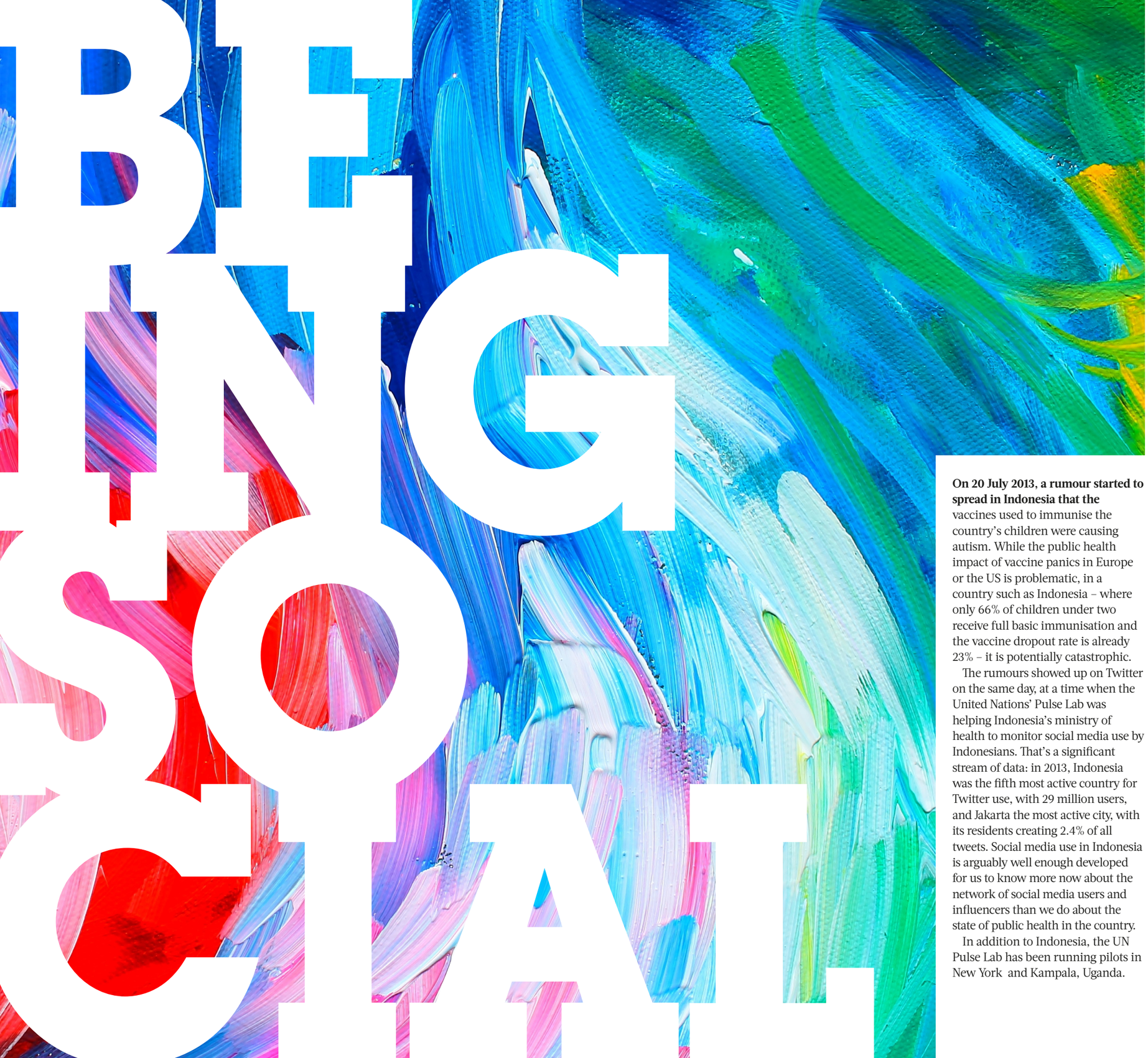

Social media data can provide valuable insight into people's behaviour, and research agencies have the analytical skills to take a lead in interpreting this information stream, as long as they embrace the challenge. By **Tim Phillips**

On 20 July 2013, a rumour started to spread in Indonesia that the vaccines used to immunise the country's children were causing autism. While the public health impact of vaccine panics in Europe or the US is problematic, in a country such as Indonesia – where only 66% of children under two receive full basic immunisation and the vaccine dropout rate is already 23% – it is potentially catastrophic.

