



## **DATA IS OUR FUTURE: WELCOME TO THE AGE OF INFOMAGINATION**

### **Who's afraid of the data wolf?**

To a lot of people, data is scary stuff. Talk to your mum about it and visions of a Big Brother state that keeps losing its CDs soon come tumbling out. Mention it to your clients and they'll tell you that they're drowning in the stuff. Tell your colleagues you're writing a seven thousand word essay on data and the fear that they might get asked to read it is palpable. It's a fear you might be experiencing yourself right now. Is reading this paper going to be like locking yourself in a lift with a maths teacher?

Fear not, however, because over the course of this essay I'm going to be setting the record straight. I believe that data is an unstoppable force in the future of marketing (not to mention life as we know it) and that the only way for us to succeed is to embrace, rather than fear it. The future belongs to those who can learn to love, nurture and play with the information around us. Don't worry, the data of the future does not wear tweed and speak in monotone. It does not want you to sit down, be quiet and behave. Quite the opposite, in fact.

This paper begins with a quick survey of the sea of data that surrounds us. Next I'll be showing you how consumers' uneasy relationship with personal information is actually set to give more and more power to the people. Then I'll demonstrate how brands with data expertise are revolutionising marketing, but how most clients need to develop new capabilities and new partnerships to succeed - something that presents agencies with immense opportunity. Finally, I'll be proving that our data-driven future is alive with creativity and possibility. Along the way, you'll see how data's cold, secretive and frankly dull past is being replaced by a warm, open and inspiring future – where success is determined by a potent blend of information and imagination. This is our future. This is the Age of Infomagination.

### **Data, data, everywhere**

Once upon a time, a mechanically captured memory was a rare and precious thing - limited to a formal photograph or the crackly recording of a voice. Now, it's all but impossible to avoid leaving a recording behind as you go about your day. Make a mobile phone call. Use a cash machine. Swipe your Oyster card. Update your Facebook profile. Pay the congestion charge. Collect your Clubcard points. Write an e-mail. Or just walk down the street under the gaze of Britain's 4.2 million CCTV cameras. We barely notice it, but each of us passes an average of 3,254 pieces of personal information into databases every single week<sup>1</sup>.

And that's only the beginning. Whilst we humans connect and interact constantly, the objects around us are doing the same. 600 billion RFID (Radio Frequency IDentification) chips are already embedded in everything from buildings to ham<sup>2, 3</sup>. Furthermore, almost every piece of digital data also comes loaded with "metadata": data that describes the data. An image might come tagged with its time, date and location, for example<sup>4</sup>.

As these ripples of data gather on servers around the world they soon become a tidal wave. Technorati now tracks over 70 million blogs, with 120,000 more created every day (figure 1). Companies hold an estimated 60,000 petabytes (about 63 million gigabytes) of data worldwide – a figure that's set to double within two years (figure 2). Tesco alone gathers over 5 billion pieces of shopper information per week<sup>5</sup>.

