

# IF 'WE' NOT 'I' ... THEN WHAT?

FROM ANGLO-SAXON TO GLOBAL WORLD VIEWS OF  
HUMAN BEHAVIOUR

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Published by ESOMAR: September 2007  
First presented at: Congress 2007  
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ISBN: 92-831-0208-8

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Mark Earls

### INTRODUCTION

*"Because things are the way they are, things will not stay the way they are."* Bertolt Brecht

This paper is intended to bolster the excellence of our community by tracing the practical applications for market research users and practitioners of a new (but growing) school of thinking about mass-behaviour dubbed "*Herd*" theory.

"Herd" theory sees human beings as first, foremost and finally social animals – not just as a successful social primate, but as the ultimate Super Social Ape (Earls, 2007). Thus all human behaviour (including the consumer behaviour that marketing research variously seeks to understand, describe and predict) is understood as *social behaviour*, in the sense that it is either behaviour that is *shaped by the influence of the perceived social context* and/or it is behaviour that *takes place in a real or imagined social context* (as Freud points out, we can never escape "The Other").

This paper is intended to be practical. Following a brief explanation of the "Herd model", the paper focuses on exploring the implications, both of a theoretical and a practical nature, for market research of this new way of conceptualising human behaviour. *'If "we" not "I", then what'*, indeed.

The first half of this exploration is of what has already been done. A number of practitioners have developed market research tools and applications which apply the Herd insights to the study of consumer behaviour in various ways: this paper catalogues these to encourage excellence among these and the broader practitioner community.

However, perhaps the biggest contribution to excellence in Market Research practice which this paper has to offer lies in its attempt to identify where further work needs doing – where interested theorists and practitioners need to dig in order to make the most of the Herd Perspective.

### THE SHOCK OF THE NEW

#### All together now

New ways of seeing the world do not get adopted easily; if they did, the effect would be dizzying: we would all be rethinking all our assumptions all of the time. Indeed, according to Kuhn's (1962) classic analysis, the value of 'paradigms' to the many is the practical questions they throw up. Few individuals in any discipline can be engaged on the primary and paradigm-shifting questions; most are foot soldiers to the pioneering work of these few.

Kuhn also suggests that things start to shift when a new paradigm is demonstrated to offer utility to the questions a particular community is wrestling with. For example, Newton's cosmology proved particularly useful to a group studying the retrograde motion of Mercury. Thereafter, the paradigm spread as other groups (beyond the Mercury lovers) began to get the impression that the first-footers found it useful. It must be said, however, that most new paradigms fail even to get to first base – they don't get taken up because they're just not that useful (just as most new products fail and – as Watts (2006) points out – most discarded cigarettes fail to lead to conflagrations).

Much the same is true of marketing paradigms: Cova (2006) follows Brown (1995) in identifying some 70+ "New Marketing" paradigms that have been proclaimed

in recent years. Some – such as “Relationship” marketing – seem to have gained a great deal of traction through the utility perceived not just by buyers (some \$80 billion is supposed to have been spent on C- and ERM applications around the world) but also the utility that has been sensed by the major soft- and hardware vendors, left with a stockpile of computing power and code and nothing to do with it. Other fads such as Word-of-Mouth marketing seem to spread on a similar basis (i.e. without much real consideration by individuals of the theoretical case for thinking about things in this way).

However, the social or “Herd” hypothesis seems to have emerged as a (at least partially) conscious response of a number of practitioners to a number of new and intriguing phenomena beyond the faddish tastes of the marketing community:

First, the rise (on the back of new technology) of interesting new things for us to study, describe and explain. For example, the popular music industry has been shocked by the sudden emergence and commercial success of acts such as the Arctic Monkeys, without the benefit of traditional marketing or distribution activity. Equally, mobile telephony companies and their advisors were largely taken by surprise at the rise of SMS texting with little or no marketing encouragement. In the UK, for example, volumes went from zero to thousands of billions in less than half a dozen years. Similarly, the rapid displacement of the existing media channels with new “social” ones: by the end of Q1 2007, Social networking sites had taken over from pornography as the number 1 usage of the Internet. For many consumers, particularly at the younger end, social media take a larger share of media consumption time than traditional media such as TV. Even low-grade technology products such as the online social journal tool, Twitter, seem to build rapid, large and fervid user bases, without obvious outside influence (e.g. from marketing).

Second, the popularisation of behavioural sciences which lie beyond the narrow confines of the Psychology faculty has offered increasingly rich and compelling accounts of human behaviour to many practitioners - accounts very different from those which dominate classical

(‘kotlerian’) marketing research and its models. Sociology, Evolutionary Psychology, Anthropology, Game Theory, Network geometry and even hybrid disciplines such as Econophysics and Evolutionary Anthropology are all being popularised by successful writers such as Jared, Gladwell and Ball.

Third, as the marketing community cottons on the growing importance in the world economy of the BRICs markets (Brazil, Russia, India and China), the cultural ideology (Durckheim) of individualism which is embedded in the US-derived practice of classical marketing is thrown into silhouette and made clear for all to – at least – see, if not question.

Fourth (and this is very Kuhnian), as the small group of theorists and practitioners innovate and discuss their innovations around this set of ideas, they reveal to each other and to the broader community the sense of utility offered by the new paradigm and derived practices. As more utility is demonstrated, so more practitioners and theorists are encouraged to join in with the ground-breakers.

### **A “We-species” with the illusion of “I”**

That said, there is no formal or structure Herd-community (as for example the pioneers of Word of Mouth marketing built for themselves in WOMMA). Many of those involved in innovation in the broader area find themselves in contact but no formal ties or structures are yet in place. There is, however, a growing consilience around the “Herd” point of view.