The rumours showed up on Twitter on the same day, at a time when the United Nations' Pulse Lab was helping Indonesia's ministry of health to monitor social media use by Indonesians. That's a significant stream of data: in 2013, Indonesia was the fifth most active country for Twitter use, with 29 million users, and Jakarta the most active city, with its residents creating 2.4% of all tweets. Social media use in Indonesia is arguably well enough developed for us to know more now about the network of social media users and influencers than we do about the state of public health in the country.

In addition to Indonesia, the UN Pulse Lab has been running pilots in New York and Kampala, Uganda. The labs were set up five years ago as a special initiative of the UN secretary-general, and have published case studies of 20 data innovation projects.

The initiative was inspired by the global financial crisis; UN agencies wanted to react, but survey data available from the developing world was often three to five years old. The labs have found that global social media and mobile-phone use generate social data with important policy applications. Pulse projects have listened for views on teenage pregnancy in Uganda, or changes to fuel subsidies in El Salvador – often with results that contradict media coverage.

Many projects would be familiar to any social media department in the developed world – although not all. The Pulse Lab and Stellenbosch University are working together to create technology so that machines can listen to Ugandan radio, which functions as a social network in that country.

The Pulse Labs are relatively unsophisticated in terms of the technology used for many of their applications. They rely on what Robert Kirkpatrick, director of UN Global Pulse, calls "data philanthropy" to do their work – yet they show the potential for small amounts of social data to allow us to re-imagine research.

In the developed world, researchers have a 10-year head start in using data. By September 2004, *American Demographics* magazine was reporting that "few concepts in recent memory have generated more interest among researchers than social networking software… sites like Friendster, LinkedIn, Orkut, Ryze and dozens of other similar competitors promise to humanise the impersonal internet".

By May 2006, with Facebook just over two years old and Twitter available for only two months, Nielsen NetRatings was already picking up that 45% of internet users were active on a social network.

So, with this advantage, are market researchers doing all we can to use social media to innovate? Not everyone thinks so. Francesco D'Orazio, now vice-president of product at Pulsar, has a few more years experience as a social media researcher than most – he was

analysing large chunks of data from bulletin boards when still at university, in 1999. But he admits he finds the slow pace of innovation in social media research (it's slow to him, if not to you) "frustrating".

D'Orazio wants social data integrated with other analytics as standard, or social media listening trained to recognise images (see box, page 32). He's excited by the potential of the "internet of sound", and is collaborating with academics to see how far the technology can go. Yet he sees client applications restricted to public relations and parts of marketing, and black-box results treated with suspicion.

Drinking from the firehose

Part of the problem is that social data may be pervasive – the data streams that Twitter, Instagram and others offer are called 'firehoses' for a reason – but it is not yet, and may never be, representative. So the techniques needed to use it to create insight are unfamiliar; processing the data to reduce bias is a start, but the results may require change to an organisation's decision-making process, to act quickly using less reliable data or build the data into an iterative learning process.

As Simeon Duckworth, global head of business planning at Mindshare (see box, page 31) points out, we need to become more comfortable with the idea that we don't know for sure. But we can't delay until we can build a model and populate it with data that gives us the levels of confidence we are comfortable with.

On the other hand, social data gives innovative clients a way to act quickly or to experiment and offers clues about what to look for in their survey-based research.

"It's the difference between being a statistician and a data scientist," says D'Orazio, "but, as yet, the data scientists are not well ingrained in many organisations."

Data scarcity, we are told, is an obsolete concept. Social data gives us an unprecedented abundance of data (there are 500m Tweets per day). The data tracks every waking moment; according to Lightspeed GMI, 34.9% of 18- to 24-year-olds in the UK check their social media even before getting out of bed. So what matters is the ability to separate the signal from the noise.

To do this, a large ecosystem of intermediaries has emerged, offering services, integration, analysis tools and data scrubbing. "Data is becoming democratised. Around 15 or 20 years ago, researchers were owners of insight because they created the data and held it. So collaboration will be the key to being successful using social data," explains Jake Steadman, director of research, international, at Twitter.

His colleague Matt Taylor, head of research for Europe, believes that Twitter's firehose is "one of the biggest assets we have", because it represents a longitudinal data set, and a source of opinion that isn't limited by recall bias. Over the past two years, Twitter has started to concentrate on building an ecosystem of partners that can analyse the data and learn the best techniques to use it.

