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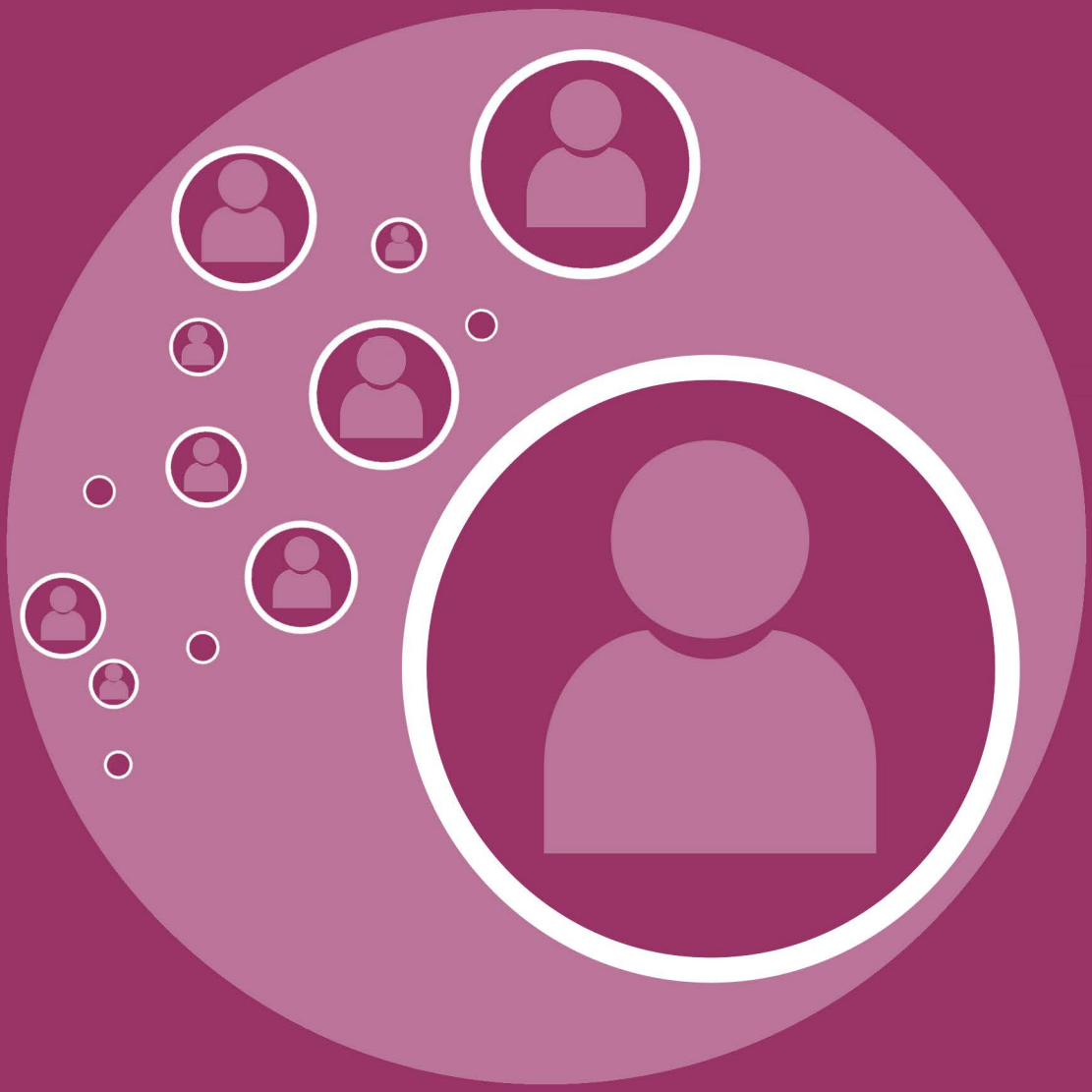

Managing the multiverse

Understanding a world in transformation

MRS Delphi Group

MRS Evidence Matters™

Contents

About MRS Delphi Group

The MRS Delphi Group is led by a collection of respected thinkers in the marketing and research sectors. The Group delivers valuable insight across a range of important business, social and political issues.

The Steering Board includes: Colin Strong, Ipsos (chair), Gemma Proctor, Sparkler; Dr. Nick Baker, Savanta; Kevin Evans, Pepsico; Zoe Ruffels, GSK; Jake Steadman, Deliveroo; Rhea Fox, Aviva; Robert Kitching, Unilever; Gerry Power, M&C Saatchi World Services; Jane Frost, CEO of MRS.

Foreword

Jane Frost, Chief Executive, MRS

Among other things like curiosity and adaptability, this report is also about empathy. It's a word that has been doing the rounds a lot lately and as a result its currency is a little devalued. However, this report really demonstrates the true value of empathy to business and society in our 'multiverse' world.

If we look back at some of the cultural and political narratives of pre 1950s Britain which are now being questioned, it sometimes seems laughable that the world was presented so simplistically. Just a few commonly held truths managed to whitewash millions of real lived experiences – experiences of Empire, of gender, of class, of race and so on.

But of course, the lived experiences were different; we just didn't know that much about other people's lives or we didn't care to find out.

In 2021, the 75th anniversary of MRS, we can take pride in how this industry was a pioneer in its attempts to examine these various truths.

