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Connected Research

Towards a common understanding of how market research can make the most out of semantic web waves

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Summary / Abstract

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 which 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 article provides an overview of an enhanced toolbox for market research toolbox from which practitioners can chose those instruments that provide an enhanced solution for a specific research problem.

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. wiki's, blogs, RSS, social bookmarking) (Huang and Behara 2007; Dearstyne 2007). The main importance of 'Web 2.0' is that it has gained considerable human relevance. Phenomena like ubiquitous broadband, crowd sourcing and wisdom, user generated or 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 (Benkler 2006, p. 3). 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.com 2004; Ahonen and Moore 2005; www.digitalnative.org). 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 fulfill 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, Galante and Guild 2006).

Up until now, a handful of market research agencies have jumped on the 'Web 2.0' trend to illustrate market research applications (Puri 2007; Hamilton et al. 2007; Reinhold and Bhutaia 2007; Gadeib and Genter 2007; du Perron and Kischkat 2007; Abiven and Labidoire 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 take 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'

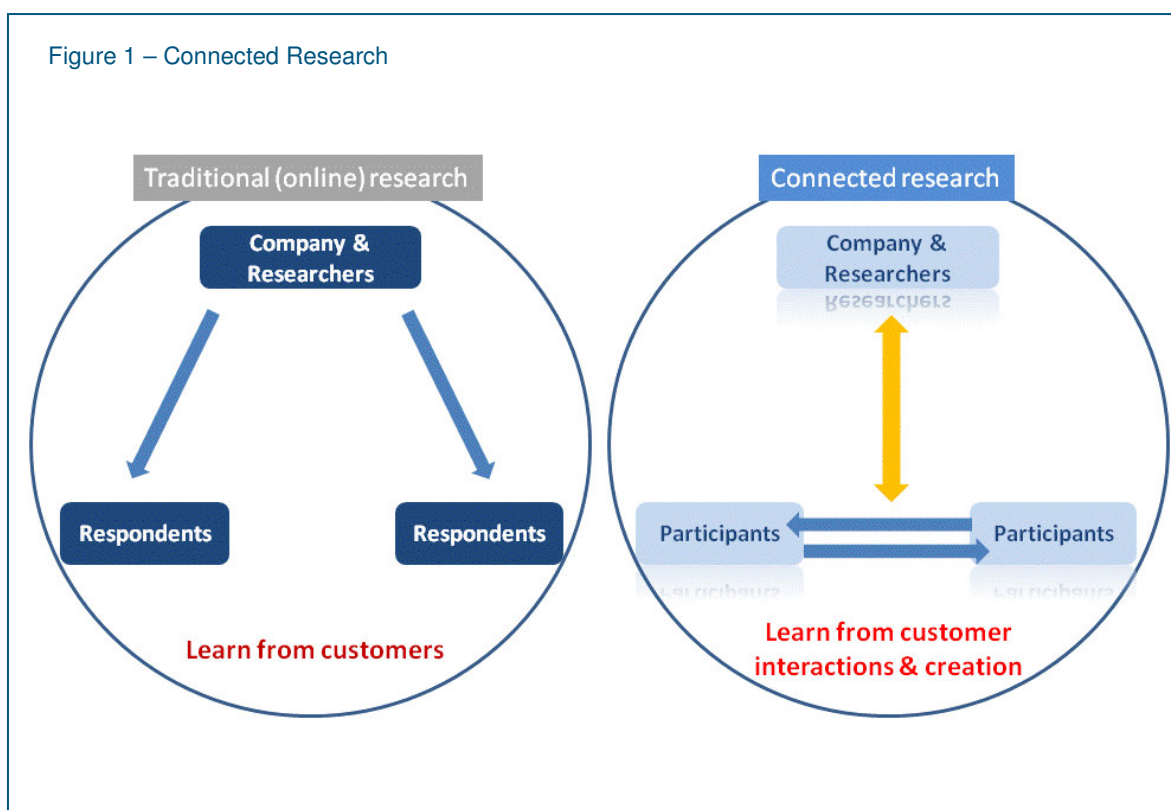
To provide a common understanding, rigor and to be independent of fads ('2.0' is just the current stage of evolutionary internet growth) we propose to coin a new term for the evolutionary web in market research, namely "Connected Research".