One obvious insight is that using the firehose blurs the line between listening and acting; between insight, customer service, marketing and loyalty. "Agility in acting on information is much more of a teaching point for research teams," Taylor says. "In the past, one of the biggest blocks to working with a

#IPASOCIALWORKS MEASURING, NOT COUNTING

Stephen Maher

As the chair of the Institute of Practitioners in Advertising's (IPA) social media measurement steering group, responsible for the #IPASocialWorks joint initiative with The Marketing Society and the Market Research Society, Stephen Maher had the idea that best practice for measuring social media should be conveyed by peer-reviewed case studies. The committee has seen more than 200 so far. For every one that has made it through and onto the IPA website (www.ipa.co.uk/page/IPA-Social-Works-cases), nine have failed.

What's wrong with 90% of case studies? "Most of them failed because we couldn't see any causal relationship between the social data and the business goals," says Maher, who is also founder of the agency MBA. "We started this because we felt social media measurement was the future, but a lot of clients were asking: 'How do I measure the ROI'?"

Other organisations – for example, Amec – have tried to create a more formal framework (www.social-media-measurement-framework.org), but Maher argues that social media measurement is evolving too fast for this to be a complete solution. "We are taking an iterative view. The organisations in the case studies have been through a process that isn't fully developed, or fully fledged yet."

He sees that there are elements of best practice that all social media measurement can adopt, but these aren't innovative. Concepts such as control cells have been borrowed from media planning and direct marketing – which found them in econometric theory. "These measures have been around for 30 or 40 years, so we have some way to go," Maher says.

The range of case studies shows how hard it is to impose a single framework: Iceland was trying to attract tourists after a volcano erupted; Cadbury wanted to test its Creme Egg media campaign; O2 wanted to communicate network outages better.

All have a layer of serious analysis, however. For example, to estimate the impact of Iceland's social media campaign, other potential drivers of tourism were eliminated – flight prices, exchange rates and weather patterns were put into the model. There was also an estimate of volumes had the campaign not occurred; counter-factual tourism volumes were forecast as part of the evaluation.

Maher is cautious over whether the industry has yet learned to 'measure, not count' social media's impact. "There are more attempts to prove effectiveness," he says, "but to do this you must start by stating what you are trying to achieve. Many of the case studies we see don't have that baked in."

The short guide to measuring not counting is published by the IPA (£25 for IPA members, £50 for non-members).

"Data is becoming democratised. So collaboration will be the key to being successful using social data"

“Agencies and clients need to move from being organisations that are slavish about numbers to being ones that have to live with ambiguity”

research department has been that it took eight weeks to get an answer. When you can identify an opportunity in minutes, research departments can be best placed to take advantage of it.”

Not all social data is easy to acquire, however, so there’s a danger of measuring what’s available – and that doesn’t suit every type of listening. An omission has been Facebook data, although that has now been partially solved by Facebook’s decision to make topic data available.

Data platform DataSift has been operating almost since the beginning – although, in 2007, it was TweetMeme. “It was the first company that was processing the Twitter firehose and identifying breaking news stories,” remembers Tim Barker, DataSift’s chief product officer. “We thought we were building a media site and we’d be having advertisers coming to us, but we actually got news companies coming to us – such as the BBC and Dow Jones – saying, ‘how do we use this kind of thing?’”

These days, DataSift takes data from many of the world’s social networks, including WordPress, Tumblr, Google+ and Tencent Weibo. One notable absentee is Twitter, which makes its firehose available through competitor Gnip, which Twitter acquired in 2014. “We try to make sure that we can build an ecosystem, and that we partner with social networks so they can provide insights into their data – but we also need to be able to protect the identity of individuals,” says Barker.

DataSift has found a way to create access to aggregated Facebook topic data. While Twitter data has the advantage of being immediate and focused, Facebook’s advantage for researchers is that its conversations are semi-private, reducing the bias inherent in the way we present ourselves in public. Its user profile is also more representative and international than those of other social platforms.

Pylon, DataSift’s Facebook data stream, aggregates the conversations, retaining demographic and location data to preserve privacy. So Facebook does its own analysis on posts by its 1.4bn subscribers to identify the product or topic, and releases data for all topics involving at least 100 people. It is not a firehose; these are not simple aggregated reports, but rather the feed intends to strike a balance between granularity and privacy.

