FORUM

‘Connected research’
How market research can get the most out of semantic web waves

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The new internet evolutions (Web 2.0 and beyond) have not yet been truly embedded in the market research process. We introduce the term ‘connected research’ as an embedded form of market research that uses online tools to tap into social interactions between consumers and allows a more equal relationship between researchers and participants in terms of communication as well as content and input. This paper provides an overview of an enhanced toolbox for market research from which practitioners can choose those instruments that provide an enhanced solution for a specific research problem.

Introduction
The term Web 2.0 refers to participation, information contribution and sharing, social networking, user collaboration and creation, all relying on improved web technologies (e.g. wikis, blogs, web feeds, social bookmarking) (Dearstyne 2007; Huang & Behara 2007). The main importance of Web 2.0 is that it has gained considerable human relevance. Phenomena such as ubiquitous broadband, crowd sourcing and wisdom, user-generated or user-created content, citizen journalism and online social interactions (e.g. conversation, collaboration, participation, sharing, connecting) have all led to a networked information economy and society.

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(Benkler 2006). For the first time in history, technology seems to allow everyone to have ‘a voice’ without a need for technical skills, and all at blinding speed and low cost. The result is a world of intense information flows with new generations of consumers: ‘generation C’ or even ‘digital natives’ (Trendwatching 2004; Ahonen & Moore 2005; Gasser & Palfrey 2008). Consumers are getting smarter – and getting smarter faster than most companies (including the market research industry). Furthermore, consumers sometimes know more about products than the owning companies do (Levine et al. 2000; Orr 2007). We believe that this has created an opportunity for new research applications to fulfil marketers’ need to connect to consumers and to understand them better, as certain information and trends are overlooked when using only traditional research techniques (Forsyth et al. 2006).

Up until now, a handful of market research agencies have jumped on the Web 2.0 trend to illustrate market research applications (Abiven & Labidoire 2007; du Perron & Kischkat 2007; Gadeib & Genter 2007; Hamilton et al. 2007; Puri 2007; Reinhold & Bhutaia 2007). While the findings of these case studies and illustrations are certainly useful, they all face similar challenges. The focus is often on specific Web 2.0 applications, which are niche, experimental and considered in isolation (e.g. second life, (mini) blogs, communities). With these applications, it is often the case that the hype sometimes overshadows reality. Poynter and Lawrence (2007) provide a valuable and more holistic view with their coined terms ‘Research 2.0’ and ‘Insight 2.0’. However, we believe the new internet evolutions have not yet been embedded in the market research process. We propose an enhanced toolbox from which specific instruments are chosen that provide an optimal solution for a specific research problem. We make a down-to-earth attempt at integrating the internet advancements into the market research process, while providing an extensive overview of the possibilities and value for market research.

‘Connected research’

To provide a common understanding, rigour and to be independent of fads (‘2.0’ is just the current stage of evolutionary internet growth) we propose to coin a new term for the evolutionary web in market research, namely ‘connected research’.

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A definition

‘Connected research’ is an embedded form of market research that uses interactive tools to tap into social interactions between people, and allows a more equal relationship between researchers and participants in terms of communication as well as content and input (Figure 1).

- It is embedded as the internet tools need to be implanted into the complete market research process of identifying, collecting, analysing and communicating market information, with methodological rigour. It is a set of utensils that complements the existing toolbox of traditional research methods but needs to serve a purpose. In other words, the market research solution is the central aspect of this methodology, as opposed to the technological tools as such.

- The tool set is in line and needs to keep up with current Web x.0 technologies and will evolve with subsequent semantic waves (Davis 2008).

- Traditional market research focuses mainly on vertical top-down relationships and information streams between one respondent and one researcher at a time. However, ‘connected research’ allows learning from social dynamics between participants. Furthermore, ‘connected research’ is a philosophy of conducting research. The connection between researchers and participants (note the difference from ‘respondents’) is much more equal, participative and bottom-up.

Figure 1 ‘Connected research’
Researchers will have to show more empathy, facilitate and inspire participants, allow the freedom to provide opinions beyond set boundaries, trust participants, cede control and tolerate ambiguity. Researchers have to ‘actively listen’ much more to online conversations rather than trying to steer them.

How can ‘connected research’ create value for market research?