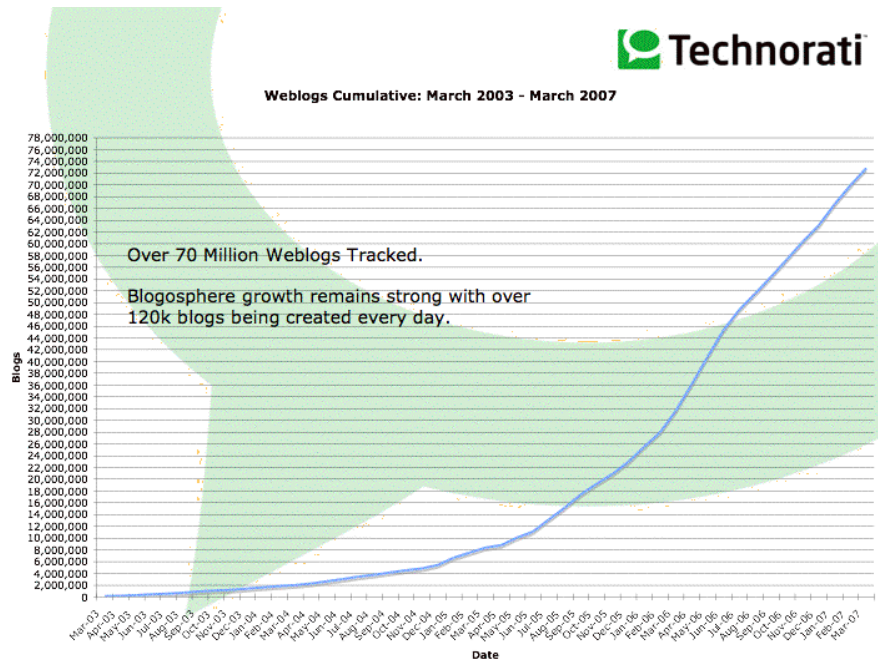


Figure 1. The explosive growth of the “blogosphere”<sup>6</sup>

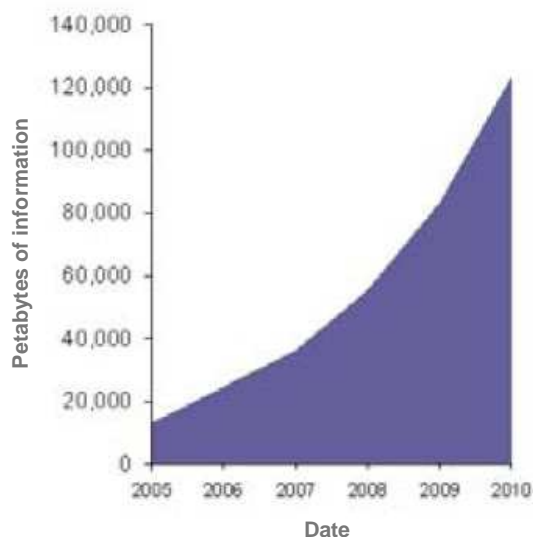


Figure 2. The massive influx of information held by companies worldwide<sup>7</sup>

Such unprecedented amounts of information have fundamentally changed the world we live in – not to mention the rules of marketing. The implications for how people feel about their personal information and for how brands and agencies must adapt are massive.

**Consumers & data: from concern to control**

*Information consternation*

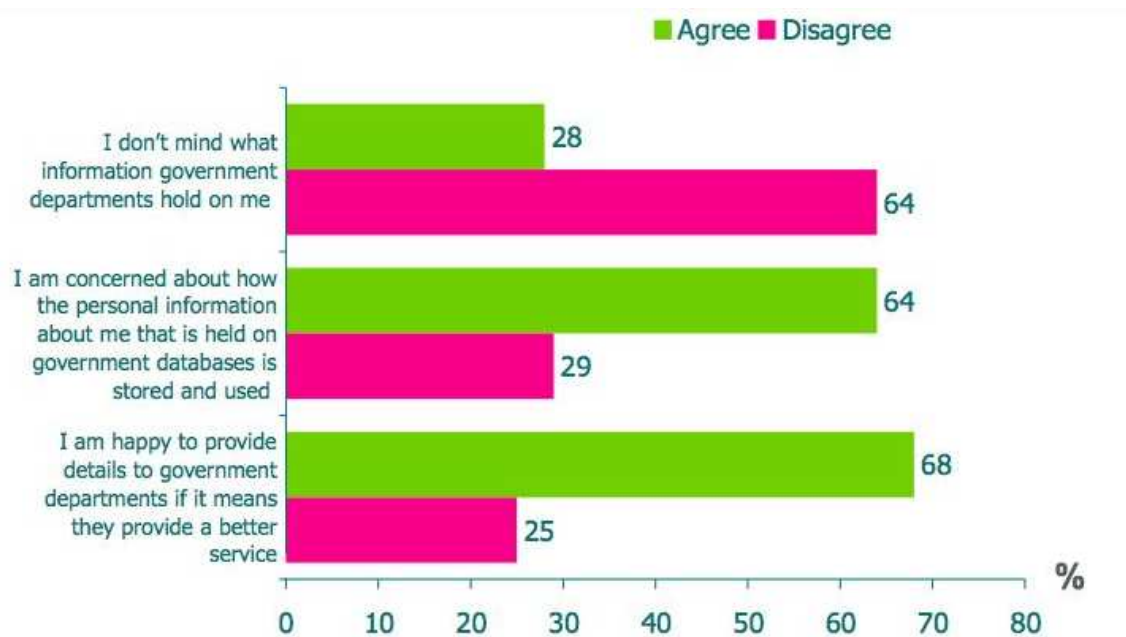
To anyone whose picked up a newspaper recently, it’s clear that “data” has become synonymous with “danger”. Whether it’s fear over identity theft (figure 3), concern over ID cards or repeated government losses of sensitive information, the warning signs are everywhere.