“Things like which country or region you are in, what your age range is, what your gender is, are all part of the data set,” Barker says. “Those are standard foundations for anyone who wants to do market analysis. We often share differently with our own networks – with our friends [than in public].

“Using this data removes one of the other criticisms of social media data: that it’s all simply about self-promotion.”

WHAT IS RIGOROUS SOCIAL MEDIA MEASUREMENT?

“The issue is that people have been over-claiming,” says Simeon Duckworth, global head of business planning at Mindshare. He trained as an economist, so had to learn the econometrics that some of his peers prefer to skip. “Hilariously so in some cases. We worked with a company that worked on the World Cup and, obviously, if you’re going to predict social noise around the World Cup, that involves using social media to predict who’s going to win the World Cup. It’s ludicrous.”

Publicity stunts aside, social media measurement has a rigour problem. Partly, this stems from the construction of the sample. This is no different from the ‘biased sample’ problem in every other branch of statistics, and arguably more obvious.

The availability of numbers, however – and the excitement around social media – create more subtle cause-effect inferences, which are massively overstated in social media. Attribution is a well-known problem: “The claims beggar belief. Things like ‘Twitter caused 5% of retail sales in the US’ – if anyone in management believed it was true, you’d basically be buying Twitter. It is just so easy to get attribution wrong because social media activity correlates with sales,” Duckworth says.

Often there is confusion between a leading indicator (A happens before B) and a causal relationship (A made B happen). Because those who engage with a brand’s social media choose to do so, they are clearly more likely to buy the brand than a random sample of people would be. If the analysis treats the group exposed to social media as a random sample, the selection bias overestimates the impact.

In 2012, Ayman Farahat, from Yahoo!, and Michael Bailey, from Stanford University’s department of economics, studied the impact of online marketing and calculated that selection bias led to an over-estimation of the effect of almost 1,000%. They analysed 18 campaigns; in most cases, selection bias was responsible for almost all of the attributed effect – and in four cases, it was responsible for more than 100% of the uplift.

How should organisations react to such problems? Not by waiting for certainty, Duckworth says. Instead, treat social data as a noisy signal, not precise facts.

“Agencies and clients need to move from being organisations that are quite slavish about numbers, to being ones that have to live with ambiguity… it’s difficult to code this stuff and make it into decent data. You will always end up with something ambiguous,” he says.

Duckworth compares this type of decision-making to the Bank of England Monetary Policy Committee’s deliberations. Despite having sophisticated econometric models, it makes decisions while acknowledging inevitable inconsistencies or gaps in its knowledge. This doesn’t mean its models are wrong – just that it can’t know everything quickly enough.

Bias can also be an advantage, Duckworth says. It may not be possible to attribute social media insight to an entire population, but those who engage may be more likely to be open to engagement. “It’s biased data, but it may be representative data of the right group of people.”


Simeon Duckworth

Finally, presenting flawed insight might simply be a way to start an internal conversation. Is it better to measure badly than not at all? “I have some sympathy with that,” Duckworth says. “If you’re measuring in a biased way, at least you’re engaging the organisation.”

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Then there's the challenge of measuring activity on LinkedIn, as a business to business (B2B) platform that has made the decision not to expose its data through an API. To listen to LinkedIn, you have to be part of the conversation, creating messages and contacts, and measuring the effectiveness of what you are doing.

Among the platforms that perform this type of evaluation, Oktopost positions itself squarely as a B2B marketing performance evaluation tool. The difference is that, in the business to consumer (B2C) world, a single post gets many likes or retweets, but attribution is hard to follow. B2B social activity is much more directed at funnelling interest from a pre-selected group.

"We want our users to align what they do to their sales KPIs," says Jen Gutman, client success manager at Oktopost, "so we give them the ability to track conversations through to lead generation."

While there is the ability to do aggregate reporting – for example, comparing the effectiveness of outbound messages to create click-throughs across LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook or other platforms – a dashboard such as Oktopost has a more granular reporting capability. This makes it possible to see exactly who has acted, what they did, which activities perform well, and what type of message suits each platform. For companies that want to track the effectiveness of a platform such as LinkedIn, however, reporting is often tracking the activity of fewer than 100 people.