A definition

'Connected Research' is an *embedded* form of market research which 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.

- It is **embedded** as the Internet tools need to be implanted into the complete market research process of identifying, collecting, analyzing, and communicating market information, with methodological rigor. It is a set of utensils which 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 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 mainly focuses 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 with 'respondents') is much more **equal, participative and bottom-up**. 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

Figure 1 – Connected Research



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; Mooney et al. 1996; Grover et al. 1996). First, *automational* effects refer to efficiency gains (e.g., doing things more quickly and cheaply) due to substituting labor 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 realized by rigorously and purposefully embedding these 'next web tools' into the market research process and create integrated designs in which different tools are used in conjunction with one another. We therefore consider these instruments as an enhanced toolbox which 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 tools. The former encompass 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 which can support desk research. Primary connected research refers to a generic set of 'next web' instruments which 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 – ‘Connected Research’ tools for secondary research

<i>Secondary research tools</i>	<i>Platforms out there not explicitly meant for research but which can provide access to information or research participants</i>
Natural blogs & microblogs	Subject commentaries or personal online diaries. Microblogs have very short postings. Support different media types like mobiles, video or photos.
Natural wiki's	Software which allows users to jointly collaborate on central documents.
Social networks	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, e-mail, video, blogs, discussion groups) but mostly asynchronous. Popular platforms are MySpace, Facebook, Bebo, Orkut or Friendster.
User forums and chat rooms	Synchronous real-time online conversations on certain topics or for specific locations. The most popular format is that of IRC and some rooms allow avatars.
Mailing lists and e-groups	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.
Natural communities, newsgroups and discussion boards	Public sites which users visit to post messages. Vary from general to highly specialized topics. Users are highly involved.
User generated content directories & blog aggregator / search engines	Databases of (user generated) web content. Examples include Digg, BlogPulse, Technorati, Google BlogSearch, Delicious, YouTube, Flickr, Google Alert.
Aggregators (including mashups, screen scrapers ...)	Applications which 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: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RSS readers, e.g. integrate comments from participants research blogs, bulletin boards or communities • Netvibes – a web desktop portal which aggregates API's from different sites. Ideal for efficiently centralizing secondary research from different sources (e.g. social bookmarking sites, blogs and blog trackers, alerts, content sharing sites ...)

Natural content & 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 into 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 which track blogs and forums. Roughly speaking, these services use web crawlers that

scrape the web (e.g. a universe of blogs) and quantitatively analyze 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 market research applications with 'Connected Research' tools

In terms of primary Connected Research we discriminate between techniques and plug-ins. Techniques are methods which 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 which are embedded into standalone methods (e.g. surveys).

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 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. 1987). Compared to offline focus groups this often leads to more progressive standpoints, less rationalized 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 participants post their responses without having to wait their turn or take

away the opportunity for others to respond¹ (Nunamaker 1997).

Smart and adaptive moderation are thus crucial to compensate for these natural tendencies and can even change it for the better. Moderation needs to allow the impulsive flow of group participants and subsequently introduce explicit interactional exercises. Introducing stimuli, visual guidance boards and adapted projective techniques² create a certain mood or vibe among participants and elicit 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 equalized 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. Besides, reactions to questions are often simultaneous and appear in a matter of seconds compared to offline focus groups. On the down side, online groups are not suited for 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 acquire participants, attendees do not have to travel to a central location which makes them more economical in case 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 optimizations 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.

¹ Compared to offline focus groups in which participants are in an 'insert mode' due to each others' physical presence.

² Photo sorting, sentence completion, me-centered maps, avatar building, personification

