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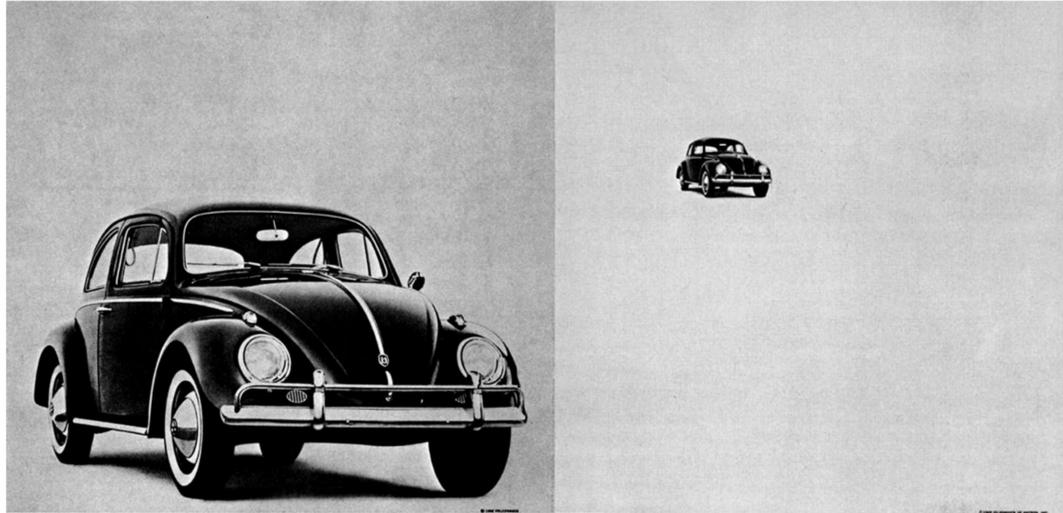
A SMALL CAR WITH A BIG IDEA

When the Volkswagen Beetle started plying through the streets of Dhaka in the late '60s, I had little notion of the "big idea" behind the "small" car, whose famous ad proudly stated: "Think small." The Beetle was a smart car, with two doors in the front. The four wheels (not two or three) gave it the status of a car. In those days, anyone with a car held a position of status in the community. He was the *gaarivala* (one who owned a car), and if he had a four-digit pay check on top of it, the *borolok* (the moneyed man). One did not need anything more in life if one had achieved these two markers of success.

But I am not here to write about our values and how they have changed. I am trying to understand the "big idea" behind the car called the Beetle and the advertisement that said, "Think small."

None other than Fuhrer Adolf Hitler envisioned a small car for the middle class of his Germany. It was he who envisaged an affordable car to serve the not-so-privileged people of his country soon after the war. This heinous killer, this blueprint maker of ethnic cleansing, Adolf Hitler, was obsessed with cars—a run-of-the-mill "man-child"! However, like a leader, he did correctly envision that soon after the Second World War, Germany would need a car that seated two adults in the front and three children at the back. To keep costs low, it would have to have two doors, and its engine would have to be at the back. The radiator would have no water circulating the engine as the water would freeze in the cold winters of Germany. Instead, a fan would be installed to prevent the motor from heating up.

Little did Adolf Hitler know what would be the fate of this car when it reached the faraway lands of South Asia. At least five adults would fit themselves in the back seat. The other seat beside the driver's would be taken up by one adult and a child. Little did he or the Volkswagen *walas* know the



Lemon.

This Volkswagen missed the boat. The chrome strip on the glove compartment is bluish and must be replaced. Chances are you wouldn't have noticed it, Inspector Kurt Krumer did. There are 3,399 men at our Wolfsburg factory with only one job to inspect Volkswagens at each stage of production. 3,333 Volkswagen are produced daily. Here are more inspectors

(then cars). Every shock absorber is tested. Ignit checking won't do it, every windshield is scanned. VWs have been inspected for surface scratches barely visible to the eye. Final inspection. In reality something! VW inspectors run each car off the line onto the fully-automated (or test stand, take up 10P check points, get ahead to the automatic

broke stand, and say "no" to one VW out of five. This precaution with detail means the VW lasts longer and requires less maintenance, by and large, than other cars. It also means a used VW depreciates less than any other car. We plug the lemons, you get the plums.

Think small.

Our little car isn't so much of a novelty any more. A couple of dozen college kids don't try to squeeze inside it. The guy at the gas station doesn't ask where the gas goes. Nobody even stares at our shape. In fact, some people who drive our little

flaves don't even think 33 miles to the gallon is going any great guns. Or using five parts of oil instead of five parts. Or never needing anti-freeze. Or rickety up 40,000 miles on a set of tires. That's because once you get used to

one of our economies, you don't even think about them any more. Except when you squeeze into a small parking spot. Or when your small insurance. Or pay a small repair bill. Or trade in your old VW for a new one. Think it over.