Information technologies traditionally have automational, informational and transformational effects (Day 1994; Grover et al. 1996; Mooney et al. 1996). First, automational effects refer to efficiency gains (e.g. doing things more quickly and cheaply) due to substituting labour for technology. Informational value emerges from the fact that the capacity to collect, store, process and disseminate information is enhanced (e.g. doing things more effectively). Transformational outcomes relate to executing tasks that were previously not possible without the technology. New capabilities and skills are developed due to process innovation and transformation.

The maximal added value on each of these aspects is realised by rigorously and purposefully embedding these ‘next web tools’ into the market research process and creating integrated designs in which different tools are used in conjunction with one another. We therefore consider these instruments as an enhanced toolbox that allows for true ‘triangulation’ (Jick 1979). Triangulation means that ‘connected research’ can provide alternatives for studying similar research subjects from different angles, and generate richer and integrative understandings of the phenomena under study.

The enhanced toolbox

A taxonomy

In order to be able to fully exploit the possibilities of triangulation, a taxonomy is imperative. When considering the ‘connected research’ tools we can roughly distinguish between secondary and primary research. The former encompasses all web content and conversations that are naturally generated and available for everybody. This natural content is not necessarily meant for market research but may be created and published with marketing relevance and can support desk research. Primary connected research refers to a generic set of ‘next web’ instruments that are used for
a specific research objective. In an attempt to sketch the entire landscape of the Web 2.0 apparatus for connected market research but without the aim of being exhaustive or perpetually up to date, Table 1 provides an overview and explanation of the ‘connected research’ toolbox.

Table 1  Secondary connected research: natural conversations and content

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Secondary research tools</th>
<th>Online platforms that are not explicitly meant for research but can provide access to information or research participants</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Natural blogs and microblogs</td>
<td>Subject commentaries or personal online diaries. Microblogs have very short postings. Support different media types such as mobiles, video or photos.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural wikis</td>
<td>Software that allows users to jointly collaborate on central documents.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social networks</td>
<td>Online social structure of communities of people around shared interests or activities (e.g. values, visions, (dis)likes, friends, brands), where people want to connect. Users interact via a multitude of tools (e.g. chat, email, video, blogs, discussion groups) but mostly asynchronous. Popular platforms are MySpace, Facebook, Bebo, Orkut and Friendster.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>User forums and chat rooms</td>
<td>Synchronous real-time online conversations on certain topics or for specific locations. The most popular format is that of IRC; some rooms allow avatars.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mailing lists and e-groups</td>
<td>Rely on topic-specific mailing lists (open or upon approval) to which members subscribe. Users use the list to post questions and answers to other members. Members are highly involved.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural communities, newsgroups and discussion boards</td>
<td>Public sites that users visit to post messages. Vary from general to highly specialised topics. Users are highly involved.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>User-generated content directories and blog aggregator/search engines</td>
<td>Databases of (user-generated) web content. Examples include Digg, Google BlogSearch, Delicious, YouTube, Flickr and Google Alert.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blog tracking</td>
<td>Crawlers tracking online buzz in a defined web universe indicate the size and content of buzz. Some well-known examples are BlogPulse, Technorati and Alexa.</td>
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</table>
| Aggregators (including mashups and screen scrapers)               | Applications that assemble syndicated web content (e.g. from blogs, communities) on a central web page for easy viewing and interaction with research participants. Two often used examples are:  
  1. Web feed readers, e.g. integrate comments from participants’ research blogs, bulletin boards or communities  
  2. Netvibes – a web desktop portal that aggregates APIs from different sites. Ideal for efficiently centralising secondary research from different sources (e.g. social bookmarking sites, blogs and blog trackers, alerts, content sharing sites) |
**Natural content and conversations: secondary connected research**

Internet users constantly create content about their lives, brands and experiences, which leads to a wealth of information. On the one hand, this provides opportunities for web and ethnographical research as it generates vivid, spontaneous and real-time insights from natural online consumer conversations on the internet (Puri 2007). Moreover, we have learned that incorporating online desk research as a standard procedure in the research process leads to increased commitment on behalf of the market researchers, generates new information and creates a bond between researchers and decision makers. Researchers build expertise, define the universe of their study subject, immerse themselves in technical matters and learn the vocabulary of the audience. It also adds speed and contemporary knowledge in fine-tuning research designs, topic guides, surveys and hypothesis generation. Finally, a number of new secondary market research services have emerged recently that track blogs and forums. Roughly speaking, these services use web crawlers that scrape the web (e.g. a universe of blogs) and quantitatively analyse its content (e.g. via text mining).