Table 2 – ‘Connected Research’ tools for primary research

<i>Primary research tools¹</i>	<i>Platforms purposefully set up for a specific research objective</i>
Online groups	Online synchronous group sessions typically hold 6 to 8 participants. Characterized by moderate interaction between participants, and a combination of high moderation and catalyzing or freewheeling for social interaction & dynamics. Software tools typically allow for projective techniques and collaborative tools (e.g. whiteboards, multi-media uploads, browser sharing).
Bulletin boards or forums	Asynchronous discussions with a relatively short time span of 1 to 3 weeks. The forum is hosted on a platform with threaded discussions, to which participants can return several times and react upon each others' comments. Typically tackles a few specific topics. Moderation is low to moderate and social dynamics are nice to have. The major goal is to scratch people's opinions on a specific event or stimulus.
Research communities	Asynchronous discussions with a longer time span of several weeks up to months or sometimes even continuous. Medium to high moderation which need to lead to high inspiration of participants. Social interaction & dynamics needed for information generation. In order to generate a common interest and ongoing participation extensive recruitment & screening is needed (community and relationship bonding). Often used as standalone research programs covering different but related research topics. Allows multi-media uploads. The community feeling is stimulated by the moderator who functions as a catalyst and incites participants to take up an expert and journalist role and feedback findings back to participants.
Research blogs (incl. RSS)	Online diary leading to a 1 to 1 conversation between participant and researcher. Participants typically report about their behavior or experiences. The main goal for researchers is to learn what an individual does. Diary reporting is usually not open to others in order not to influence others' input but handled in separate silos (Poynter and Lawrence 2007). If they do become peer-to-peer it is mostly towards the end when there is less risk for contamination and interaction may even become desirable. In this case, this tool is than very similar to a bulletin board.
After survey comment tool	After completing a survey participants have the opportunity to provide a general comment 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).
Exit survey discussion forums	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.
Virtual worlds	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.
User coded open ends	Tools which 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").
User created brainstorm	A tool which 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.
Visual user tagging	A tool to enrich a concept or notion with associations by means of tagging user or researcher generated visuals.

The platforms used for online groups can also be used with single participants for one-on-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 as asynchronous online group discussions (e.g. when covering different time zones or accessing hard to reach target groups) and for clearly identifiable events which a wide target group can observe (e.g. a nationwide integrated communication campaign). By the same token the 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 e.g. qualitative communication trackers to capture comments before, during or shortly after a communication campaign, sharing brand experiences or 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 and Beckstrom 2006). The task of the moderator(s) is demanding because communities are labor-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 which they must execute and report back on, appoint community members as journalists who summarize and comment on specific discussion threads, invite special guests who are knowledgeable about a topic and who participate live, and play on participants' intrinsic motivation in providing them the results of polls and surveys. In this context we should rely on "why" users contribute content online 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 (Hamilton et al. 2007; Comley 2007). In order to engage participants fully, research communities have to rely on an integrative set of research tools such as multi-media 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 for 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 board room.

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 behaviors and processes and are well suited for (visual) (n)ethnography³. 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 consumers' mindset (Cooke 2006). The challenge for 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. Including RSS feeds into research blogs are 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

³ Participants are not followed or observed but asked to film or photograph daily life situations.

they are labor intensive to follow and monitor from a researcher's point of view and that 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 organized in terms of one-on-one interviews as well as focus groups. Especially in 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 and Labidoire 2007). While there is undoubtedly a future for simulated environments and we need pioneers at the forefronts of research in virtual worlds, the question today is if 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 of the scope of what the research has foreseen. This approach is rigid and typical for 1.0 research and communication with respondents (Comley 1996). **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 U&A 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 into 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 are integrated in quantitative surveys and allow 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, contextualization and propagation (e.g. provide their own answer → tag and label their response → share and dig the answers of peers) (Jaffe 2007; Verhaeghe, Schillewaert and De Ruyck 2008; Orr 2007). **User coded open ends** allow participants to content analyze their own open responses into structured categories which 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 if 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, the participants. The procedure is less labor 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*, *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 undergo clear changes. While the introduction of online in market research in the nineties had major efficiency impacts on quantitative research (e.g. Schillewaert, Langerak and Duhamel 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 and Lawrence, 2007). Engaging participants in communities or blogs for instance will require more non-probability **sampling** (often snowballing) as well as scrutinized 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 among researchers and customers (e.g. via joint publishing in wiki's or user coded open ends) eventually resulting in higher customer involvement,

co-creation of the research product and more integrative relationships (Druner and Remelle 2007). Enhanced multi-media 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 centralized, bold, larger, in strong colors and small caps; forms with gradients, wet floor effects and reflections; realistic photo prints; etc.).

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 toward the unknown & fuzziness of outcomes and findings at the outset of studies

Nonetheless, we strongly feel 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 researchers' 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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