Responding to the challenge

"The industry has historically been quite risk averse and cautious about methodology, and that was probably the right way to behave in an era when robustness and data quality were supreme in client's minds," says Will Galgey, CEO of TNS in the UK. "But in an era when speed and agility are supreme, we have to be much more innovative in how we think about our approaches.

"We're an organisation that has historically been focused on survey-based research. The mantra that we have within the business today is: 'better surveys, better social, and better together'."

But are they? Galgey defends the place of the survey business that, he concedes, social has partly supplanted. "To size a particular opportunity, survey is still supreme. Also, with a survey, you are able to ask very focused questions about what it is you are trying to understand... but social media is always on. We can monitor change faster and we can spot changes earlier. Social might allow us to identify the trigger points at which something is changing. That's the point at which it makes sense to do a survey."

Smaller-scale, qualitative consultations can use social media, but – as Carol McNaughton Nicholls, a director at Truth, warns – this requires care and a regard for the ethics of research. Just because you can do it with social, doesn't mean you should.

McNaughton Nicholls has used social media as a way to create conversations in her work with The Samaritans. Investigating how to reduce suicide has led her to blend methods, but "when I use social media in research, there has to be a clear case for it – and there often is.

SIX INNOVATIONS IN SOCIAL MEDIA

Francesco D'Orazio, at Pulsar, picks areas in which he thinks widespread innovation should be occurring, but isn't yet

1. Don't listen for keywords – listen to your target audience
Listening for keywords from the whole data set doesn't tell you what you should do. Defining a community helps to create a benchmark of expectation, so results are easier to translate into actions. During Baroness Thatcher's funeral, Pulsar used social media to create six samples by choice of newspaper as an experiment. A surprise result: *Sun* readers were among the most vocally critical of her. Analysing the full sample for critical sentiment wouldn't easily produce this type of insight. At Twitter, Taylor gives the example of an insurer that could listen to mentions of its brand name, but would be better served by listening to posts of people who have just bought a house.

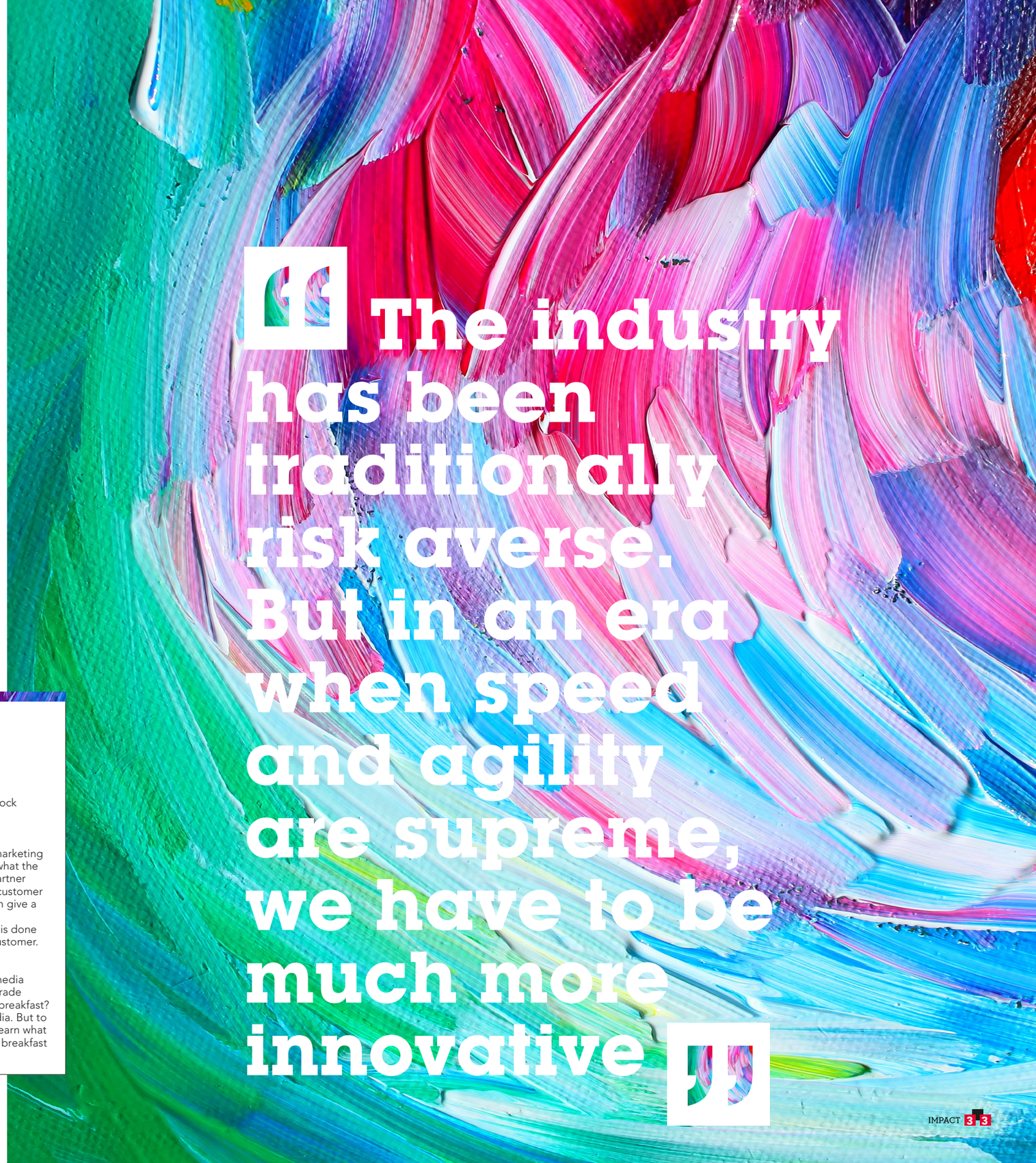
2. Predictive behaviour rewards agility
Web-server activity allowed a concert-ticket seller to predict demand for tickets a few hours ahead. Social activity allowed it to predict demand a few days ahead. If the company could adapt its behaviour swiftly enough to take account of the data, those additional hours have value.