The impact for market research is mainly informational and transformational, as it adds to our existing activities. It is informational because it provides a wealth of extra information that is stored, shared and easy to access. It is transformational because the information comes from a wide variety of target groups, even people who never participate in research and whom we would never be able to reach otherwise. It also changes the way we are performing; for instance, market researchers used to physically go to the library in order to conduct desk research.

**Primary connected research**

In terms of primary connected research we discriminate between techniques and plug-ins. Techniques are methods that can function and generate meaning by themselves. They are either individual or group based, and synchronous or asynchronous in nature. Plug-ins refer to tools that are embedded into standalone methods (e.g. surveys) (see Table 2).

*Online groups* rely on advanced web features such as online meeting, chatting, sharing, uploading and creation tools (e.g. joint drawing). In line with Reid and Reid's (2005) findings, our experience reveals that online discussion groups overall generate the same findings as offline focus groups, although experience and specific measures are needed, and slight differences may still exist. By nature online groups tap into the
Table 2  Primary connected research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary research tools</th>
<th>Platforms purposefully set up for a specific research objective</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Techniques</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online groups or chat</td>
<td>Online synchronous group sessions – typically 6 to 8 participants. Characterised by moderate interaction between participants, and a combination of adaptive moderation and catalysing for social interaction. Software tools typically allow for projective techniques and collaborative tools (e.g. whiteboards, multimedia uploads, browser sharing). Can also be used with individuals for general chat sessions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bulletin boards or forums</td>
<td>Asynchronous discussions with a relatively short time span of days to 1–3 weeks. The forum is hosted on a platform with threaded discussions, to which participants can return several times and react upon each other’s comments. Typically tackles a few specific topics. Moderation is low to moderate and social dynamics are nice-to-haves.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research communities</td>
<td>Asynchronous discussions with a longer time span of several weeks up to months, or sometimes even continuous. Medium to high moderation, which needs to lead to high inspiration of participants. Social interaction and dynamics needed for information generation. To generate a common interest and ongoing participation, extensive recruitment and screening is needed (community and relationship bonding). Often used as standalone research programmes covering different but related research topics.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research blogs</td>
<td>Online diary leading to a one-to-one conversation between participant and researcher. Participants typically report about their behaviour or experiences. The main goal for researchers is to learn about (parts of) individual lives. Diary reporting is usually not open to others in order not to influence others’ input, but handled in separate silos (Poynter &amp; Lawrence 2007). If they do become peer-to-peer it is mostly towards the end when there is less risk of contamination and interaction may even become desirable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virtual worlds</td>
<td>Computer-simulated 3D-environments (‘worlds’) where users adopt a self-created avatar for interacting with others. Second Life is currently the most popular platform. Researchers use the simulated environment for primary research tasks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Plug-ins</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After-survey comment tool</td>
<td>After completing a survey, participants have the opportunity to provide general comments about the survey topic, concrete stimuli or statements tested, a specific topic or even their survey experience. There is no moderation and no possibility for participants to return to the platform. Participants’ answers are not peer-to-peer (i.e. not visible to others).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exit survey discussion forums</td>
<td>Similar to after-survey comments, but participants are asked to provide general comments or discuss concrete stimuli or statements tested, a specific topic or even their survey experience. Inputs of participants are peer-to-peer and interactions are desirable.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(continued)
unconscious, top-of-mind and fast-processing areas of human memory. The consequence is that the input from participants is open-minded, factual, concise, impulsive and to the point (Hiltz et al. 1989). Compared to offline focus groups this often leads to more progressive standpoints, less rationalised emotions or responses triggered by social desirability. In addition, there is less direct interaction between participants based on one another’s answers if the group session is not steered that way (which is less ‘2.0’ than expected). Due to the computer-mediated textual communication environment, online group participants are in ‘overwrite mode’, which means they post their responses without having to wait their turn or take away the opportunity for others to respond.\(^1\) Smart and adaptive moderation are thus crucial to compensate for these natural tendencies and enhance the interaction. Moderation needs to allow the impulsive flow of group participants and subsequently introduce explicit interactional exercises. The introduction of stimuli, visual guidance boards and adapted projective techniques\(^2\) creates a certain mood, or vibe, among participants and elicits in-depth emotions and interaction. The end result is an even richer information stream compared with traditional focus groups including overt as well as latent cognitive processing. The overwrite mode also has a positive effect on participation as it is equalised and less dominated by some individuals due to parallel communication. While the participation rates may not be equal for all members, in our experience, the number of contributions per participant is not correlated with the number of participants in a group. Moreover, reactions to questions are often

\(^{1}\) Compared to offline focus groups in which participants are in an ‘insert mode’ due to each other’s physical presence.