However status-enhancing it may be to own a decaded-old Beetle, in our country, a groom would not ride a Volkswagen to bring his newlywed wife home. In the 70s, a bridal car had to be a Ford or a Dodge Dart.

disaster that would befall the Beetle in Pakistan or Bangladesh when there was no water circulating the engine and the back seat yielded under the weight of five adults. The seat would come too near to the battery. The battery cover was meant to protect the springs that hold up the back sea, but alas, in Bangladesh, most often the battery cover was out of stock. The spring got heated and the seat atop the battery would catch fire. The people squeezed and huddled in the back seat would have to jump through the front door. A series of timely actions—detecting the smell of burnt leather, sliding down the front seat, opening the front

door—could prevent their backsides from catching fire.

Neither did the Volkswagen *walas* know that economising on the battery would often cause the car not to start. The guy behind the driver's wheel would announce the "self is not working," and all the passengers would happily volunteer to push the car until the engine started. Even with all these disabilities, the Volkswagen—by now a jalopy—would remain the status symbol of the middle-class sub-continentals, more specifically of the then East and West Pakistan, and then later too in Bangladesh. (By the way, India only had the "age-old Ambassadors".)

Let's go back to the beginning of the advertising of the Volkswagen Beetle in the early '60s, wherein lie some interesting stories. William Bernbach was the guy who set the trend in advertising wherein honest words were spoken. DDB was the agency. This honesty in fact won DDB the Volkswagen campaign. The campaign was for Americans in the US in the early '60s. Julian Koenig (the copy writer) was hesitant about telling Americans that Volkswagen was like a beetle. He wanted to speak to them in their language of luxury, signifying the American Dream. On the insistence of Bernbach, Koenig came up with the "Think small" tagline. Helmut Crone was of Jewish descent but did not much care about the fact that Hitler thought up the concept of the Beetle. What went down in history was the layout of the ad of Volkswagen for the press that was created by Krone, the art director. He kept a huge space in the press ad blank. An image of a small Volkswagen appeared on the right hand corner of the layout. The benefits of the car were at the bottom of the space in small print.

Behind every successful ad campaign, there is a "big idea". Through the '50s,

the ad world was creating a world of fantasy around cars. By being aspirational, they were creating a world that was unreal, almost fake. People wanted an honest talk with a car like Volkswagen, and that's what was addressed in the "Think small" tagline of the Beetle.

However status-enhancing it may be to own a decaded-old Beetle, in our country, a groom would not ride a Volkswagen to bring his newlywed wife home. In the '70s, a bridal car had to be a Ford or a Dodge Dart. One owner of a Beetle was so insulted that the car he was so proud would not do for a pair of newlyweds, that he took revenge on the

system by making his old Volkswagen the pilot car in a trail of cars that brought newlywed wives home.

Fast-forward 40 years thence, by when the Volkswagen had become a vintage, it was decided that the theme of this man's son's wedding too would be vintage. Suddenly it struck the son that the Volkswagen stashed away in the garage should be brought out, repaired and polished, and even if it had no air conditioning, it would be the car that would bring his newlywed bride to her new abode. It was proven yet again that thinking small never lets you down.

Advertisement such as Volkswagen's "Think small" campaign were the first of what would later be called the Creative Revolution of the '60s and the '70s. These ads relied more on big ideas than in previous decades, and we began to see a more modern style that hit the right balance of headline and body copy. To quote Mark Hamilton: "Bernbach's belief that 'good taste, good art and good writing' could be good selling was proved."

Thumbs up to the Beetle. Think Small!

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INTERNATIONAL |



PHOTO: AFP

When Gauri Lankesh was killed, all quarters of Indian society condemned the killing except for the prime minister himself. Lankesh was editor of the Kannada weekly *Gauri Lankesh Patrike*, a secular activist and, most importantly, a staunch critic of Hindutva, the predominant form of Hindu nationalism in India.

It has been widely speculated that she was murdered by right-wing activists because of her activism, and many in the country firmly believe this. The onus therefore, was on the prime minister, one of the custodians of Hindutva ideology, to categorically reject the notion that the ideology he preaches condones violence.

Despite being called out repeatedly, Modi not only kept mum but also appeared to follow some Twitter trolls that celebrated the murder with abusive and vile language. His silence triggered a widespread campaign to "block" him on Twitter.

However, it is barely an isolated case. Modi's refusal to condemn techniques adopted by Hindu nationalists to intimidate journalists led to a dangerous environment for media workers in India. This year, in terms of press freedom, India went down by three places to 136th in the list of 186 countries, according to a widely-recognised index by Reporters Without Borders (RSF), an international media watchdog.

"With Hindu nationalists trying to purge all manifestations of 'anti-national' thought from the national debate, self-censorship is growing in the mainstream media," RSF wrote in its India section. "Journalists are increasingly the targets of online smear campaigns by the most radical nationalists, who vilify them and even threaten physical reprisals."

Senior journalist Ravish Kumar, of *NDTV*, is the latest prominent journalist to receive threatening and vile messages via WhatsApp. An investigation by *All-News.in* revealed that at least one of the perpetrators is in the prime minister's following list on Twitter. He was proven to be closely connected to one BJP leader while the admin of the WhatsApp group had tight ties to several. Subsequently, Ravish Kumar wrote an open letter to Narendra Modi, in which he wondered whether his life and job were under threat.