Figure 3. Data makes the headlines for all the wrong reasons<sup>8</sup>

*Quid pro quo*

With all this bad PR, it's no surprise that people are extremely wary about the information that's held on them. As figure 4 shows, however, when requests for personal information are sweetened by the promise of "better service" then the picture changes dramatically.



Base: 1,011 UK adults

Figure 4. The quid pro quo relationship of personal information provision<sup>9</sup>

As Rob Norman, Global CEO of GroupM Interaction, wrote in 2006, "it seems that the Millennials or, as PWC describes them, the Patriot Act generation, are happy to trade information for relevance."<sup>10</sup> We might not like to think about the data that's held on us, but we're grateful to Amazon for recommending us the right books and to Tesco for sending us

vouchers for the food we like. Personalisation is just too powerful a driver to resist – and Kevin Kelly<sup>3</sup>, founder of Wired magazine, believes this makes information sharing inevitable: “total personalisation will require total transparency... to share is to gain.”

One look at the next generation tells you that Kevin’s right. Today’s teens aren’t exactly hiding their personal details from the world (figure 5). In fact, New York Magazine recently declared the willingness of young people to share their lives online to be “the greatest generation gap since rock and roll”<sup>11</sup>.

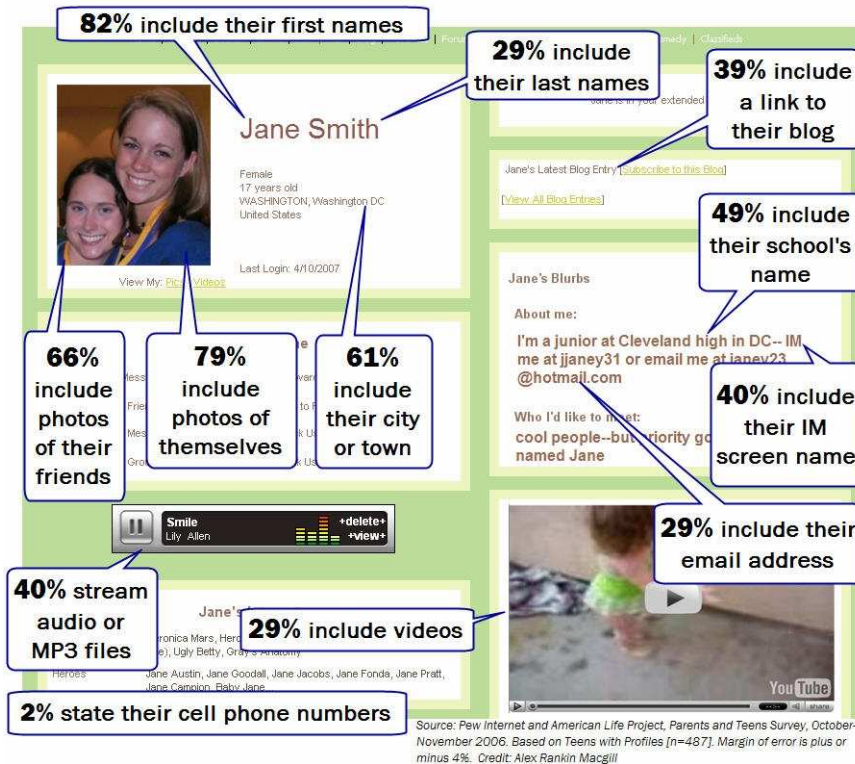


Figure 5. Teens share their lives on social networking sites<sup>12</sup>

*Our data, our selves*

With the benefits of supplying personal information too strong to give up, but concern over how our information is used deepening, the result is a growing movement that seeks to give people control of the data they create. Organisations like dataportability.org are working hard to create a “free, open, remixable web where your identity, contacts, relationships, personal details and media are free to follow you wherever you go”<sup>13</sup>. The net result will be to make our data more complete and connected - and to put us in charge of it (figure 6).