\(^{2}\) For example, photo sorting, sentence completion, me-centred maps, avatar building and personification.

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**Table 2** Primary connected research (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary research tools(^1)</th>
<th>Platforms purposefully set up for a specific research objective</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Plug-ins (continued)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>User-coded open ends</td>
<td>Tools that generate structure and quantitative output in open-ended responses. The specific characteristic is that users go through a process of coding themselves (‘user/participant generated coding’).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>User-created brainstorm</td>
<td>A tool that departs from an open-ended question to produce ideas, and generates an arranged list of ideas tapping into the wisdom of the crowd of participants.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visual user tagging</td>
<td>A tool to enrich a concept or notion with associations by means of tagging user- or researcher-generated visuals.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^1\) Market research agencies may develop their own proprietary tools each marketed in a different way.
simultaneous and appear in a matter of seconds compared to offline focus groups. On the down side, online groups are not suited to observational and sensory research, and miss out on all non-verbal cues. With the higher prevalence of webcams, however, the latter inconvenience may be reduced to a certain degree in the future. While online groups require the same if not more rigorous recruitment efforts to obtain committed participants, attendees do not have to travel to a central location, which makes them more economical in cases of an extensive design with a wide geographical coverage. Hence, the added value of online discussion groups can be found at the automational (e.g. immediate transcripts, less travel) as well as informational (e.g. mode of interaction) level. Online groups can be used in preparatory research phases as well as standalone research designs for product concept optimisations using drawing and creative tools, idea and association generation for communication ideas, communication testing, brand mood board creations and transactional satisfaction measurements. In post hoc, they are ideal for clarifying willingness to pay and price zones, understanding delighted and dissatisfied customers, as well as segmentation schemes.

The platforms used for online groups can also be used with single participants for one-to-one interviews or chat sessions, if needed for a specific research topic or target group.

Bulletin boards (or forums) and research communities are similar to one another in that they share the same technical software platform, but there are major differences in terms of practical implementation. Bulletin boards are ideal for asynchronous online group discussions (e.g. when covering different time zones or accessing hard-to-reach target groups) and for clearly identifiable events that a wide target group can observe (e.g. a nationwide integrated communication campaign). By the same token, this asynchronous nature leads to less control over the interaction and puts limits on certain projective techniques. Bulletin boards typically have between 20 and 80 participants (i.e. at least one-time posters). They can be applied for, say, qualitative communication trackers to capture comments before, during or shortly after a communication campaign, sharing brand experiences or for generating critical incidents in customer satisfaction studies (Flanagan 1954) and motivated polls. For successful research communities there is a need for good planning and continuous management of participants to create a common interest such that participants keep contributing. A deep understanding of the online culture and social interactions in communities is at least as, if not more, important than fancy technology. The level and approach of moderation is also
critical. It is no longer one of a directive moderator, but much more that of a trustful and inspirational catalyst (Brafman & Beckstrom 2006). The task of the moderator(s) is demanding because communities are labour-intensive to monitor and the research is spread over longer periods of time. Engagement can be enhanced by using several motivational techniques. Examples are giving community members tasks that they must execute and report back on, appointing community members as journalists who summarise and comment on specific discussion threads, inviting special guests who are knowledgeable about a topic and who participate live, and playing on participants’ intrinsic motivation in providing them with the results of polls and surveys. In this context we should rely on why users contribute content online – reasons such as fame, fun, desire, ego and reputation (Bughin 2007). Typical sample sizes are hard to provide, but in general terms research communities have around 200 active members, of which 20 to 60 engage per topic or participation wave. Our experience has taught us that careful recruitment around a common interest is a key success factor for communities to generate participation and quality output. This recruitment of community participants may be a disadvantage if one cannot rely on customer databases. Communities are living social systems, and conventional recruitment methods (e.g. online access panels) alone may not be sufficient (Comley 2007; Hamilton et al. 2007). In order to engage participants fully, research communities have to rely on an integrative set of research tools, such as multimedia uploads, drawing boards, polls, chats, blogs or online group sessions. Therefore, the value of communities is transformational. They allow new ways of interacting and bonding with consumers (or even employees) over extended periods of time. Research communities are well suited to continuous concept development at the fuzzy front end of product development, idea screening, reality checks and product experience testing. Communities result in co-creation and product innovation: they truly bring the consumer alive in the boardroom.