Most theorists and practitioners working in this area are agreed about a certain number of axioms and principles:

- 1. Homo Sapiens is first and foremost a social species.** We are supremely adapted for a highly social life and seek out the company of others with gusto. From the moment we are born to the day we die, each of us seeks out and is shaped by our interaction with other people. Indeed, all that is of worth in our world (even the power to destroy it) is rooted in our social nature and our abilities to collaborate and co-create.

2. Contrary to what our Anglo-Saxon Enlightenment ideology suggests, we are not independent, self-determining creatures but rather, as Ghandi put it, “necessarily interdependent”. We do what we do because of other people – what we think they think/do/feel is the key influence shaping individual behaviour.

3. As the Conformity<sup>1</sup> research of Asch, Bem, Schachter, Singer, Milgram and Zimbardo suggests, most of the influence of other people is invisible to the person being influenced; other causes are often blamed.

4. Whatever we do, we are poor witnesses to the mechanisms that underlie our own behaviour. Our experience of our own individual lives is misleading in a number of ways, not least the role we ascribe to our own conscious decision-making. In particular, our minds seem to work overtime to retain the impression we have of each of us shaping our own individual agency (even in the face of strikingly contradictory evidence). Indeed, thinking seems to be much less important than we would like to think: a growing body of evidence from neuroscience would seem to suggest that it has much less to do with our actions than our individual experience and received wisdom would suggest. Indeed, it seems Andrew Ehrenberg’s (e.g. 1997) long-standing counter-intuitive view that our attitudes and opinions change *after* our behaviour changes (and not before) is largely true.

### The big implications for Marketing Research

Clearly, this line of thinking raises some important – and often fundamental – challenges to the contemporary practice of marketing research. Some of our biggest and most sacred assumptions are unpicked by this view.

If Herd theory is correct, individual respondents are clearly deeply unreliable witnesses to their own lives. They are equipped with a poor understanding of their own actions and the forces that shape them; indeed, their map of their lives is largely wrong. Yet a large – perhaps even the greatest – part of market research practice is based on the assumption that individual respondents are ultimately – when probed and questioned in the right context and in the right way – reliable. From the Herd perspective, this is *just plain wrong*, however plausible the explanation or credible the witness.

Similarly the way we move from individual to mass behaviour must be challenged: as Cova and Cova (2002) point out, we are used to taking the accounts of behaviour of a number of individuals – selected as representative of some larger universe – and aggregating those responses in order to paint a picture of the behaviour of a ‘market’, ‘consumer segment’ or some such grouping. In other words, we get to mass by aggregating individual responses. If Herd theory is correct, this approach misses the most important influence on any one respondent’s behaviour – past, present or future: *other people*.

Also, Herd theory questions the way that marketing and marketing research draws the map of change in mass behaviour: for example, it is taken as read by most practitioners that the primary relationship/interaction to be explored is that existing *between the company/brand and the individual consumer*, whereas Herd theory suggests that the key relationships to consider in shaping individual behaviour are those *between individual consumers and other individual consumers*. Only latterly (e.g. Reichheld) have some of us woken up to the fact that *what they say to each other* might be more important than what we say to them or that they hear us saying to them; for example, most advertising research is still about *what ads do to consumers* as opposed to (evolving Lannon and Cooper’s seminal paper) *what they do to each other* around us. Perhaps we should not be surprised: the client wants to know about “his advertising” and what “difference it will make”, rather than about the truth of how this or any other means will contribute to stimulating change.

### Hard to accept, hard to embrace

As can be seen from these very simple examples, Herd theory strikes hard at some of our profession’s most fundamental assumptions and practices. A number of practitioners will find this too much and reject the thinking and any recommendations out of hand (again, as Kuhn suggests, the resistance is strongest from those communities with most to lose). However, I have observed a number of different responses to the Herd line of thinking and its challenges to research practice.

For example, even at the most simple functional level, most practitioners find it hard to accept that our most basic survey tool – interviewing – is quite as unhelpful as the picture painted. It is hard to accept that the highly plausible accounts that individual respondents give of their own lives are ultimately not to be trusted – that these accounts are not based on any real knowledge of the mechanisms that drive that individual's behaviour and that – nice and interesting and vivid as they are – these accounts remain interesting psychological flotsam. So some practitioners listen, think about and discuss this proposal and then decide to ignore it because acceptance would mean accepting the fragile basis by which they earn their mortgages, sense of belonging and status in the world.

Alternatively, while some practitioners can accept this truth *intellectually*, in practice and when faced by real live respondents the truth is harder to embrace. Practitioners respond in a number of interesting ways to this: some abandon the surface of normal interviewing and insist on going *deeper* (Zaltman, 2003) into the subconscious of the individual brain, hoping to find the real mechanisms that drive individual behaviour. Others again abandon the mind and its unreliability altogether for the mere meat of the brain: after all, “brains don't lie” (Alps, 2006). Either way, this type of response seems misguided to say the least. Because individuals are (in most interviewing contexts) very bad guides to their own life does not mean that there has to be a place inside the individual where reliability is assured. Indeed, the point is that the behaviour is shaped by interaction with others and there *are* tools that can help us to understand and measure this (and where the tools don't exist there lies the opportunity to do so).

Other practitioners twist and turn themselves and their thinking inside out to *both accept and at the same time reject* the insight: while they may accept that respondents have a very poor understanding and awareness of the mechanisms shaping their own behaviour, practitioners often profess that they have the sense of understanding what respondents “mean” or “feel” or “would like” and so feel able to continue with traditional practice. This I have

termed the “Kevin Maclean Syndrome” after a leading UK practitioner: he thinks I am hiring him to understand consumers through traditional qualitative interviewing; I am more interested in his experience-led judgement of how the type of people who end up as respondents in the unusual and faulted context of qualitative research respond to the ideas we lay before them.

Of course, the theory and practice of marketing research are not somehow independent of the cultures and practices of the context in which they develop: marketing research is embedded in these larger contexts and cannot usefully declare independence; there is inevitably some kind of accommodation to be sought with old assumptions and old practices for most innovations.