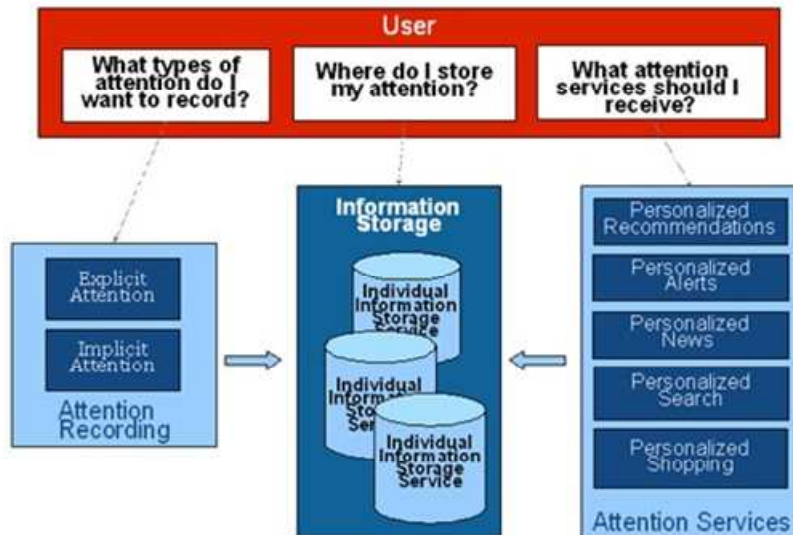


Figure 6. In the future, people will have greater control of their personal data<sup>14</sup>

This idea is being taken even further with the development of “Vendor Relationship Management” at Harvard University. Described as the reciprocal of CRM, VRM is a way for consumers to host and manage data themselves – enabling them to interact with businesses on their terms and cut off “bad partners”<sup>15, 16</sup>.

*Consumers: the new data analysts*

In the throws of the digital revolution, data is fast becoming democratised – and brands certainly aren’t the only ones collecting, analysing and comparing information.

The evidence is everywhere. First up are the “agent brands”<sup>17</sup>, which deliver data on a whole range of markets right into consumers’ hands (figure 7). When it comes to knowing where to get the best deal, consumers might once have been confused.com – but now the balance of power has shifted firmly in their favour.

**Compare thousands of products & services**

One search for cards, loans, insurance, mobiles and more

<p><b>Money</b></p> <p>Credit cards, loans, mortgages, savings...</p>	<p><b>Insurance</b></p> <p>Motor, home, travel, life and more...</p>	<p><b>Travel</b></p> <p>Flights, hotels, car hire, holidays and more...</p>	<p><b>Utilities</b></p> <p>UK gas and electricity suppliers...</p>
<p><b>Broadband</b></p> <p>Broadband only and bundled products...</p>	<p><b>Shopping</b></p> <p>Compare prices for consumer goods...</p>	<p><b>Mobiles</b></p> <p>Compare, switch, upgrade your mobile...</p>	<p><b>Motoring</b></p> <p>Car prices, breakdown cover, car leasing...</p>

Figure 7. Data analysis is increasingly at consumers’ fingertips<sup>18</sup>

We like to compare ourselves too. Glassdoor.com is a website that lets people discover what companies pay, and whether employees think they're a good place to work, in return for revealing the details of their own job (that quid pro quo thing again). More than 50,000 reviews and reports were published in the site's first two months and it now holds information on over 14,000 companies worldwide<sup>19</sup>.

Data also helps consumers monitor their lives and loved ones. FollowUs (www.followus.co.uk) lets them track the location of mobile phones, using online mapping software. School cashless catering systems let them check what their kids are eating<sup>20</sup>. And if that's not enough information then the government will be putting details of each pupil's attendance, behaviour and academic performance online in 2012, allowing parents to monitor their progress daily<sup>21</sup>. In the future, it seems that marketers won't be the only ones checking how their "product" is performing against KPIs.