3. Social, meet analytics
Many retailers use Google Analytics, and many also track their social data. Few integrate the two, because they live in different silos. But the reward for doing so is the start of a return on investment (ROI) model for social data.

4. Social, meet share prices
Are social trends leading indicators for share-price movements? The University of California built models that outperformed analysts three years ago, and traditional prediction markets also perform well. Yet few companies supplement their stock forecasting with social data.

5. Social, meet loyalty data
The long-term problem of loyalty marketing is that the best data tells you only what the customer does in the store, or in partner stores. Making the join between a customer and their social media presence can give a public context that might help with segmentation, or even (provided it is done with care) adjust the offer to that customer.

6. The internet of images
According to Citrix, 63% of social media updates are images. How did Gatorade discover that teenagers liked it for breakfast? By analysing pictures on social media. But to do this, your application needs to learn what Gatorade looks like, and recognise breakfast when it sees it.



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This, combined with reassurances and planning around the ethical implications, means that clients are comfortable. But it is important, as a researcher, that I can explain and reassure clients about the process and value," she says.

"Where it is always problematic, I would say, is using social to research behaviour that may be illegal or harmful – and there is plenty of that available online, so it is possible. As researchers, we need a clear policy, agreed with clients, to mitigate risks of harm, just as we would face to face."

McNaughton Nicholls also points out that, for some people, the ability to engage in social media – especially on anonymous platforms, such as Yik Yak – might be a way to uncover truthful feelings in qualitative research.

Galgey agrees that what should matter is the narrative, not the data-acquisition method – research reporting based on a story, supported by the best available evidence. Few research agencies, however, are structured in this way. "Historically, the way the industry has been set up, we have people who focus on survey data, and that's their expertise – or they focus on qualitative data. We need more people who are able to think in a data-agnostic way and identify different data sources that might help them to solve a client problem – and then have the skill of synthesis to be able to pull all of that together into one coherent story."

Twitter's Taylor agrees: "Decisions are not made by dashboards."

Collecting the best evidence might mean measuring more than words in social media. Jamie Robinson, global research and insight director at the appropriately named agency We Are Social, has worked with brands such as Red Bull and Adidas on what he calls "social thinking", which adapts the method to the part of the community to be measured. He is currently experimenting with image recognition (is the brand there, and what else?), machine learning, and sentiment analysis influenced by emoji recognition – a confectionery client wanted to track if it was successfully spreading joy among a target group that often communicates emotions via emoji.

Robinson is hoping that someone will soon build a functioning technology to 'watch' YouTube by machine. But it's not all rocket science – We Are Social also still tracks online forums. "They are often the most active for insight," Robinson says. "Many clients switched off tracking them a year or so ago, but if you want to research mothers, for example – or users of electronic products – you find them there."