On the one hand, the assumptions and practices of the businesses that buy and use market research inevitably impact on our ability to implement new practices based on any new paradigm. If for example a business has made a huge investment in “relationship” marketing techniques, it is going to find it difficult to embrace techniques and methodologies which insist that the prime relationship is between real people (and not between the brand and ‘consumers’). Equally, in those cultures in which the individual is a central tenet (or what Durckheim called a “cultural ideology”) such as the USA, it is going to be harder to accept practices and techniques which suggest that things work differently (this is perhaps why so many marketers have embraced ‘word-of-mouth’ marketing and market research techniques as an additional and complementary activity rather than a replacement). Except – and this is perhaps where the opportunity lies for innovation – where the problem or challenge remains large (e.g. in prediction likely success of a product concept) or where the phenomenon is new or uncharted by traditional approaches (e.g. in social media).

Finally, there is another tactic which practitioners use to head off for the unhelpfulness of questioning as a means to understand individual behaviour: that is, the use of “bricolage”, in other words, the use of multiple research techniques to provide understanding by seeing the issues



from a number of perspectives. While the pragmatic marketing researcher in me values and appreciates the effort – by so many means – made to understand the behaviour or issue to be studied, the theorist in me knows that bricolage is in an important sense merely another way to avoid doing the hard thinking about what we do and how we do it: no matter how many unhelpful tools one uses, the better solution is always going to be to have or develop better tools.

It is worth noting that while many of us working in this area feel that too much data is being generated by marketing researchers and research supplier – certainly too much to be usefully read and understood – Herd theory is not an argument for abandoning market research entirely. Quite the opposite: Herd theory argues for a different kind of market research, just as skilled, just as professional but hopeful more useful and relevant to today's concerns and today's understanding of what it is to be human. Sometimes this means dropping old practices and measurements; sometimes it means creating entirely new practices and measurements but more often than not it means repurposing our tools and our talents to do this different kind of market research.

### Fertile ground

Fortunately, the world of marketing research is a great field in which to be innovating. It enjoys low barriers to entry and change (if you have a new idea about how to use market research to understand or measure consumer behaviour, it is relatively easy to prototype it); the only real limits are set by the codes of practice of the industry bodies, and the receptivity of clients and data users. Oh, and the entrepreneurial instincts of practitioners.

And ours *is* an innovative community: a number of practitioners have been experimenting with different ways of approaching the central challenges of market research and developing both theory and practice hand-in-hand. In many ways, our industry is at least (if not more) innovative as the more “creative” marketing services sectors we have previously been overshadowed by (the roll-call of innovators is contained in the bibliography).

The next section of this paper reviews some of these most important innovations of recent years. To make the detail more accessible to readers, this review approaches the innovations as if they were part of some co-ordinated plan by a coherent and organised team of individuals working under the “herd” banner but the truth of course is otherwise. The use of this frame serves an additional benefit for this paper: it helps to identify areas for further development and raises some important theoretical questions that deserve more thinking and debate.

## “HERD” INNOVATIONS IN MARKET RESEARCH PRACTICE

### Thinking, asking and observing

Most marketing research practice today is shaped by a bundle of assumptions about human behaviour that might most usefully be described as the “thinking individualist” model (the roots of this model reach deep into our Enlightenment Culture). Each of these assumptions has corresponding research techniques/tactics. (See figure 1.)

The “thinking individualist” model suggests that individuals are largely self-determining; that they do what they do largely as the result of some accessible internal mental processes (whether ‘rational’ or ‘emotional’ thinking is unimportant); that in order to change the behaviour of an individual, we have to impact on the thinking or feeling in some way prior to the behaviour changing; that the way to understand large numbers of individuals (will) behave is to sample representatives from that population and aggregate the accounts.

Herd theory rejects the thinking/feeling part of this description, partly because first, (pace Ehrenberg) attitudinal change tends to follow behavioural change rather than precede it and second (and more profoundly) that mental processes are much less important in shaping individual's behaviour than is commonly thought. (Nobel Laureate Daniel Kahnemann (2002) describes this as the “Lazy Mind” model. He also suggests that *human beings are to thinking what cats are to swimming* – they can if they really have to but will tend to make efforts to avoid it).

**FIGURE 1**  
**SUMMARY OF IMPLICATIONS: INDIVIDUALIST VS. HERD**

Individualist	Herd
<p><b>Theatrical Assumptions</b></p> <p>Individuals are self-determining</p> <p>Mental processes /opinions precede / cause behaviour</p> <p>Key to changing behaviour is changing / impacting on individual mental processes.</p>	<p>Mutual (and often invisible) influence</p> <p>Mental process / opinions largely follow behaviour</p> <p>Key to changing behaviour is changing behaviour / perceived behaviour in social context</p>
<p><b>Research Implications</b></p> <p>Focus on isolated individuals</p> <p>Thinking feeling</p> <p>Asking / Answering</p> <p>Representative samples of individuals</p>	<p>Focus on interconnectness</p> <p>Influence</p> <p>Observing / monitoring</p> <p>Representative samples of groups /networks /network member typologies</p>

The Herd research practitioner thus largely ignores opinions, attitudes and descriptions of internal cognitive processes. Asking what individuals think, feel or (think they) do is only ever going to marginally valuable. What matters instead is observation: either the ethnographic approach that Cova et al (2002, 2005) advocate with its roots in the more ‘social’ social sciences such as Anthropology and Sociology; or indeed the behavioural interaction that is identified by analysis of telephone or other social media usage (e.g. though analysis of customer-customer interaction over time).