Technology has enabled us to know so much more about other peoples' lived experiences. It's all available in the data and videos, the blogs and posts, the reporting and polling, the surveys and ratings. In this accelerating and increasingly connected world these experiences are now more influential because they can within a few hours create and destroy markets, governments and individuals.

So the multiverse is available to everyone, and individual voices have potential to be supremely influential. But just tapping into the multiverse doesn't create understanding, and certainly not empathy. For empathy you need to understand the framework of a person's experience, not just their message. And then you need to be able to respond appropriately. To add to the complexity, these frameworks aren't static; our circumstances and values can change over time.

In his commentary on page 14 Carlsberg's Nick Rich explains how this plays directly into the purpose of research and insight. He writes that the research sector is expertly equipped to reflect and manage the multiverse, in order to help organisations make good decisions. Businesses can be islands of stability in a disrupted and cacophonous world; but only if they are plugged into the main frame of consumer experience. Ipsos' Ben Page tells us that while trust in politicians continues to wax and wane, trust in business leaders is higher than ever.

So for me the take away from this report is that we all need to do more to ensure that business leaders know where to look for the insight that will help them build that trust with consumers, and respond appropriately to their needs. The goal is more than just good financial sense; the goal should also be to support a stable, fair and empathetic society.

Jane Frost CBE,
Chief Executive, MRS

Executive summary

We are in the midst of an infodemic, where there is more information than ever before, and yet we seem to disagree more than ever on how to see the world.

In Europe, since the seventeenth century a small body of people were empowered to seek out a single, 'rational' way of looking at the world. This shared understanding of how we look at the world has offered a means of political dialogue and progress.

But the consensus sits behind this approach is radically changing: there is an increased recognition that the data we choose to represent us, and how it is presented is never neutral.

This report explores how:

- The meta narratives that have created a sense of order and shared understanding of the world are being questioned by the multiverse of perspectives that technology has helped to enable.
- Finding agreement on one single way of looking at the world is increasingly unlikely.
- This has created a tension – what constitutes legitimate perspectives is a battleground which is finding its form in many places, not least conspiracy theories.
- Data is never neutral and can be intentionally or unintentionally misinterpreted, but is still often regarded as more objective and rational than reported experience.

None of the above is news for the research industry, well used as it is to navigate the complex streams of information and data about people.

What has changed is that with open access to this information, there is an urgent need for the industry to apply these skills to help businesses and society make decisions that are transformative, fair and more representative.

Key messages for the research industry from this report are:

- We need to lead this transformation in how business, government and society understand the multitude of perspectives that are held.
- Through the process of identifying, describing and quantifying the multitude of perspectives that exist on any one topic, we can demonstrate that the notion of a single 'rational' perspective no longer has the same value or credibility it once did.
- The industry is setting the scene for the transformation of how we navigate, negotiate and coalesce the way we live together, forging respect for diversity and difference rather than seeking to insist on a single 'truth' about the world.
- This is the huge transformation of our age for which the industry is at the helm: providing the framework, the operations and principles for the nurturing and flourishing of our multiverse world.

"There is an urgent need for the industry to apply these skills to help businesses and society make decisions that are transformative, fair and more representative."

Introduction

Colin Strong, Chair of the MRS Delphi Group

How do we make sense of the world?

We live in a world where the integration of digital technology into our lives means ever more of our behaviours are represented by data. But at the heart of all this information that we have about ourselves, there is a subtle but critically important point as we consider the issue of transformation. Our world seems increasingly fractured: to what extent can the data that is chosen to represent us, reflect the reality of our many and varied lives? The proliferation of ways we can be represented is transformational: but can we agree on how to do this?

In a world of economic polarisation do figures about national or global financial well being reflect the life of many communities whose financial wellbeing, stagnant for decades, has hugely suffered due to COVID? In a world where the narrative is that digital technology is transforming our lives, does this actually translate into the lives of most people whose needs governments and brands claim to seek to address?

This report explores a tension between the way in which technology means that data is more available than ever before, but at the same time risks not representing the very people whose lives it is intended to reflect.

The research industry operates at the intersection between the data that tracks what we do and the huge range of people's lived experiences. As such, the industry can lead a much broader agenda for society where we have a role in bringing sense to data about us so we can find this shared understanding and prevent a slide into conflict and polarisation.

This is a report about transformation: the transformation is about the move from the notion that there is only a single legitimate world view outside of which all else is irrational. The move that has been afoot for some time now, is the need for a multiverse of understanding of our very human diversity. The multiverse perspective, which has always been at the heart of our industry, holds that views different to our own cease to be wrong or threatening, but ones to be considered and understood.

Part 1: Data and its limitations

Our data centric world

We live in a world where technology means we now have unparalleled access to data about more or less anything we decide we need. Of course, we have always attempted to datafy the world – think mapping, scientific experiments, weather forecasting, censuses.

But what has changed is the degree to which technology has today facilitated this process. The value of access to data is clear: whether we are a commercial organisation, government or other public body, we need a commonly agreed starting point. We need some form of shared understanding about the world if there is to be a possibility of progress and peaceful dispute resolution. Governments need data on the economy, health, wellness and so on. For brands scorecards will encompass a wide range of commercial metrics, employee measures (e.g. employee engagement), consumer insights (e.g. brand awareness, brand attitudes).

We take for granted that these numbers offer us straightforward and even irrefutable facts, and while we may disagree about policy or strategy, the data we use is expected to offer an objective description, that we can all agree on, of the world we inhabit.