Innovation doesn't just have to be built around how we find things out. Tiffany St James, founder of Transmute and a former head of social media for the UK government, emphasises that social media as a research tool is only one of many ways to embed social in a business. Establishing it as a tool for human resources, internal communications, direct sales and customer service can also be aligned to what the business needs.

"There are some measures that people ask for all the time – such as reach and effectiveness – and they are based on the traditional ways we would measure. But it gets interesting when we have to track that back to activity, to tie it to a campaign-specific objective," St James says. "Or you can now find incredibly niche markets, and identify the pleasure and pain points of those markets."

But what does it mean?

Despite D'Orazio's misgivings about implementation, social has an oversupply of entrepreneurs and experimenters. For counting to become measuring, however, we have to know what the data means, and automated sentiment analysis hasn't delivered reliable results in many cases.

A simple example that confounds keyword-based analysis is: saying you hate a TV programme is negative, but saying you hate the bad guy in the same programme is usually positive – the two Tweets will be virtually identical.

Historically, sentiment has been hard to identify beyond 60% or 70% accuracy, which is not actionable and has led to social sentiment analysis being an indicator that may be calculated, put into the dashboard – and broadly ignored.

Crimson Hexagon claims its systems can reach 93% of the accuracy of a human when trained to recognise sentiment. O2 is one of its clients. "We're producing feeds into the marketing planning process, so we're having a say at the beginning of that process," says Daryl West, insight lead at O2 Telefonica.

Crimson Hexagon offers some standardised expert system-based products, but not simplistic keyword or phrase analysis to attribute sentiment. "'It's good to be bad' – Jaguar's current message – would be a nightmare," says Lili Osorio, the firm's EMEA marketing manager.

> **With a survey you ask very focused questions... but social media is always on. We can monitor change faster**

SOCIAL GAMING TO RESEARCH CLIMATE

We know less than you would think about what people believe and understand about climate change. Because it is a global problem, however – that will require international policy intervention, with potential costs measured in billions – local surveys or obsolete data are not a good evidence base for public opinion. Surveys such as the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) or the World Values Survey do provide cross-country results, says Sebastian Seebauer, a researcher at the University of Graz's Wegener Center for Climate and Global Change, in Austria, but they are expensive, limited in scope and often take years to complete.

Could social media games help? Seebauer specialises in 'serious games'– the type in which we volunteer to categorise galaxies, or count people in an image, and the 'wisdom of crowds' produces answers as good as, or better than, single experts. He was interested in a Facebook climate-change game, developed by Media Watch, in which players matched words to help train an expert system that was analysing newspaper reports about climate. They were motivated only by being told they were performing better or worse than other players, but achieved results equivalent to those from a panel of experts.

Seebauer's idea was to mix questions on attitude to climate change with these game tasks, to create a survey element in Climate Quiz. This has many advantages: players tend to be truthful, and it is relatively easy to extract demographic data, and to correlate expressed opinions with performance in the game and, so, level of knowledge. His research showed that social media games quickly create a large data set – and that the social competition is a powerful motivator.

Impact: Why do 'games with a purpose' interest you, and how did you get involved in this project?

SS: Initially, I was interested in them mainly as an intervention technique for motivating citizens to reduce their carbon footprint. I realised that the data could be used to monitor the progress of the intervention and as a measurement instrument for the social sciences. Methods from computer linguistics for extracting word valence and frequency from huge bodies of text seem quite coarse. Climate Quiz was an opportunity to establish the validity of data gained with a data-collection tool tailored to the specific topic.

Impact: Are there other applications of game-driven research that interest you?

SS: My motivation is to develop an intervention technique: so we can experiment with environmental education by means of quiz games; players competing against each other in saving energy; integrating smart electricity meters and smartphone geo-tracking of everyday trips in games.

Impact: Do you think the wider research community could apply this technique to hard-to-research social data?

SS: The basic principle of measuring knowledge from the gaming data of quiz games applies to any field. In German-speaking countries, there is an app called Quizduell, which covers a wide range of general knowledge. Any field of knowledge addressed in this game could be tracked as a population indicator; for example, you could build a game on healthy/unhealthy habits, and track the impact of an awareness campaign for healthy eating by monitoring the quiz scores.