**Influence and the Influentials**

Rather than assume that individuals make decisions on their own, Herd practitioners acknowledge that the prime behaviour-shaping feature of the context for human life is other people (real or imagined). Thus, rather than seeking to understand how individuals decide, the focus is on how individuals influence each other. In this context there is still quite a lot of debate to be had to resolve quite how that influence arises, how it operates and how to observe it. Some – following the network theory that fired Malcolm Gladwell’s Tipping Point – insist that some individuals are just more influential on their peers than others. Good examples here are Berry and Keller (2003)

whose book title (“The Influentials – One American in Ten Tells the Other Nine How to Vote, Where to Eat and What to Buy”) makes their assumptions pretty clear and OLR’s Cooke and Matteson whose social protagonist concept has inspired a more collaborative and deliberative research approach capable of real scalability (see below).

On the other side of the debate are those that take their cues from complexity theory and behavioural economics: a number of these are academics using modelling techniques to test different assumptions about influence against the observable data. Bentley et al (various) for example have identified that the idea of superconnectors, mavens et al are unnecessary in explaining how behaviour changes through a large population: copying and random drift appear to be sufficient in explaining the (as it turns out) largely predictable changes in record buying behaviour, fashion, baby-naming and so on. Watts (2006) points out that the important element in cascades of behaviour through any given population is the availability of others to pass the behaviour on, rather than a particularly powerful causal behaviour or influential originator or “influential” nodal consumer. Certainly, copying would make sense for examining human



behaviour cascades: as the evolutionary psychologists point out, copying is more important to learning in homo sapiens than in related species because we have both more complex social environments to navigate and we give birth to our infants 12 months more premature than our cousins. There is clearly more to be done to explore these two opposing explanations for mass behavioural change.

A hybrid – and pragmatic – approach is suggested by Blades and Phillips (2005) in their award-winning paper: they identify up to eight different types of influence on an individual’s purchase behaviour. Their methodology is qualitative and iterative, tracing back influencers and influences through a series of follow-on interviews. This allows them to trace maps of influence (see figure 2).

They even report ways of integrating the understanding gained with existing quantitative databases to ‘tag’ individuals/individual data files. This offers a very practical means to understand how the influence of others works on purchasers in specific categories (and

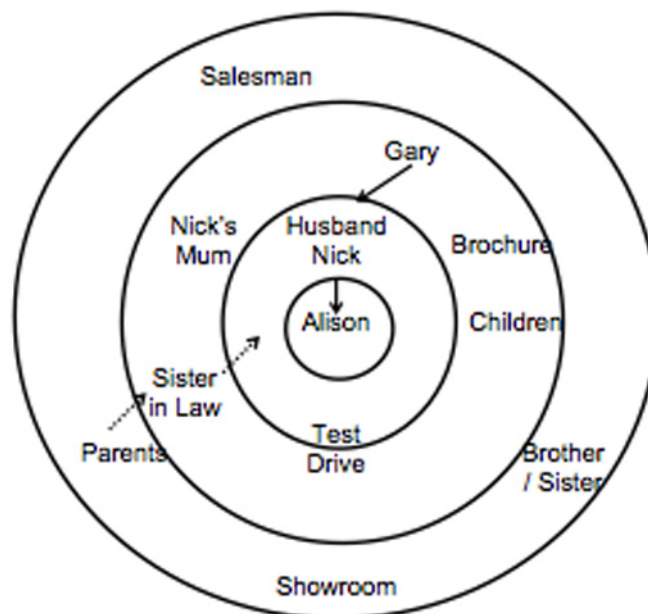
thus suggests how to allocate marketing actions to harness the mechanism).

**Sampling individuals or sampling the context**

If – as Herd theory suggests – individual purchase and consumption behaviour is shaped and takes place in the company (and therefore, the context) of others, then it makes little sense that we create samples of individuals that are representative of the mass of individuals, as if they and their behaviour was indeed disconnected one from another. Even in the eyes of the pragmatist, our standard sampling approaches for both qualitative and quantitative survey methods are hard to defend when they are considered in this light.

Instead, it would seem far more sensible (if you buy the network theory of Gladwell et al) to sample individuals on the basis of the primary role that that they play within their social network. One example is the approach pioneered by Pollard and Yakob (2006) for weighting media audience research based on the idea of consumer message propagation through networks: marketing

**FIGURE 2  
INFLUENCE MAP**



Source: Blades and Phillips (2005).

messages are more effectively cascaded through populations through those with greater connections and greater propensity to spread them than through those with lesser propensities.

More broadly – and for the network-sceptic – this might mean qualitative research being conducted *within* social networks (rather than on samples of false and quickly constructed focus groups with individual respondents extracted from the reality of their own social contexts); it might mean reverting to household interviewing, or hobby group or whatever social context appears to be relevant to the behaviour to be understood.

Unfortunately – as too many practitioners aver – this will certainly involve a significantly increased expense, some of which will have to be passed on to clients.

### **The wisdom (or otherwise) of crowds**

One of the most important uses made of market research data is to predict the future – whether or not the methodology is designed for this, whether or not a particular report bears any kind of statistical health warning.

This is traditionally done by interviewing individuals to provide their accounts of their own lives: sometimes particular types of responses, interest, engagement, etc.) are used to predict that individual's likely future action. More often than not – particularly in qualitative and in product/concept testing – a behavioural propensity question is asked directly and explicitly of the individual respondent. Notwithstanding the correlation noted by several authors between purchase propensity and past (rather than future) behaviour, this continues to be used as a 'common-sense' indicator of future success for many practitioners and all too many users.

By contrast, Kearon et al (2005) have utilised the hitherto little appreciated power of the Herd to guess collectively more accurately than the smartest (or best informed) individual over a series of guesses about *other people's behaviour*. For Herd practitioners it is no surprise that this should prove so powerful: if individuals of our species have a specialist subject, it must be what other people do. We are after all "Super Social Apes" (Earls 2007).