William Davies describes this as the legacy of the Scientific Revolution that occurred in the seventeenth century, in his book Nervous States. The creation of modern government during that time not only required methodical record-keeping by a central professional administrative structure, but also depended on the emergence of people able to collect and make sense of this data. Davies sets out the way that the original premise of the disciplines that arose from this was to create the basis for a shared social understanding and therefore peace.

But we have challenges to this project. First, the way we are represented by data collected about us is being challenged in fundamental ways – when we look in the mirror of data collected about us, is it ourselves that we see? Second, our capability to make sense of the data collected about us is under scrutiny and many psychologists consider that we are to be found wanting.

Does data represent who we are?

It is tempting to think that we can collect data that offers a shared understanding of the world. Indeed, for us to avoid simply throwing 'alternative facts' at each other then some form of agreement of the world as represented in data, is as Davies points out, still as essential for peace as ever. But what are some of the challenges with this?

Data is never neutral

Media historian Lisa Gitelman coined the phrase "'Raw Data' is an Oxymoron" to indicate that selection of data necessarily involves making decisions: about which data to look at, what variables to generate, what constitutes an outlier, and so on. These decisions involve human judgement, often well intentioned, but guided by assumptions or hypotheses concerning what is important and why.

Indeed, we have seen the way in which during COVID the relationship between policy and scientific data has been strained. The notion that government policy has simply been 'following the science' drew much criticism as it was apparent that this was used as a means for justifying particular policy decisions that might otherwise have been more closely scrutinised.

"When we look in the mirror of data collected about us, is it ourselves that we see?"

Part 1: Data and its limitations

But alongside this there has been a hollowing out of the role of experts that collect and present data suggesting that their 'objective' lens is a smokescreen for their own vested interests: Indeed, Michael Gove famously suggested that we have all had enough of experts. There has always been a balancing act on this issue. As Davies points out:

"The expert culture that was born in the late seventeenth century viewed society as just another physical object to be measured and observed, like human anatomy or the movement of the planets, and yet experts are also inhabitants of society, benefiting from its progress, potentially converting their own influence into money and power. This same problem afflicts expertise today."

Today we can see the way in which official numbers, whether from commercial organisations or government departments do not sit outside of politics. Many people consider that the data they see offers a version of reality that only reflects the world of a small and privileged proportion of society. Indeed. As Angela Saini points out in her books ('Superior: The Return of Race Science', and 'Inferior: How Science Got Women Wrong'), expertise and the data that is collected can be used as a cover for fundamentally problematic views.

The cause of this is clearly in no small part self-inflicted: data can be collected and leveraged in a selective manner to justify commercial and policy activity rather than being sought a means of genuine insight. Too often the direction of travel can appear to start with the conclusion and then work back to find data to fit and validate the decision. This has led to a decline in confidence of data.

Davies backs this up by citing how although 90% of people trust the office for National Statistics, only 26% trust the Government to represent the statistics in an honest fashion.

Does data reflect what matters?

There is a beguiling sense of authority to 'data' that can make it hard to disagree with. Often data that has been collected in an apparently neutral way via technology is considered superior and is used to challenge other sources such as survey data. Of course, this hides the wide variety of ways in which any data collect process comes with its own representation of the world.

On this, Davies suggests that "Numbers allow us to see the world objectively, but the flip side of that is that they eliminate feeling". He cites the way that, over time, numbers became a way of signalling that one was being objective and apolitical, focused on facts and immune to sentiment (see also Susan Herbst for more on this). As such, personal accounts of lived experience can be relegated as being less important: numbers that have been collected may reflect what I am doing, how I am behaving in great detail. But do they tell you want I am thinking and how I am feeling?

Matthew Salganik of Princeton University points out that some of the most important social outcomes and predictors are internal states, such as emotions, knowledge, expectations, and opinions. Internal states exist only inside people's heads, and sometimes the only way to learn about internal states is to ask. He goes on to say, "Researchers who study dolphins can't ask them questions. So, dolphin researchers are forced to study behaviour. Researchers who study humans, on the other hand, should take advantage of the fact that our participants can talk."

What we do matters but what is in our minds is equally important (if not more so). If we simply measure what people are doing rather than how they feel, or how they think about things, then we can fail to represent what really matters to use.

Part 1: Data and its limitations

Does it represent how things are?

Many of the classic economic indicators that used to reflect societies are captured at the aggregate: Davies references the way GDP captures our economic well-being in the aggregate, and GDP per capita captures what this means for people on average.

The challenge here is the degree to which taking an average really reflects anyone's life. The UK has the most extreme geographic polarisation of wealth and deprivation of any country in western Europe.

Davies reports that output per head in West London is eight times higher than it is in the Welsh Valleys; during the coalition government of 2010–15, median household wealth in London rose by 14%, while it fell by 8% in Yorkshire and on the Humber.

The disproportionate wealth of London is the reason that Britain's economy is the fifth largest in the world: the majority of UK regions have a GDP per capita below the European average.

Market and social researchers are acutely aware of the need to represent different groups, but granular data collection can be expensive. A national sample of 1,000 interviews is much lower cost than a quota based sample designed to properly reflect regional, social class, age differences.

As power and resources have gradually become concentrated in particular cities and regions then relying on nationally representative numbers to represent all the population is increasingly challenging.