Research blogs are online diaries people keep for the sake of a specific study and to which they are invited by researchers. Research bloggers typically report on behaviours and processes and are well suited to (visual) (n)ethnography. Blogs are ideal for understanding usage and attitudes, product beta tests and early-launch user experience testing, but also for recording information search, price comparison processes, and buying and purchase decisions. Blogs provide a new way of tapping into the complex set of decisions in the consumer’s mindset (Cooke 2006). The challenge

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3 Participants are not followed or observed, but asked to film or photograph daily-life situations.
for the continued use of personal blogs over an extended period of time lies in recruitment and keeping individuals at sufficient and necessary levels of activity. Especially when investigating long-term decision-making processes, it is important that consumers do not forget to report their progress on the research blog. The inclusion of web feeds in research blogs is handy for researchers to follow up, but also to push reports back to them directly, which reduces time and effort in checking participant blogs (Puri 2007). Therefore, blogs are often used in addition to other research (methods), even in preparing for online or offline groups or interviews, and most often include ‘creative’ tasks. Other complexities of blogs are that they are labour-intensive to follow and monitor from a researcher’s point of view, and there is a lack of group interaction. The contribution of blogs for research is mainly transformational as it changes data collection methods (e.g. diary research) including interactive features.

Market researchers have also experimented with virtual worlds (mainly Second Life). Qualitative research in virtual worlds was organised in terms of one-on-one interviews as well as focus groups. In the case of interactive 3D settings, co-design exercises have been tried out. The advantage is that participants are immersed into an experience, and participate in building and creating concepts. Quantitative research applications in virtual worlds have been limited to ad boards for recruitment towards traditional online surveys outside of the simulation or for quick user polls (Abiven & Labidoire 2007). While there is undoubtedly a future for simulated environments and we need pioneers at the forefront of research in virtual worlds, the question today is whether they really add value to market research in their current format. The user interface and graphical design of existing platforms are still limited and often require advanced user skills. What participants produce sometimes needs a reality check (e.g. buildings often defy the laws of physics; flying or ‘transponding’ are ‘normal’ means of transportation; and avatars adopt supernatural abilities). Since virtual worlds provide a novel way of unlocking the web, the eventual value is transformational.

When conducting classical online surveys, participants never have the opportunity to provide additional personal comments outside the scope of what the research has foreseen. This approach is rigid and typical for 1.0 research and communication with respondents (Comley 2006). After-survey comment tools and exit survey discussion forums should provide this opportunity for participants. By the same token, it enriches the descriptive findings of the underlying quantitative study. As disadvantages of these tools, one can mention that participants can become focused on irrelevant
themes, that participation is lowered after participating in a survey and that there is little ongoing interaction between participants. If this is the need, however, researchers should turn to (for example) communities or bulletin boards. Examples can be found in innovation research where people can elaborate and discuss tested concepts, or in usage and attitude studies they can provide a self-description of who they are. One of the greatest applications in our view is to use post-survey comments and forums in customer satisfaction studies to automatically generate critical incidents. These consumer experiences illustrate quantitative findings and can be tied in to specific extreme (sub)satisfaction scores, which in turn offer opportunities for remedial action or appraisal. The impact for market research is informational as it allows the collection and storage of additional information.