Kearon's approach is two-fold: first, for high-end concept sorting (where the research objective is primarily to sort potential winners from the mediocre and run-of-the-mill concepts that clutter up NPD programmes, costing companies \$millions) he asks (diverse but non-representative) respondents to judge *what other people* will find most interesting and most attractive. Again and again, this has proved quicker, cheaper and at least as accurate in predicting success as traditional methods. Moreover, in those cultures (such as some Central American cultures) in which all 'new news' generates a strong positive research response (but poor real world one), the technique which harnesses our ability to predict what other people might do is highly discriminating. For more fully developed concepts and marketing mixes, a full online trading environment such as that pioneered by Berg et al (2001) at the Tippie Business School, Iowa, has been properly beta tested and is due for public release shortly.

### **FUTURE THINKING**

#### **More "what if's" and more "thens"?**

So far, so good: thus far we have reviewed some of the more important innovations that practitioners have already made (or advocated) in pursuit of the new insights into human behaviour and the new phenomena confronting them. Taken together this work amounts to a significant break with traditional thinking and offers marketers a host of opportunities to better understand the behaviour of their consumers and the degree to which their efforts to change that behaviour are working. As a catalogue of different practices this short review describes a whole new school of marketing research – one more suited for the world of hyper-connectivity, social media and consumer activism.

This is, however, just the beginning. There are many more opportunities to apply the Herd perspective to marketing research, many more areas in which to innovate. The more we consider the world from a Herd point of view, the more challenges we see to existing ways of thinking and existing practices.

This third section explores a number of important issues that Herd theory and the new world of hyper-connectivity raise or reveal. My intention in exploring these issues is to tease out – in theory at least – some further contributions that Herd theory can make to market research practice. That said, this section is more speculative than previous ones.

### Rethinking Communication?

One of the subjects that marketing researchers often have to deal with is communication: particularly the impact of commercial communication on consumers, their attitudes and their behaviour and within this, the evaluation of proposed creative content. But is herd-thinking unpicking the certainties of communications and challenging how we go about understanding, describing and measuring communication activity?

A number of different challenges are accumulating in debate around this issue, from the relative incidence and importance of brand-to-consumer and consumer-consumer communication in shaping behaviour to the extreme of suggesting that neither form of communication is best understood as an information-transmission activity.

At the simplest level, it has become widely accepted that what customers say to each other is often as important as what we say to them (or they remember us saying to them). However, many of us now feel that this may well understate matters: Reichheld (2003), Keller (2003, 2005) and Pollard (2006) would propose a stronger version, i.e. that what customers say to each other is actually *more important* than what we say to them. Edelman (2006) would actually go further: their analysis of historical survey data would suggest that – “even in the golden age of the TV networks” (the 1970s) – ‘other people’ was the most trusted source of information about new products.

If any (or all) of these claims is correct, it would mean that we need to shift the locus of communication research from the communication vehicle and/or medium, the audience being targeted by either of these and the interface between the vehicle, the medium and the audience

... to the audience members (and their friends/families etc), the interaction between them and the content of that interaction (i.e. what they say to each other).

This would seem to raise practical challenges for researchers: on the one hand, we have to develop new ways of thinking about and tracking conversations that are had by our target audience and their friends as well as finding understanding how to unpack the significance of those conversations. Is online activity really a good guide to offline behaviour – is it the same kind of thing or different? How can we observe both in such a way as to provide valuable comparisons?

But there are also some important cultural challenges: not least the shift in focus from the brand-consumer interaction to the consumer-consumer interaction. Even those engaged in the lively world of word-of-mouth marketing research struggle here: what concerns brand owners and their agencies most is what you might call “exogenous” WoM (i.e. that generated within a population by the activities of some external agent or organisation. It’s almost as if only marketing-stimulated WoM is proper and worthy of study; as if no consumers talked to each other before WoM came along when in fact one of the few things that we do know about human beings is their incessant talking to each other about things large and small. “Endogenous” WoM is likely to be important – more important than, perhaps – and if not cast a shadow, then provide a backdrop of the bigger conversation against which exogenous WoM is judged.

At heart, what this kind of thinking leads us to a fundamental rethink of our audience: not the passive body (that Ehrenreich 2007 describes) of individuals whose primary role is that of ‘consumer’ waiting attently for and responding to the stimulus we provide. Instead, the ‘audience’ gets redefined as a group of real people leading primarily social real lives, interacting with each other and occasionally – very occasionally – doing so around things and messages we put in their world.

You should now feel a slightly uncomfortable feeling arising in you (unless you are a social researcher); a sense that the interests you otherwise represent

(your clients, their products or advertising or whatever) are actually not that important in the lives of the people we insist on calling consumers.

Which would be the truth, if only we were prepared to listen: the really important stuff in the lives of those who we call ‘consumers’ is not consumption but *other people*. It is curious to ponder that in order to properly – finally – fulfil classical or ‘Kotlerian’ Marketing’s objective of orientating business activities around the interests of the consumer, might actually require us to abandon the notion “the consumer” altogether.

### Communication as behaviour

There is another aspect to communication which raises some interesting issues for marketing researchers: even a common-sense, pragmatic interpretation of ‘communication’ deals in terms of transmitting information from A to B (and possibly back to A again but we’re only just getting used to Lannon and Cooper’s (X) challenge). We measure attention, interest, comprehension, recall, recognition, persuasion and a host of other things to help us understand how pieces of communication-as-information transmission work. And we’ve been ingenious over the years in developing new versions of these basic metrics, new ways of expressing or combining them. But are we right to think of communication this way? Is the kind of communication that shapes (or not) consumer behaviour actually best understood as being even primarily concerned with information transmitted from one party to another? Or is there a more useful way of thinking about the relationship between what we call communication and behaviour?

Certainly, some of today’s more interesting communications thinkers might be understood to be saying so: the high profile US creative agency Crispin Porter Bogusky (2006) talk not of persuasion or image but of creating “Hoopla”. What they seem to be describing is more than stimulating consumer WoM (although this is one outcome); what they really seem to be after is more a sense of excitement in the social world surrounding the brand advertised (which is not dissimilar from the ‘energy’ (Earls 2003) in focus groups which qualitative

practitioners will recognise when an interesting or exciting thought or piece of work is presented to consumers).