With consumers set to take ever greater interest in their own data, brands need to start giving them access to their information, together with the tools to explore. Why doesn't HSBC help me carry out some simple financial analysis when I use their internet banking, so I can manage my money better? Why doesn't O2 let me analyse my mobile phone bill records online, to see where I could save? Why can't I log into tesco.com, check what I've bought with my Clubcard, monitor my spending and learn why it recommends me the products it does? In the battle for better service, these all seem like easy wins.

*Summary: data power to the people*

The march of relevancy and personalisation, combined with inevitable digitisation, means the future is destined to be data-powered.

One too many bad news story has left storm clouds lurking on the electronic horizon, however. Public concern can only slow progress, so business and the government must work hard to stop data becoming a four letter word. Clients should develop transparent policies where they are open about how personal details are stored, explain how customers benefit from providing them and offer an opportunity to delete them.

Companies of the future certainly won't be able to take customer data for granted. Concern breeds control and the next generation of data will be held and managed by the people who create it, rather than the services they use. Like companies, consumers will increasingly use data to keep track of and manage their lives, including their relationship with brands – and helping people to access and analyse the data they create will deliver competitive advantage.

In this way, tomorrow's most successful companies will be those that use data to their customer's advantage, as opposed to their own - whilst those that don't risk it being used against them. In the Age of Infomagination, the limits of how a brand uses its data are defined only by its creativity. I'll be exploring a few possibilities here later, but first let's take a look at how brands and agencies are adjusting to the information revolution.

## **Brands & data: understanding and overload**

*Analysis breeds advantage*

Jack Welch of General Electric once said that "there are only two sources of competitive advantage: the ability to learn more about our customers faster than the competition and the ability to turn that learning into action faster than the competition."<sup>5</sup>

In the past, learning about your customers meant sitting behind a two-way mirror in a research facility somewhere. Whilst qual can yield great insights, however, it can also shine a light down a blind alley every now and again. We humans can be a perplexing bunch and it's a fact of life that people often "don't say what they mean or mean what they say"<sup>22</sup>. Really understanding consumer behaviour means going beyond what people say to what they actually do. This is where data comes into its own. Through loyalty card data, search results, blogs and beyond, we increasingly have the power to know who's doing what, where they're doing it and what they're saying about it. In the future, it's likely that complex combinations of information will finally allow us to make a clear, measurable connection between exposure to communication and purchasing decisions – creating something Jim Taylor of MEC describes as a "Soul Meter."<sup>23</sup>

Whilst a Soul Meter might be a little way off, even now leading companies are already changing entire industries through the use of high-speed analytics.

Google is on a mission to organise the world's information. Its legendary data storage capacity and number crunching abilities allow it to identify the most relevant web pages and sponsored links for any query, refined by learning from your personal search history<sup>24</sup>. The more data it sucks up, the smarter it gets and - whether it's digitising the world's book and newspaper archives<sup>25</sup>, or launching its Chrome browser, which reports on surfing habits<sup>26</sup> - it's always on the hunt for more. The upshot is that Google knows what people want and how to give it to them; a sure-fire recipe for the world's most powerful brand<sup>26</sup>.

The social music website Last.fm monitors every track its users listen to on their computers and digital music players in order to recommend similar artists – notching up 20 million fans of its own, plus providing insights on listening trends, in the process.<sup>28</sup>

And, of course, Tesco has quietly revolutionised the marketing world with Clubcard, using hourly sales data on over 12 million shoppers to guide its key business decisions and deliver personalised service through incredibly tailored offers<sup>5,29</sup>. Despite printing 4 million Clubcard mailings a time, normally only two people get the exact same set of vouchers<sup>23</sup>.

The principle is the same throughout – better data leads to better customer understanding, leads to better service. Companies like these, who have invested heavily in analytics, show us that the future is already here. The rest of us are running along behind.

### *Most marketers aren't waving, but drowning*

For most organisations, information is a messy and overwhelming affair. In a recent global survey of over 1,000 business decision makers, 75% of respondents said that they suffer from information overload – with only 50% of their information useful for decision making<sup>7</sup>. In our rapidly changing times, marketers must be more rigorous than ever to justify investment. Yet, they are caught in a paradox. On one hand, they need to react quicker than ever to the data they have available, on the other sheer abundance of information can easily trigger analysis paralysis.