> "Numbers allow us to see the world objectively, but the flip side of that is that they eliminate feeling."
>
> William Davies, *Nervous States*

Part 2: The human deficit

Alongside questions about the degree to which we are now represented by data collected about us are questions relating to our ability to make sense of the vast increase in data collected about us. It is to this we now turn.

Our 'good enough' solutions

One of the disciplines that emerges to make sense of the new sources of data was economics, which focused on the behaviour and interactions of consumers and seeks to represent that way economies work. It is today broadly recognised that classical economics tended to assume that people have flawless data and can, therefore, make optimal, rational decisions. Of course, this was challenged by Herbert Simon and continued by Daniel Kahneman who worked to develop 'a coherent alternative to the rational agent model'.

Bounded rationality was the term that Simon developed to reflect the notion that optimal, rational decisions will always be limited by the complexity of the decision problem, the restrictions of the person trying to solve the problem, and the time available to make the decision. With this in mind, people inevitably act as 'satisficers', aiming for a 'good enough' solution rather than always seeking to optimise.

This 'deficit' model of human behaviour is often applied to the way in which we go about navigating the wealth of data we have available today. It is claimed we live in an age of information overload, described as 'infobesity':

"An uncontrollable flood of it overwhelms us, and we feel stressed. Our systems shut down, and our capacity to absorb additional information actually decreases. To cope with the flood, our brains develop tricks and habits. We rely more on information that is closer to home than on information from a distant source. We remember data presented in one format and forget data presented in another. ... All such reactions hamper our ability to make decisions based on the best available evidence, and performance suffers accordingly."

It is frequently argued that the general public is simply poorly ill-informed when it comes to rudimentary facts and issues of scientific consensus.

Part of this is laid at the door of the 'cognitive load' of acquiring knowledge. As academic researcher Daniel Williams recently put it:

"For a typical citizen in a modern democracy with one vote among millions, the benefits of being informed are meagre. By contrast, the costs of becoming informed are significant, especially when compared to spending time and energy on things that are more enjoyable or impactful."

Williams suggests we have rational motivated ignorance: that is, knowledge is just as frequently a liability as a source of power. If we do not know about something then it protects us from difficult truths, saves us from taking responsibility for our actions.

Second, our capabilities are such that we are unable to process the sheer volume of data that claims to represent us, so we fall back into superstitious ways to pull stories from it. If we cannot deduce the rational reality sitting behind the data then we are irrational, using all manner of short cuts which leaves us vulnerable to manipulation or simply poor interpretation.

"Our capabilities are such that we are unable to process the sheer volume of data that claims to represent us, so we fall back into superstitious ways to pull stories from it. "

Part 2: The human deficit

A crippled epistemology?

The overall costs of being informed will inevitably increase as new data becomes available. As the costs of being informed rise, and the data available to us declines then, then it does not seem unreasonable to suggest that we can then become susceptible to alternative, conspiracy theory-based explanations.

Cass Sunstein suggests conspiracy theorists suffer from a 'crippled epistemology', in the sense that they know very few things, and what they know is wrong. But also that they operate in informationally isolated social networks. This 'deficit model' of how we intuitively understand the world is aligned with much of the perspective that the human brain did not evolve to process complex information about politics, economics or science. Rather we evolved to survive on the savannah where dealing with threats took our attention. According to New Scientist this means that we evolved to:

"Assume that unseen threats are lurking everywhere, that "outgroups" have malign intent, or that coincidental events are causally related. The cost of holding these assumptions was minimal, but the cost of not holding them was often death. Natural selection favoured the conspiratorial mindset."

Of course we can all be persuaded to perspectives that may at first sight seem ridiculous. We are all aware of the way in which we can all succumb to a gradual 'slippery slope' of beliefs where accepting one set of beliefs can then make another one more plausible. Dan Ariely talks about this is relation to cheating:

"I have had lots of discussions with big cheaters – insider trading, accounting fraud, people who have sold games in the NBA, doping in sports. With one exception, all of them were stories of slippery slopes. You look at the sequence of the events – you look at the end – and you say, my goodness, what kind of monster would do this? But then you look at the first step they took and say, I can see myself under the right amount of pressure behaving badly. Then they took another step, another step, and another step."

There is not a one step process of acquiring a set of beliefs, we are instead in a more dynamic process of belief acquisition and change. And of course, much has been said about the role of social media is "doing the heavy work of locating vulnerable people andguiding them through a series of ever-more-extreme ideas and communities."

Does this means that we are in a situation where confidence in data is undermined and in its place we are seeking our own explanations that sit outside of a shared understanding of the world? Are we in danger of all slowly occupying our own separate worlds where we are increasingly out of touch with each other and even reality, pre-occupied by every more unrealistic conspiracy theories?

To explore this we will look more closely at these theories and use them as a case study for the way in which there is an imperative for research industry to offer guidance not just on what data is needed to represent the human world but also ways in which we go about interpreting and navigating that data.

"There is an imperative for research industry to offer guidance not just on what data is needed to represent the human world but also ways in which we go about interpreting and navigating that data."

Part 3: Truth as a choice

Conspiracies*are*sometimes true

There is a tension at the heart of conspiracy theories, as demonstrated by one of the leading theorists in this area, researcher Sander van der Linden who writes:

Clearly, people and governments have conspired against each other, throughout human history. Healthy skepticism lies at the very heart of the scientific endeavor. Yet there is something fundamentally dangerous and unscientific about the nature of conspiracy theorizing.