A similar thought is the ‘branded utility’ notion that Johnny Vulkan of the NYC-based Anomaly has proposed: powerful creative communication just like product design and experience is, he insists first and foremost “social useful” – it helps folk interact around it. This seems very close to the “Social Object” theory of Jaiku (a new social medium service) founder Jyri Engstrom (2007) which in its turn has echoes of Malinowski’s (1922/1984) Kula notion. In this context, (Jones 2007) it is also worth considering the ‘toy-etics’ concern of computer game design (not just how much fun a game is but how much fun it is to play with other folk and to do so again and again).

A number of strands run through most of these examples:

- the primary outcome seems to be social interaction (not transmission);
- the communication activity (or service design in Engstrom’s case) is thought of as an object (rather than an act);
- and finally, our usual considerations (the internal processes of the individual audience members) appear to be much less interesting than the behaviour generated (Engstrom advises that social media designers think about *verbs* rather than messages).

How do we make sense of this? And how do we understand the mechanism sufficiently to design research around such phenomena?

### Analogic vs. Digital Communication

One source is a classic text on how human communication affects human behaviour, Watzlawick (1967) Pragmatics of Human Communication. This little-read book draws a clear distinction between thinking of communication as a medium for transmitting information (“digital” communication) and thinking of communication as a behaviour which stimulates a behavioural response (“analogic”).

Watzlawick underlines how readily we resort to thinking about communication as if it were digital and contained information but how much of it merely seems to be behavioural and content-lite. In a classic passage, he describes the experience of many cat owners: when you return to your home, your cat appears to “greet you”, to “tell you how much you are missed” and so on. The truth of course, is that the cat is not “telling you anything” (however much the meows and miaows suggest otherwise): there is not digital information being transmitted from the cat to you (even though it may seem so and you may well relate the story as if this was true). All the cat is doing is behaving towards you in such a way as to stimulate the kind of behavioural response it seeks (attention, stroking/grooming and of course, feeding).

This echoes the sociological and linguistic notion of ‘phatic’ speech: speech, vocalisation and gesture that has a social rather than an informational function. Japanese speakers have “*aizuchi*” – the collection of nods, gestures and noises which confirm to a speaker that the listener is paying attention to the content of what is being said. The rest of us have general small talk which has no real informational function but serves many more important social purposes. For example, the British obsession with discussing the weather confuses many foreigners; its use is clearly social rather than informational (see Fox 2005).

Perhaps behavioural responses are not just more important than we thought (Hall and Partners have recently revamped their brand tracking products to build in specific behavioural responses in addition to the attitudinal and emotional ones that the Framework Models are based on); perhaps behavioural responses are what really matter because although communication activity looks as if it is digital, it turns out to be analogue. It turns out to be behaviour rather than transmission-based.

Further work and thinking needs doing in this area, but what strikes many Herd advocates is that what we are really trying to do with much marketing communication activity is to stimulate and propagate new behaviours

through a population (or rather get a population to do this for themselves, rather than persuade (i.e. change the mind of) anyone to independently choose to behave differently). It should be no surprise that every product page on Amazon has 16 mechanisms for encouraging this kind of behavioural propagation. What kind of communication is that? (See figure 3.)

If we are right about this, then the challenge now is to work out how to observe, measure and understand ‘analogic’ communication and to do so within large numbers of interacting individuals. And say goodbye to the old ‘digital’ model of communication and our methodologies built on it.