### *Clients need partners to help them surf the data wave*

The changing information landscape dramatically changes the type of people, processes, and capabilities brands need to succeed. Now, technology, data proficiency and speed are the keys to competitive advantage<sup>30</sup>.

The hot chat in the analytics community is around the need for "multichannel analytics teams" – with web analysis, site optimisation, social metrics, database marketing, search analysis, market research, qualitative analysis, ad analysis and audience measurement

functions all handled by a single unit<sup>31</sup>. Some clients may be able to develop this kind of function in house, but the specialist nature of such skills, together with the scale of technological investment and cultural change needed for true analytical expertise will be beyond many<sup>32</sup>. For this reason, clients will increasingly look for partners with superior data crunching skills. As Taylor predicts, this could well lead to the management consultants, or even Dunhumby, getting a bigger piece of the action<sup>23</sup>.

To compete, the comms networks will need to develop their information capabilities. In recent years there's been a big rise in partnerships with entertainment, media and content developers. In the future, networks will also look to make technical partnerships that bring crucial competencies to the table. Analytics hotshops will be developed, to outsource to clients and other network agencies. Such expertise has the potential to form lasting client partnerships. I interviewed Jonathan Buck, founding partner of Fuel, Engine's "data strategy" agency. He described how the specialist nature of the field has led to his agency taking total management of a client's customer and prospect database. This makes the agency a real part of the client's business, leading to what he describes as "a much stickier relationship, integrated in lots of places - a bit like Velcro."<sup>33</sup>

Even if specialists are covering the sharp end of data, it doesn't mean that the rest of the communications industry won't have to learn to play the game. Data literacy and competence must become *de rigueur* if we're to speak the same language as our clients and optimise the planning, execution and monitoring of our campaigns.

*How are agencies feeling about the data revolution?*

I surveyed 122 people in a mixture of creative, media, direct, digital and PR agencies<sup>34</sup>. Whilst they agreed that reliance on data was increasing (rating it an average 4.1 out of 5), there was little sense that their employers were committed to training staff to use it effectively (with employer commitment rated an average of 2.5 out of 5). This echoes the comments of William Eccleshare, Chairman and Chief Executive of BBDO Europe, who was "struck by how much rigour has seeped away from our business over time" when re-reading the foundations for planning laid out by Stephen King<sup>35</sup>.

When asked what they disliked about data, respondents lamented that it was "boring", "cold" and "limits creativity." Pretty much the opposite of what we're aiming for in our work. I disagree fundamentally that this should be so, but I understand where the concerns come from. Advertising has had an uneasy relationship with science ever since Bill Bernbach declared "I don't want academicians. I don't want scientists. I don't want people who do the right things. I want people who do inspiring things."<sup>36</sup>

We all want inspirational people around, but today's technical playing field also means that more academic minds are sorely needed. Fortunately, Bill was mistaken to imply that the two are mutually exclusive. As well as giving us the skills we need to succeed, recruiting the right kind of "academics" will make the future a much *more* inspiring place. We need people who are part scientist, part artist, all creative. The IPA calls them "Diagonal Thinkers"<sup>37</sup>. I call them "Data Punks." These are people who embrace the world of data and see not limitations, but possibilities. People who can translate the language of information into that of the common man and use it to inspire the masses. People who say bollocks to the rules and have a damn good time tearing down the old orders that most of us have grown too comfortable in to change.

Armed with a potent combination of brains *and* balls, the Data Punks will fuse information with imagination to lead us into the Age of Infomagination. Now let's get a taste of what we've got in store.

## Data drives conversations

Data is already the driving force behind more personal, relevant and context sensitive communications, be it through Amazon recommendations, Google AdWords or Facebook targeted ads. As technology advances, this trend can only continue. Information about where people are, what they're doing and even how they appear to be feeling will help us pick the right time and tone for what we say and do - and talk to people like people. In turn, we'll behave like Brand DJs, using on-the-fly data analysis to sense the mood of the crowd and pick the tunes that will keep them on the floor.

As time passes, mass marketing will grow more and more similar to direct marketing, where different things are said to different people depending on the data held about them. Here we face two challenges:

The first is that targeted ads could become so personal it's just plain creepy<sup>38</sup>. We must tread carefully to prevent a backlash. In this way, personalised advertising is unlikely to mean dropping someone's name into the conversation or mentioning that we know where they live, just using our data to show them the aspects of our brand we think they'll be most interested in, in the way that's most likely to appeal.