In a sense, as philosopher Matthew R. X. Dentith points out, van der Linden is exposing the challenge at the heart of conspiracy theories: we understand that conspiratorial activity is perfectly legitimate in a democracy. At times governments need to be secretive in order to realise future benefit and commercial organisations need to deny some a claim of wrongdoing in order to fully investigate it. But of course, governments and businesses can conspire and do wrong. Which means that the notion that there is something dangerous and unscientific about conspiracy theorizing is a problematic position.

There are many examples of stories we think are incredible and must clearly be wrong and yet they turn out to be true. Denith flags the way that stories about the police and politicians protecting high profile sexual offenders from investigation might seem unthinkable, but also that if it had happened, it surely would have been exposed by the authorities. Yet as the Operation Yewtree investigation in the UK showed, well known men preyed on young men and women in the seventies and eighties. Attempts to expose this scandal were ignored and even covered up by powerful members of British society. From Nixon to the Weapons of the Mass Destruction of Iraq, there are many examples of conspiracy theories that were found to be true.

Indeed, this is the same if we are on the other side of the fence: there are many instances where someone has claimed there to be a conspiracy, leading them to being accused of being a conspiracy theorist and then later being vindicated for having been right in the first place! The point is that what we know is not something static to be uncovered: the notion of what is reasonable or unreasonable to believe is not something that is fixed in time.

This leads us to an important point: it is a comfortable position to assume that there is one single, legitimate and rational way of looking at the world which is there waiting for us to uncover. But in just the same way that we can be led through down a 'slippery slope' to more extreme views of the world, so it can be the case that what we understand to be true is something that not only changes over time as more information becomes available but also depends on what we have come to know about the world both in terms of the past and present.

What is true depends who you are

We can explore the more fluid nature of the way we understand the world by taking a tangible example, that of vaccination for COVID-19. Polling data suggests that a disturbingly high percent of people are unlikely to take-up the offer of a vaccine: this is despite overwhelming medical evidence of the benefits of vaccination not only for ourselves, but also for the wider community.

We can take a deficit interpretation of the world in which people are struggling to make sense of the overwhelming amount of information available on this topic, both from credible institutions but also from a wide range of plausible sounding sources found online that present a wide range of information that vaccination is problematic. Undoubtedly there are 'bad actors' at play here and, indeed, it can be hard to unpick the variety of information sources available. But is this the full story?

Part 3: Truth as a choice

The Guardian journalist Arwa Mahdawi cited a range of surveys which indicate women are less likely to say they are likely to seek a vaccination for COVID than men, despite global research suggesting that women are more likely than men to take the pandemic seriously and comply with public-health regulations. Similarly half of Black American adults say they intend to get a coronavirus vaccine, compared to 61% of white people. So why is this?

The deficit model of humans simply does not stand up to scrutiny here as it is clearly simply not credible that women and black people find it harder to assimilate data and arrive at the appropriate conclusion. The explanation surely lies in experience of these less powerful groups in society. Mahdawi writes:

One reason women are disproportionately attracted to alternative medicine is because traditional medicine hasn't exactly done a brilliant job of earning their trust. Women's health concerns are often dismissed: one study found women with severe stomach pain had to wait 33% longer to be seen by a doctor than men with the same symptoms. Women's health problems are also massively under-researched: there is five times more research into erectile dysfunction than premenstrual syndrome, for example, despite the former affecting 19% of men and the latter affecting 90% of women. In the US, medical research trials weren't required to include women until 1993 because women's bodies were considered too complex and hormonal.

And she goes on to make the same point about Black Americans:

Black Americans have been experimented on (one word: Tuskegee) and forcibly sterilized. Black pain hasn't been taken seriously by the medical establishment because of enduring racist notions that Black people have thicker skin than white people. Minorities are also underrepresented in clinical trials, which can result in technology and treatments that don't meet their needs. Pulse oximeters, for example, which measure the oxygen levels in your blood and have been increasingly in use due to the pandemic, can give misleading readings in people with dark skin. A new study has found that misleading results happen three times more often for Black people. Probably because the colour of light used in the pulse oximeter can be absorbed by skin pigment. Which would have been something researchers would have caught straight away if they took diversity seriously.

Put this way, we can see why these groups have a not unreasonable scepticism about vaccination, and far from simply being ill equipped to make the 'right' decision, instead have perfectly legitimate concerns that need to be addressed.

Going back to the points earlier, we can see that if we find ourselves not represented in the data that we are seeing, if the data appears motivated by values that are antipathetical to our experience, if it simply does not represent our concerns, then it is understandable why we might reject what may seem to others, to be entirely reasonable proposal.

It is less about 'irrationality', 'motivated ignorance' or 'crippled epistemologies' and more that there is more than one legitimate way of seeing the world. Just as what might at first sight appear to be a conspiracy theory can turn out to be true.

"If we find ourselves not represented in the data that we are seeing...then it is understandable why we might reject what may seem to others, to be entirely reasonable proposal."

Part 4: Implications

Representing the multiverse

In physical science it can more easily be argued that there is a single objective way of looking at the world (although quantum physics has started to question even this view. There is a huge temptation to assume that the logic and mechanisms of the physical world can be applied to human behaviours – it seems logical and 'scientific'.