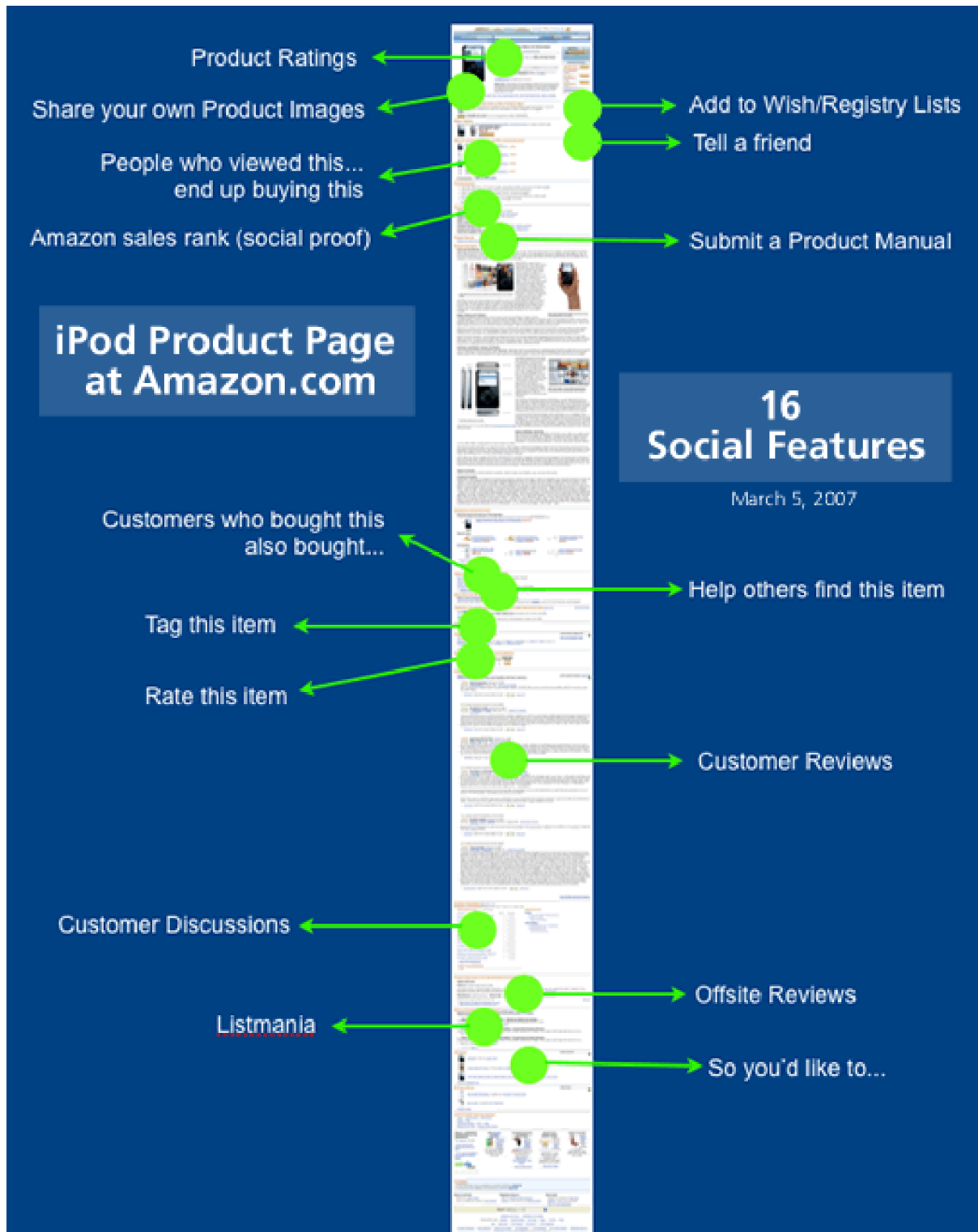
### **Living with complexity**

In everyday speech, we often confuse the meaning of two words commonly applied to the behaviour of our curious little species: we often say ‘complicated’ when we mean ‘complex’ and vice versa. ‘Complicated’ tends to be more correctly used to refer to behaviour that is difficult to understand or explain, whereas ‘complex’ has a very precise meaning in this context: ‘complex’ behaviour is a phenomenon which results primarily from the interaction of individual agents. The second big set of problems that Herd theory raises for market research is that it sees human behaviour as essentially complex – complicated (as in ‘hard to understand’), for sure, but fundamentally *complex*. Before we understand how this causes us problems it is worth being really clear about complexity.

Schelling opens his classic text (1980) on complex behaviour with a description and analysis of how the patterns generated by the members of the audience in the lecture halls dominated his teaching life. He notes how individual members of the audience may end up in very different places at different times (depending on their interaction with other individuals and the extent to which they themselves apply or weight the established rules for Western audiences in this kind of context); and yet, the type of pattern of audience seating tends not to change much – the front seats are rarely full and the audience tends to



FIGURE 3  
AMAZON'S SOCIAL DESIGN



Source: Porter, 2007



bunch in groups (particularly on the edge of the aisles). This is *complex* behaviour generated by the interaction of individuals with each other.

So how does this challenge our ability to study human behaviour? The answer lies in three aspects.

The first problem is that we find complexity in general difficult to discern from either randomness or ‘complicatedness’. As Nisbett (2003) documents, there is a strong cognitive bias embedded in Western culture that overestimates our ability to trace causal connections in the world. We expect – as Taleb (2007) notes – to be able to trace the causal mechanisms on the surface of things: failure to do this is disconcerting. We either dismiss the causal mechanisms as “random” (again not used in the strict mathematical sense) or we fall back on the ‘difficult to understand’ portmanteau term of ‘complex/complicated’. Added to these cognitive issues is the assumption – largely culturally distributed, it seems – that complicated (yes, difficult to understand things) cannot arise from simple causes. This is quite wrong, of course – high degrees of richness and ‘complexity’ (in the strict sense) can be generated from very simple algorithms. The famous flocking simulation, Boids, is perhaps the best example in the literature: three rules (keep up, keep going in the same direction as your peers and try not to bump into anyone) are capable of generating a rich flocking pattern, which mimics that of birds in the wild. Others have used the same approach to model human behaviour in traffic and everyday and emergency uses of spaces.

The second problem with our attempts to understand complex behaviour is that we imagine that individual accounts are not only generally true (see above) but also accurate: we tend to trust the description that the individuals involved give us of the ‘hows’ and ‘whys’, not recognising that within a complex system, no agent has the full picture (however accurate their accounts of their own lives are). In seeking to understand the behaviour of the system as a whole (i.e. at the group level of Schelling’s lecture-hall audience), the accounts of the individual agent are necessarily unlikely to be much help

because the individual is just one part of the mechanism. Equally, in seeking to understand the behaviour of an individual within the crowd (something we seem to try to do all too often), we imagine that the individual’s behaviour is shaped by their own internal processes or that the individual will be aware of outside forces impacting on them (both of which are untrue). We are led again and again to see the individual in isolation from the context that shapes their behaviour. We would do well to revisit Schelling again: most human life is spent responding to a context which consists of other people responding to the responses of other people (and so on) but our minds tell us otherwise.

The third and most profound problem with complex behaviour phenomena is of a different order and is rooted in our ignorance about what complexity looks like. Complexity must be unstable, we assume, given so many different factors interacting all the time. Whereas the truth is quite the opposite: complexity often underpins long-term stability (but can lead to sudden and violent changes which look ‘random’ or ‘complicated’). One well-documented (e.g. Ball 2004) example is Power Laws: when you see something like the 80:20 Pareto Principle common so beloved of the loyalty and relationship marketers, it is more than likely that any surface stability conceals complexity beneath (as we should expect if behaviour really is the result of the interaction of individual agents).

Taken together, these aspects of complexity challenge some of our most important cognitive assumptions.

