SEO listicles with titles like, "57 NEW Artificial Intelligence Statistics." Come and get it, fresh off someone else's website!

Ideally, listicle readers will use the statistics in their marketing collateral or sales deck, spreading it to even more people. Like in a game of telephone, the stat will be mis-copied, mis-linked, and misrepresented as it spreads. I know this because one of my ghostwriting duties is to trace such facts to their source before putting them in anyone's mouth.

The point is that we are surrounded by "facts" or "statistics" driven by an agenda, not by curiosity. Yet confusingly, these stats can turn out to be true or semi-true despite their questionable origins. Smartphone addiction was and is a problem, and I bet a lot of people would give up booze and candy before their phone.



BY ISABELLA VENEGAS



# SNOW QUEEN

The polar breeze doesn't sting my skin, the gleeful snowflakes dance around me. My winter eyes are shut and hidden; my warm smile is chilled in degrees.

My hair delicately waves with frigid tips, a cape of ivory melody sits on my shoulders. I breathe in the scent of power on my lips, the thawing world will grow no colder.

I nestle on the deliciously twinkling snow; the crystals and patterns can be seen. If only I could stay here forever to glow, if only I was the lovely snow queen.

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