If we believe the deficit model, then we implicitly accept the notion and possibility of a single, perfect, rational outcome. There is an implication that someone, somewhere is capable of determining the best options and outcomes.

But when it comes to human behaviour then what is rational is inevitably a function of the individual, how they interpret the world which is itself shaped by context of their lives. Even when our behaviour may look the same, the reasons for it can be entirely and utterly different.

Teppo Felin talks about the way that as humans it seems natural to us that there is world that exists independently to how we think about it just waiting to be uncovered. Of course, we can only ever seek to represent the world in our heads: this is the 'Bucket theory' of perception which suggests information we collect about the environment is passive and automatic. We assimilate a world that exists independent of ourselves and our limitations means we can get this wrong.

Our beliefs represent the world in a similar way to a road map representing a landscape. Points on the map represent towns cities, lines represent roads and motorways. We cannot externally verify and validate our beliefs: we cannot know the world independent of our own experience. This is the Searchlight theory of perception: the way we make sense of the world is active, using guesses, theories, questions and hypotheses, which means that the way we comprehend things by directing perception and attention.

A good example of this distinction is the classic Simon and Chabris study on attentional blindness. They showed how a person in a gorilla suit walking in a film can be missed because we are 'primed' to count the number of basketball passes. Kahneman uses this as an example of how we can be 'blind to the obvious' due to our limited processing capacity (as per the 'Bucket theory of perception). But Felin points out that if participants were instead 'primed' to watch for the gorilla instead, they then struggle to accurate report on the number of correct basketball passes.

The point is that our representation of reality is necessarily based on a whole range of contexts, motivations and backgrounds. Our perception is less about capturing a reality that is waiting for us through our limited abilities, and more that perception is always a function of the nature, abilities and aims of the people involved. This means that the closest we can get to any final agreed 'objective' truth is when we reach a general consensus, not when we are perfectly aligned – that simply will not happen. Indeed, we are suspicious of those that claim to be in possession of absolute truth not least as some of the most repugnant acts in history have been undertaken by people who consider they hold this.

The notion that there can only ever be one way of representing the world is looking problematic – we have different perspectives – which of course can become disconnected from the general consensus. Which means there is a delicate balancing act to be had about the way we represent the multiverse of perspectives while at the same time facilitating a shared understanding of the world.

"There is a delicate balancing act to be had about the way we represent the multiverse of perspectives while at the same time facilitating a shared understanding of the world."

Part 4: Implications

The role of market & social research

The argument that Will Davies sets up is that we need to have some reasonable degree of shared understanding of how the world works. Davies sets out how this can also slide all too easily into assuming there is only one single legitimate view of the world. When we look closely at 'truth' then we can start to see that we all hold many different versions of it. But at the same time, we can all too easily dismiss alternative truths as problematic, deficits in the way others see the world. Indeed, one of the problems with tackling conspiracy theories is that each group (the conspiracy theorists and the critics or different sides of a political debate) tend to set out to disprove the other – rather than seeking to be open minded and respectfully and open-mindedly looking into the claims and concerns.

What market and social research has always had at its heart is representing and respecting the diversity of 'truths' that people have about the world. The motivation for this is pragmatic – government policy and commercial strategy have both long recognised that this is needed to help ensure success in design and adoption of any initiative. Many has been the innovation that seems perfectly reasonable in theory and should be a resounding success but if people believe it is problematic then it will fail.

Sitting at the heart of asking people questions and ensuring a detailed representation of perspectives, values, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours is an implied but not always recognised and articulated understanding. This is an understanding that there are multiple, perfectly valid truths held by different groups in the population that need to be identified, measured, shared and understood. That is not to say we have to agree with other people's truth, but we do need to recognise the legitimacy of them holding that perspective and have the means by which we can do so.

The actions of those that stormed the Capitol building were clearly problematic. But their actions do surely need to be understood and not purely dismissed as the irrational activities of a lunatic fringe. One protestor put it, "I listen to my president, who told me to go to the Capitol" and that the overwhelming majority of the GOP representatives in the house after spending the day in lock-down came back and voted to overturn the election. Without this understanding we simply fall into delegitimizing the views of others by dismissing them as irrational and as such we fail to examine and understand them. This reduces meaningful discourse rather than enhances it.
We sit in a world which has an abundance of data all of which promise to tell us about people. They may do this, but they are reliant on the skills of researchers who know and can navigate this landscape, who have a constant focus on ensuring representativeness but also to provide a way of weaving the data into a broad basis of understanding of the multiverse of minds.

Alongside this, we sit in a world which has an abundance of data all of which promise to tell us about people. They may do this but they are reliant on the skills of researchers who know and can navigate this landscape, to provide a way of weaving the data into a broad basis of understanding of the multiverse of minds.

Managing the multiverse

The market and social research industry have an important role to play setting out a powerful agenda that goes beyond the parameters of the traditional role. There is no singular 'rational' way to view the world and that we need to take care to represent, understand and respect the views of diversity of beliefs of the populations we speak for.

This chimes with psychologist Adam Grant's new book, Think Again where he challenges the way we favour the 'comfort of conviction over the discomfort of doubt, and prefer opinions that make us feel good, instead of ideas that make us think hard.'