The second is that making communication much more relevant will also make it much more complex. Adapting from carpet bombing a big group of people with a few ads to engaging lots of smaller audiences with targeted messages is a fundamental shift in production terms. Until a way can be found to reduce costs in traditional media, this means online and DM will naturally lead the charge.

Brands can do much more than use their data to become better at interrupting people's lives, however. As mentioned earlier, making data work *for* your customers holds the key to real success.

## Use your Infomagination

*We've got the information, so let's utilise it*

A couple of years ago, R/GA CEO Bob Greenberg spoke of a "personal epiphany" that brand culture would move "away from the metaphorical and toward the useful". This idea of "branded utility", where brands create tools for people to use, rather than just talking about themselves, offers them the chance to play a more integral and ongoing role in consumers' lives<sup>39</sup>.

Making useful tools out of the world's data is an area of rich creative potential. Whilst some of us are wandering, lost in the data woods, the smart ones are wondering what they can build with all these trees...

*Mashups make 1 + 1 = 3*

When you hear the word "mashup," data probably isn't the first thing that comes to mind. Mashups started in the music world, when producers like 2 Many DJs took two unrelated tracks and "mashed" them into something new. Mashup a bit of Nirvana with a little Destiny's Child and the result "Smells Like Teen Booty" (<http://uk.youtube.com/watch?v=7958669iFu0>).

Operating on a similar principle is the hot new trend for "data mashups" – where information from multiple sources is combined to create new and distinct services not provided

individually. Mashups breathe fresh life and use into data and as such represent great opportunities for brands. Let's explore a few that are out there already.

Http://pubs.iamnear.net and http://wikinear.com take location data from your mobile phone (once you install Yahoo! Fire Eagle (http://fireeagle.yahoo.net)) and mash it up with location data on pubs or Wikipedia pages to show you the ones near you (figure 8)<sup>40</sup>. This kind of thing seems begging to be developed by brands – Heineken and Lonely Planet, why didn't you get there first? Top Table, when are you releasing this for restaurants? Last.fm, how about doing something similar with listening tastes, for a new way to give people the vibe of wherever they're travelling?<sup>41</sup>

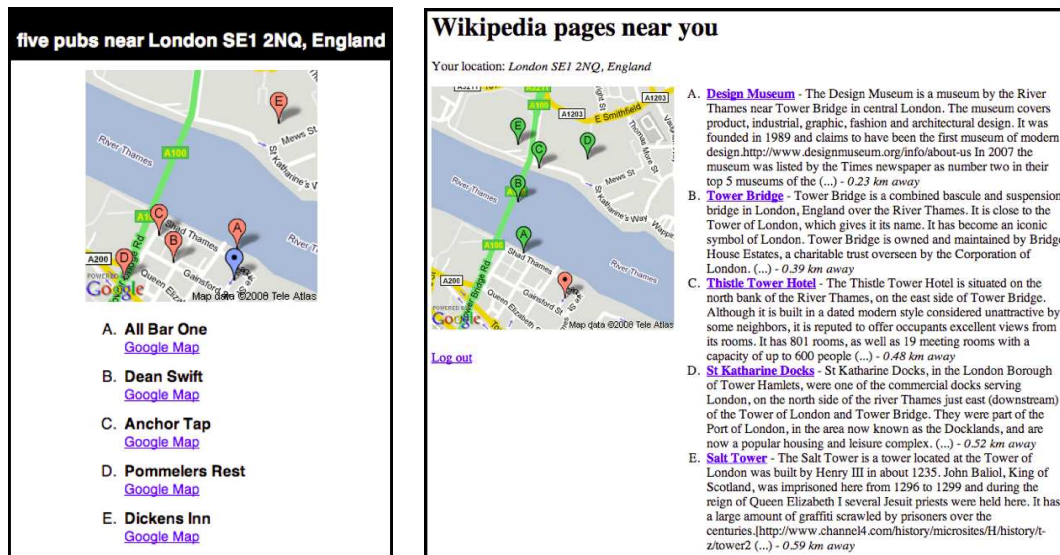


Figure 8. a) Pubs.iamnear.net<sup>42</sup> b) Wikinear.com<sup>43</sup>

Getty Moodstream (http://moodstream.gettyimages.com) mashes up music with images from Getty's libraries to create an audiovisual feast that will satisfy the "mood" of your choosing. It's a great idea – and the first brand to supply me with the tools to mashup my iTunes with my Facebook photos, so that I can wallow in my choice of either euphoric or melancholic nostalgia, is surely on to a winner.