- Complexity is difficult to deal with because our minds seem to be built (in the West at least) to expect to discern the mechanisms easily and quickly; anything else seems ‘random’, just too difficult to understand.
- Complex behaviour is difficult to live with because there is no individual agent whose actions drive the behaviour (indeed we suspect that there is no agent with a true or accurate account of the mechanisms behind their own behaviour or the behaviour of others).
- Complex behaviour is difficult for us to handle because it can look very stable, very ordered (the

opposite of what we imagine complexity to generate) but at the same time be prone to sudden and apparently unpredictable change.

If these things are true for the amateur student of human behaviour, then it is no less valid for us professionals: complex behaviour doesn't offer up its mechanisms to us as observers or participants and while it may remain stable for a long time, it can also suddenly and unpredictably change. Stability is affected by connectedness, it seems: the one characteristic feature of our modern world.

The answer for market researchers of course is not to rush to measure more things that lie 'on the surface' as a way of compensating for the lack of causal patterns discernible to us, nor is it to run and hide (the 'random' and 'complicated' response).

Rather it is important to hold our nerve (and that of our data users who like us will continue to trace patterns of causality on the surface) and resist over measurement. Instead, acknowledging our tendencies we should of course understand the interactions of agents in a system and ideally the rules of interaction, seek to identify 'indicators of instability': metrics that suggest a change in the system's behaviour.

Oh, and perhaps accept that human behaviour is far harder to predict both at an individual and at a mass level than it might at first – or generally, indeed – seem or want it to be.

### **Out there and in here**

Depending on your point of view, the vision all this suggests of the future of marketing research might seem utopian or dystopian. However, it surely reflects a profound re-drawing of our map of the world.

The final aspect of this redrawing is the removal of the barriers we have raised between "us-in-here" and "them-out-there". We tend to value the distinction between "in here" and "out there" because it makes us feel more objective, more rational, more "scientific", as we act as guides to the world beyond company walls.

Marketing researchers like this kind of role – it gives us and our work some sense of importance and a sense that our "data" is not just valuable but at the same time somehow clean and pure.

It is undeniable that the agenda of those of us *in here* tends to shape how we perceive what we seek to understand *out there* and in many ways genuinely distorts how we see it. See for example, the preference in word of mouth marketing research for *exogenous* word of mouth over *endogenous* word of mouth (that what is generated by the social system itself, rather than by outside stimulus) as discussed above. The fact is the walls between us and them have been crumbling rapidly in recent years, not least because of the impact of the internet (Prahalad, 2006); we as market research practitioners and our professional bodies would do well to embrace this change, rather than ignore it.

To be fair, a minority of practitioners are already facing down this truth (codes of conduct notwithstanding – Griffiths' (2004) experiments with focus group respondent collaboration ran very close to accepted rules of what is and what is not appropriate and acceptable practice). But this is no new phenomenon: it has long been known (Marsden, 2006) that the market research does not leave respondents untouched; Cooke (2003) et al have turned this insight into a deliberative form of market research (for organisations like the UK Department of Health or BskyB). In these "Summits", respondents, clients and researchers all work together to address, prioritise and solve problems in service design and delivery.

Of course, all of the participants are changed by the experience – both clients *and* respondents. And researchers, also, in particular in their view of their role as researcher: no longer are they white-coated, lab-rats, observing, describing and measuring the internal processes and behavioural responses of individual respondents. More and more, like Margaret Mead's school of anthropology or RD Laing's strand of wild psychiatry, they are participants in the world of respondents and not passive observers. Just as for

those working with these experimental and leading-edge practices, so for the rest of us. Whether we like it or not, the Herd perspective is raising important challenges not just to what we measure, understand and describe or how we do these things; it is challenging some of our most profound views of ourselves and relationship to respondents and the outside world.

## CONCLUSIONS

This paper has tried to trace the theoretical and practical implications of a new way of seeing consumer behaviour – the Herd model.

In doing so, it has demonstrated quite how fertile the research world is – in many ways more innovative than its counterpart in the creative or media industries. A host of innovations, both theoretical and practical, are collectively – albeit with little co-ordination or conscious collaboration – charting a new kind of market research, and not just one limited to a particular marketing discipline or a particular aspect of human behaviour. The practitioners responsible should be proud of their achievements and others be encouraged by what has been done already in, for example, rethinking prediction or redefining the role of attitudes/opinions in shaping behaviour or more fundamentally in accepting, embracing and moving beyond the uncomfortable truth about the unreliability of individual consumers' accounts of their own lives.

That said, we have barely begun. The changes that have prompted the theoretical rethinks – the rise of the internet and new technology – are going to continue to shape the world we seek to understand in ways that are hard to trace from this point in time. And – just like the human behaviour that is the proper study of market researchers – the shape of our industry is complex. Our industry is built through the interaction of individual agents (who like consumers are often blind to the influences on their own decision-making). In moving away from the individualist psychology influences which have shaped so much of what we do – shaped as they in turn are by the Anglo Saxon culture in which they are embedded – we are becoming open to a much

broader conception of human behaviour, taken from a much broader set of behavioural sciences, most of which assume (as Herd theory does) that humans are essentially *social creatures and social influence is the prime factor shaping the behaviour of individuals*.

The big issues identified in the latter half of this paper – communication as a behaviour, the difficulty of living with complexity and the removal of the barriers between “in here” and “out there” – suggest that both practitioners and the industry bodies have a lot more work to do just to catch up with what is going on today. But it is all there for the taking: lots of clues are already laid down by the pioneers.

This is undoubtedly a very exciting time to be in marketing and marketing research. As Brecht put it, “everything is in motion again”. This generation has a chance to reshape its discipline as the world around it changes and new insights into human behaviour emerge and are tested and re-applied to marketing research.

The final thought goes to a character in another play (Stoppard's *Arcadia*) who says with relish, “Oh, to be at the beginning again, knowing almost nothing”. A number of us feel just the same way about what lies ahead.

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#### Footnotes

1. See Earls (2002, 2007) for detailed bibliography.

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