Part 4: Implications

He talks about the way we can each carry with us the mindset of three different professions; preachers, prosecutors, and politicians. We become a preacher if believe our beliefs are threatened. We feel the need to deliver earnest speeches to protect and further our philosophies. And we become prosecutors when we identify errors in other people's thoughts and aim to show how they are wrong. When we want to be liked and look for approval, we become a politician.

Grant counsels that we are too often preaching that we are in fact right, prosecuting those we consider are wrong, and engaging in politics to gain approval. The problem is that this does not leave us much time to to reflect on our own beliefs and examine what we hold to be true. Grant suggests that to success requires us to adopt a fourth profession – that of scientists. "Treat your strategy as a hypothesis and your product as an experiment," he proposes. He points out how this approach values humility over pride, questioning over conviction and curiosity over closure. Instead of starting with the answers, he suggests we lead with questions, and see where the inquiry leads.

Grant cites the way in which the most important driver of any forecasters success in prediction was less about intelligence and more to do with the extent to which they updated their beliefs. He pointed out that "The best forecasters went through more rethinking cycles. They had the confident humility to doubt their judgements and the curiosity to discover new information that led them to revise their predictions."

And surely this is the critical contribution of the research industry: we are responsible for representing the multiverse of human life, bringing together the various strands helping to make sense of a wide variety of data sets, often derived from digital activity, that need contextualising alongside the beliefs, attitudes, perspectives and intentions that led to the behaviour.

We need to help manage the balancing act between having a shared understanding of the world but at the same time recognising that people have very different perspectives and beliefs which mean they also inhabit quite different worlds.

In many ways we are in a multiverse revolution: we have seen a decline in a single agreed understanding of the world as represented by data presented by a small group of experts. Instead we are in active negotiation where we need to think like scientists, challenging our own narratives and interpretations and having the confidence to examine the hypotheses proposed by others. And this is the transformation – working out how to operate effectively in a multiverse and seek connection, overlaps and common ground while respecting difference and diversity in beliefs, attitudes and behaviours.

"The most important driver of any forecasters success in prediction was less about intelligence and more to do with the extent to which they updated their beliefs."

Viewpoint: Carlsberg

Nick Rich, Vice President, Insights & Analytics at Carlsberg Group

What is this transformation you speak of? Are things changing anew or are long established trends simply accelerating? Is our world of continuous, exponential data generation making our role easier or simply faster?

One could easily argue that it is 'all of the above'. T'was ever thus.

Good businesses have always recognised the sum of its parts can never be greater than the whole. A good business knows what it exists for, what purpose it serves in the life customers and it knows its current destination, even if it does not know exactly how to get there right now.

The same should be said of society and governments. That we know our chosen destination and democracy delivers a consensus on how we approach that journey. This notion appears to be absent from discourse or maybe even be facing extinction. Our social narratives are disrupted. Challenges we thought we had begun to address for the betterment of our society are no more resolved now than when they were first identified generations ago.

The world outside appears chaotic but I would argue that our places of work are not. And there are some clear reasons why.

Our sources, methods and practices have changed significantly over a generation and we are asked to solve a much wider range of business problems and inject consumer and market knowledge across a much wider range of functions and stakeholders.

"What good insights teams have offered business, is perhaps, what we can offer the wider world at this time."

We're handling the rise of 'big data' and delivered 'single versions of the truth' and we're still striving to be involved at the start of projects as opposed to being called in midway to bring reason and calm to another swirl of indecision.

Within those good businesses, we are there identifying in which direction growth and success can be found. We are there continuously checking whether we're still on-track and the engines of growth are all working in unison. And we are there to help the business navigate any detours, like a pandemic, for example.

Good insights teams have always known there is rarely a true single version of the truth but we also know that the organisation needs to move forward to reach its goal. So, our chosen version of the truth is good enough. We can live with the ambiguity as long as we know we are helping the organisation to progress.

What good insights teams have offered business, is perhaps, what we can offer the wider world at this time.

A former US Secretary of State once rather clumsily opined on 'knowns and unknowns'. Insights teams are excellent at solving for both these. We are excellent at facts, lateral thinking, asking questions, hypothesizing or measuring to solve the former. And we have superpowers to tackle the 'unknowns' through living curiosity, discovery and executing plain old 'research' of the world around us.

No other business function is as capable at this than we are.

Viewpoint: Carlsberg

We are excellent at seeing through the chaos to define the certainties, the foundational knowledge that is needed, the truth of business performance today and what our colleagues 'should know' in the present.

"And then there lies only one more challenge to overcome. And that is to be heard."

And we are world-class at uncovering the foresights, the growth opportunities of tomorrow and what our colleagues 'need to know' for the future.

And then there lies only one more challenge to overcome. And that is to be heard. We are still striving for success in our own organisations, to be at all the right tables, top or otherwise, at the right time.

Our industry must also push even harder to achieve the same in society at large and the wider world. We have an opportunity to bring knowledge of the certainties back to the conversation and shine light on what is yet to come.

And no industry is as capable of this as we are.

Viewpoint: Aviva

Rhea Fox, Head of Marketing, General Insurance, Aviva

This report has big repercussions for our industry. In a multiverse of fake news, hyper-media, political and social polarisation and 'alternative facts' where does that leave you as an industry built on the notion of objective truth? If you're a clientside insight professional unable to present a credible, concise and robust understanding of the issues impacting your market / customers then the honest answer is probably in need of some other way to pay the bills.