NDTV, India's oldest news channel known for its critical approach towards the Modi government, for instance, was recently targeted in a crude fashion. The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) acted on a FIR filed against the channel's promoters who they accused of gaining INR 48 crores by wrongful means.

The CBI even raided the *NDTV* office and the residences of its founder Prannoy Roy. A statement by the investigators said that their actions were based upon a "complaint of a share holder of ICICI bank and *NDTV*."

IS THE PRESS AS FREE AS MODI'S REGIME WOULD LIKE US TO BELIEVE?

NAZMUL AHASAN

There is evidence to prove that it was a strategic step. *The Indian Express* reported that business tycoon Ajay Singh, a long-term BJP supporter and the man who coined Modi's "Aab ki bar Modi sarkar" slogan, bought the majority stakes of *NDTV*, gaining the editorial rights. That the reported exchange of ownership happened after the raids raises this question—was this a textbook case of intimidation by a pro-ruling party businessman?

NDTV later disputed the claim, but *Indian Express* has stood by its report. We hope that the report is untrue; but if it is true, it throws shade on a powerful and independent voice in India.

While the change in ownership does not necessarily mean that the media house will turn pro-BJP, there are previous examples of such a thing happening. *The Caravan Magazine*, in its December 2013 issue, cited an independent study to report that after Reliance group, the country's largest conglomerate, had invested in *Network18*, a group of several media outlets including two leading TV channels and multiple magazines and new portals, the group shifted its political coverage to the right. The relation between Reliance and the ruling party is so warm that the group used the PM's photo in its full front-page advertisement.

The ruling party does not mind having so much positive coverage. "Modi does not need either the party or PR agencies; television news media is doing the job for us," confides a senior BJP leader to *Open Magazine*.

Modi's overreach with the media was not limited to *NDTV*. *The Wire* revealed that a personal meeting between the owner of *Hindustan Times* and Modi preceded the abrupt exit of Bobby Ghosh as the editor-in-chief of the age-old newspaper. Although the government firmly claimed in a statement that the meeting between Modi and HT Media Chairperson

Shobhana Bhartia was limited to the planning of a flagship event, the timing of Ghosh's departure is very fishy.

This makes sense when put in context. While the paper remains one of the outspoken media outlets against Modi's regime, Bobby Ghosh during his tenure caused particular concern for the ruling BJP. He notably introduced "Hate Tracker" in HT that infuriated the ruling party.

There are rumours that to discredit Bobby Ghosh, his foreign citizenship, rather than his editorial decision, was brought forth as an excuse. Mr Ghosh, previously the editor of *Time's* international edition, had to leave subsequently. Previously, Siddharth Varadarajan, the first non-dynastic editor of *The Hindu*, was fired because the board felt that he was "underplaying of Narendra Modi", as reported by a regional media watch-dog *The Hoot*.

Open Magazine removed its political editor for a report explaining how media outlets are turning pro-BJP and replaced him with a journalist deemed close to a government minister. Therefore, when Ravish Kumar asked whether his life and job was under threat, he couldn't have made more sense.

"There was a celebration on social media a few days back that I would be fired from my job now," he wrote addressing Narendra Modi. "Recently, Bobby Ghosh—editor of the *Hindustan Times*—was fired because you didn't like him...They quote this and say that now it is my turn."

Apart from this, a bunch of stories and commentaries that sharply criticised the government simply disappeared from digital platforms. For example, reports on the 300 percent increase in BJP chief Amit Shah's assets or the education minister's educational qualification vanished from the *Daily News and Analysis (DNA)* and *Times of India (TOI)* in July this year. Film critic Suprateek Chatterjee's body of work was removed from the website *The Quint* after he tweeted "Good to know that Modi is one year closer to retirement/death #ChooseOptimism." What is telling is that Chatterjee is primarily a film critic, and the website chose to judge him based on unrelated political views.

Modi, it appears, likes not only to punish critic journalists, but his party seems also to award obedient ones. In June, for example, a leaked WhatsApp message showed that editors from *Times of India* and other newspapers actively lobbied on behalf of an income tax official with finance minister Arun Jaitley. It later turned out, reported *The Wire*, that one of the editors involved in the WhatsApp scandal may have played a part in removing anti-BJP stories from *TOI* website.

In the wake of this scandal, *The Wire* wrote an editorial that raised an important question. "If editors from the *Times of India* and other newspapers have the ability to push for personnel changes with government ministers, do these ministers, in turn, have the ability to influence the editorial line in these newspapers—including what gets printed and what get's taken down?"

All that may not mean that Narendra Modi has become an authoritarian leader or that Indian press freedom has vanished. But when an environment hostile to the minorities has developed and jingoism is on the rise, attempts to weaken what is left of the independence of press would spell disaster for Indian secularism and democracy.

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