A final set of tools is integrated in quantitative surveys and allows users to create content from their own qualitative inputs, such that it becomes quantitative and structured information. This can be applied to user-coded open ends, user-created brainstorms and visual user tagging. In these quantifying tools, participants produce research content via creation, contextualisation and propagation (e.g. provide their own answer → tag and label their response → share and dig the answers of peers) (Jaffe 2007; Orr 2007; Verhaeghe et al. 2008). User-coded open ends allow participants to content-analyse their own open responses into structured categories that they themselves define. Participants provide their unaided opinions about a stimulus, interpret and tag their own answers, assign them to categories generated by peers and, finally, reassess the question with the entire set of user-generated codes as if it were a closed-ended question. Relying on the same principles, user-created brainstorms help participants to brainstorm and think interactively about a wide variety of topics. Participants list as many of their own ideas as possible about a certain topic and track whether their own ideas are already provided by other participants. If not, the new idea can be added. Finally, participants are invited to check, or ‘dig’, the ideas they prefer. Visual user tagging is a final variant of these content creation tools as participants label visuals – uploaded by themselves or provided by the researcher – with their associations and ‘dig’ the tags of peers. The advantages of these tools are rich coding schemes that are truly validated by the original sources, i.e. the participants. The procedure is less labour-intensive for the researchers, and the number of people not providing any input is almost non-existent due to propagation effects of seeing the answers of peers. The main disadvantage is that it is time-consuming for participants and hence limited to one or two exercises per survey, depending
on its overall length. The added value of these tools is *automational* and *informational* as well as *transformational*. Large parts of the analyses are done by participants, which makes the process much more efficient for market research agencies, and the richness and quality of information is enhanced via a tool with new peer-to-peer and tagging capabilities.

The power of these tools often lies in the fact of integrated multi-step research designs, which include a sequence of different techniques (e.g. homework and blogs followed by online discussions, a traditional quantitative survey and ending with a bulletin board). This allows true triangulation and profound understanding of the research topic, embedded in real life.

**Conclusions**

With the web evolving into the next semantic waves, the entire market research process and industry are undergoing clear changes. While the introduction of online in market research in the 1990s had major efficiency impacts on quantitative research (e.g. Schillewaert *et al.* 1998), the impact of Web x.0 is more informational and transformational, and probably the largest for qualitative research. Novel techniques require different ways of recruitment, screening, moderation and interaction towards a more personal style, with more engagement and social bonding between researchers and participants. On the other hand, the boundaries between qualitative and quantitative research are blurring with the arrival of blog tracking, text mining and user coding. *Field* interaction with participants will have to change as well, as researchers will have to engage with respondents in a less directive and rigid manner (Comley 2006; Poynter & Lawrence 2007). Engaging participants in communities or blogs, for instance, will require more non-probability *sampling* (often snowballing) as well as scrutinised screening procedures. Since current access panels are not built for that purpose, researchers will have to consider alternative recruitment methods such as customer databases, online advertising and snowballing via groups in social networks (Poynter 2008). *Analysis and reporting* will change due to joint collaboration between researchers and customers (e.g. via joint publishing in wikis or user-coded open ends), eventually resulting in higher customer involvement, co-creation of the research product and more integrative relationships (Druner & Remelle 2007). Enhanced multimedia features and juicy case stories from participants will make new-style reports more illustrative and conclusions (hopefully) more memorable. Reports will contain fewer charts and numbers, and have a different design
(e.g. tag clouds; text that is centralised, bold, larger, in strong colours and small caps; forms with gradients, wet floor effects and reflections; realistic photo prints).

While traditional research will not cease to exist, we will move from ‘rather accurate information two months late’ to ‘more fuzzy immediate insights’. More than ever, consumers in the extremes and tails of traditional distributions speak up. As marketers and managers we should be interested in what really motivates these people and allow them to clarify their needs in more creative and illustrative ways. Only then we can act and improve. Even though connected research provides us with some of the tools to do just that, there is still a long way to go in the area and the industry is still learning. There may even be reasons not to engage in ‘connected research’:

- unwillingness to cede control to participants
- aversion to accept and handle critique and provide concrete solutions for customers
- the belief that ‘connected research’ will solve all problems
- absence of resources and skills
- lack of fit between tools and research objectives
- the sole purpose is to be fashionable, not to enhance or add value to market research
- unrealistic sampling requirements
- resistance towards the unknown, and fuzziness of outcomes and findings at the outset of studies.

Nonetheless, we feel strongly that the benefits of connected research are numerous, that these techniques can provide unique and insightful windows into consumer preferences, and can serve as a valuable part of the market researcher’s toolbox. In a world in which individuals increasingly expect to voice their opinions online and in their own words, connected research can provide a method to tap into this lifestyle to obtain consumer insights.

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