Industry needs some degree of objective truth on which to make decisions, otherwise we might as well accept that there is no objective data worth basing decisions on. We may as well go with the hunches or lived experience of our CEOs, MD and CFOs. Eeek.

With that in mind, here are a few thoughts on how best we might better respect the multiverse and practically apply our new knowledge.

Remember our training. We all know by our learning and experience that the way in which data is collected must be accurate and sensitive. We know that it must be given context in both the analysis and the reporting. The demands of industry (perhaps driven by the cult of agile) for faster 'insight' has led to a proliferation of fast rep-level studies, or micro single-issue surveys which rarely drive significantly nuanced insight or represent niche consumer groups. They are the bluntest of instruments. Same with very superficial analysis. How many times have you found a commercial problem that actually started years ago but was masked by flattering scorecards or revenue results? We should be proud to call out that an increasingly fragmented consumer landscape requires increasing intelligence to understand and navigate.

Brutal relevance. When representing diverse or niche views, it's important to contextualise them. It's very easy to dismiss outlier views of say 5% of a market, less so when it's hammered home that audience is likely to grow to 15% in the next 10 years, or that this group is threetimes as influential or wealthy than average. Visualisations and projections are our friends here.

Build diversity. Not just of teams. We know the industry has a fairly narrow feeder pool in terms of socio-demographics and that's something we all need to work to broaden. We're largely unrepresentative in terms of earnings, education or region. But we're also lacking diversity of opinion. We're largely not representative there either. More curiosity is key and moving out of our comfort zones. If you're not regularly reading the two most popular news sources in the UK – that's the Sun and the Mail - and immersing yourself in mainstream social media which doesn't fit your worldview you're part of a different diversity problem. And unlikely to offer a sufficiently nuanced view of the multiverse in your work.

Viewpoint: M&C Saatchi

Jared Shurin, Strategy Director, M&C Saatchi

Ten minutes on social media alone is enough to demonstrate that we are awash in passionate incompatibilities. The existence of a 'multiverse of understanding' comes as no surprise.

As the report notes, despite the vast amount of information to hand, reality itself is proving increasingly elusive. Sixty years ago, Daniel Boorstin wrote that the world was experiencing 'a shift in common experience from an emphasis on 'truth' to an emphasis on 'credibility'." These words feel no less accurate today, in a world where it often seems like volume trumps veracity.

What is new is the relentless, intense hammering that the very concept of the truth has received. We have all borne witness to an assault on truth, as well as the institutions tasked with uncovering, sharing, and protecting it. As the report argues, the very concept of 'expertise' has come under fire, a turn of events that disparages the value of truth, and simultaneously undermines those who seek it.

This report is another potent reminder that we need to be both in the world and of it. Clients consult with agencies for our perspective. Therefore, it remains both a moral and a business requirement that we have access to a diversity of opinions and of thought. If there is no range of lived experience within an agency, how can it claim to understand the world outside of it?

Part of the value agencies add is insight: audience understanding, research, parsing the data. Simply put, we help make the very decisions at the core of this report. The quality of our work depends on having meaningful access to diverse audiences and data; contexts and trends. Accordingly, we are in possession of more insight and more data than many others, either directly or through our own partners. We act, more often than not, as gatekeepers to the multiverse.

With that role, and this report, in mind, there are certain principles to which agencies should adhere.

First, in the words of Haroro Ingram, we should 'do no harm; do no favours'.

As highlighted in the report, there are 'bad actors at play here'. Misinformation and disinformation - the accidental and deliberate transmission of false information - further cloud the landscape. Rumours and lies make it more difficult not only to find a, or 'the', truth, but also discourage belief that such a thing is even possible. Our challenge is not only to account for all meaningful worldviews, but to do so in a way that avoids giving credence to falsehoods or lending credibility to unfounded rumours.

Secondly, although we should respect a broad multiplicity of worldviews, there are some that remain objectively harmful to society - the distinction, for example, between those who lack confidence in vaccines, and the dedicated and coordinated anti-vaxx movement. It would be irresponsible, and dangerous, to grant the dignity of equivalence to dangerous, deliberately false views.

Finally, our work, and that of our clients, exists in a greater social and cultural context. We need to bolster those parts of society that protect the truth, and not undermine them for short-term gain. We should not add to the chaos or the noise; creating artificial problems simply for the sake of selling the solution. We can support a diversity of views without undermining trust or contributing to the increasing fragmentation of society.

As Jane Frost says in the introduction, our clients 'can be islands of stability in a disrupted and cacophonous world'. The great problems of our era - from climate change to community cohesion - are challenges of persuasion as well as policy. Agencies play an essential role in supporting our business, government and third sector clients in shifting the attitudes and behaviours required to achieve positive change. Our clients look to us to tell them what is meaningful, what is useful, and - yes - what is true. That is a responsibility that cannot be taken lightly.

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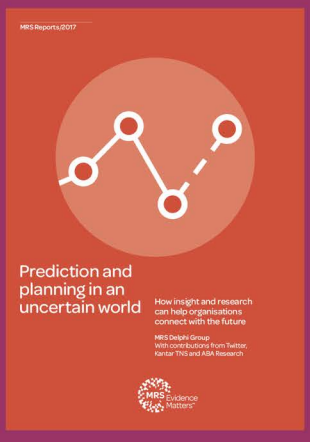

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