Instead, training the application with as few as 10 or 20 messages quickly lets a machine-learning algorithm identify irony, humour and sarcasm in the target material, and screens out the large proportion of messages that don't have useful sentiment. It creates a feed that can add early warning about changes in trackers such as NPS, or sit alongside other business KPIs.

Crimson Hexagon is adding the subject's contextual data to its analysis to help explain the causes of sentiment. In beta, there is also logo recognition, which, hopefully, will open up a new front in social media when we rediscover the phrase 'war for eyeballs'.

DataSift helps data users analyse sentiment using its just-launched VEDO Intent product, again providing some machine-learning capability by allowing non-specialists to train the application.

"What we have built with VEDO Intent is a way that a marketer or analyst could train an algorithm to classify data automatically," Barker says. "Because computers are stupid, but fast learners, it does that by having a human train it by example – to say, 'code this one to say it's a rant; this one means it's a rave; this one means it's a churn signal'."

The bigger search for meaning will be to use social media to solve two important problems with some certainty: what just happened, and what will happen as a result.

At Demos, Carl Miller, co-founder and research director of the Centre for the Analysis of Social Media (CASM) has been working on the "big datafication of social life", collected as social media intelligence, or 'Socmint'. "This is trying to get a hold of those gritty social dynamics, processes, tipping points that lead to certain things happening," he says. "It might lead to revolution or public disorder. It might lead to lots of other things. Then the holy grail of Socmint – the thing that I'm asked by government more than anything else – can we use social media to predict events that will happen in the future?" The answer is, perhaps.

Demos has had success in predicting the weekly results of the *X Factor* using social media – which has limited wider value, but the methods are applicable to many problems. For example, to solve the problem of 'what happened', when we know something happened, but not what or where, Demos worked on dividing the Tweet stream into 'before' and 'after'. By finding words that are in the 'after' but not the 'before' – and vice versa – and using geolocation, it becomes a real-time source of intelligence.

Experimental work like this uses a coalition of skills; similarly, the work Francesco is doing on his Visual Social Media Lab project involves an art historian and a philosopher alongside researchers and programmers. Miller explains that he is part of a group that is "half policy researchers and social scientists, who talk a lot to government and large institutions. The other half are computer scientists, data scientists, visualisation experts and natural language processing experts. So CASM is both a technology lab and a policy hub."

In future, we will find much of the innovation in start-ups, data science houses and academia. Twitter, DataSift, Pulsar or Demos are now part of a wider coalition of experts. Research agencies have an important place, and this type of innovation will be a collaborative effort.

However, St James warns that creative, technology-aware problem-solvers are hard to find, and even harder to hold on to. "The really smart technology people don't want to work anywhere in particular; they want to solve problems – so what gets them excited is being presented with a real-world issue," she says, "Great developers think 'I want to find this out', knowing there wasn't a way to find it out before."

HEARING THE CUSTOMER'S VOICE

No matter where they work, research teams have a common objective: to ensure the customer's voice is being heard and considered when a business is making a decision. This has given researchers unprecedented access to boardrooms across the world. Every day, research teams are standing up in front of CEOs and CFOs, and giving persuasive and powerful updates on brand health, customer satisfaction and new trends in markets.

It wasn't always easy to hear that voice; customers were quiet. If we wanted to listen to them, we had to find a group of customers and ask them directly what they thought of our products or our advertising.

Now, customers are easier to listen to than ever before. Every day, more than 500 million Tweets are sent; more than half a billion expressions of likes, dislikes, opinions and thoughts are also made. This is the largest public library of consumer opinion ever amassed and opens up opportunities to understand, anticipate and meet customers' needs. The challenge is that many more people now have that exact job – it's not just the domain of the researcher.

Whereas everything from advertising measurement and brand tracking to proposition testing tends to sit with the research team, responsibility for analysing and reporting on social media is often scattered across a business. Sometimes the media agency owns it; sometimes brand managers are doing their own analysis; and sometimes tech platforms or media owners are reporting back on it themselves.

Research teams have a great opportunity to collaborate across these parties, to innovate with social media data and combine it with existing research to uncover valuable insights – but time is short. Other teams and types of agencies are already using this data to find actionable insights about customers. This risks eroding researchers' treasured position as chief customer advocates. The time to start exploring what social media research means for you is now.

By **Olesya Moosman**, head of research, Twitter UK

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