The government is also getting in on the mashup game with its website www.showusabetterway.co.uk, which asks the public to suggest innovative uses for the masses of data it collects – with a £20,000 prize for the best. An example is shown in figure 9. Show Us a Better Way makes me wonder what companies could do with the data they have available, if only they mixed it together properly – or found the right partners to mash it up with. For example, if I want to book a hotel to go to a friend's wedding, I'll visit Laterooms.com to check availability and prices, TripAdvisor for reviews and Google Maps for the route to the venue. With a mashup of all three, I could simply browse my way through an interactive map with the locations, prices and TripAdvisor ratings all on there – and booking just a click away.



Figure 9. Mashup travel data with crime statistics and you can tell people the quickest and safest way to get home<sup>44</sup>

On that note, my final example is more than just a data mashup - it's a brand mashup. Nike+ is one of those pieces of technology that makes you go WOW. Just place a little sensor in your shoe and slot a receiver into your iPod and you can capture, analyse and compare data about your running ability - all managed through the Nike+ website ([www.nikeplus.com](http://www.nikeplus.com)). As a result, Nike and Apple have created the world's largest running club, connected and powered by their brands<sup>45</sup>. In the future, I believe brands will increasingly foster partnerships like this, combining complementary resources for the mutual benefit of themselves and consumers. Agencies can play a role here too, by encouraging "data dating" amongst their clients.

#### *Remix your thinking*

Using data for your customers' advantage, rather than your own, is a new way of thinking that challenges old beliefs and practises.

Once, corporate information was something to be kept secret - "Data Protection" was the watchword. The data of the future does not want to be hidden away, however. It yearns for something altogether more positive. Mashups teach us that tomorrow's data is open, socially connected and likes sharing. "Data Liberation" will be the theme from now on.

Once, companies looked to new data for inspiration. Mashups show us that we should be looking at new ways of using our existing information – new things to combine it with, new places to put it. High Street retailers could mashup sales information with online reviews and route them to in-store screens, to offer in-situ recommendations. Mobile phone companies could use call records to create tailor-made contracts. Creativity is the name of the game. Thus, this is an area where agency creatives could excel, if only they are trained to see data as another brush in their palette, rather than something that the planners deal with.

Once, campaigns had a set launch date and finite lifespan. Now, branded tools can live online forever, getting discovered by new audiences years after they originally launched<sup>46</sup>. Marketers who invest a portion of their budget in such tools must take a long term view and consider how to evolve them over time to reap the rewards of a sustained partnership with consumers.

Data is a wondrously multifaceted beast - not just useful but also fascinating and beautiful. And in our business, "fascinating and beautiful" can be a great way to engage an audience.

## Data is the new video

No lights or cameras were used to make Radiohead's video for "House of Cards". Just data, collected by laser scanning systems (figure 10). For brands seeking to differentiate themselves and capture the public's imagination, data seems likely to offer a slew of new production tools. The benefits of data are also in its malleability vs traditional footage. This could not only help address some of the production issues around the shift towards more varied, targeted communication (mentioned earlier) but also encourage consumer engagement. Radiohead's second piece of genius was to release their data as open-source code that fans could play with and remix to their heart's content<sup>47</sup>.



Figure 10. Thom Yorke gets a data makeover in the House of Cards video<sup>47</sup>

The equipment that Radiohead used was developed at UCLA, which points to a future where agencies need to make unusual contacts to access new technologies. Specialist data production houses seem likely, pooling the expertise and connections needed for such cutting edge techniques.

"But that's the flashy end of data," you may say. "What about the practical side? How about data analysis?" Well, the good news is that there's a revolution happening there too.

## Analysis is the new storytelling

### *The new art of data analysis*

Microsoft Excel has a lot to answer for. Yes, it's functional, easy to use and ubiquitous, but it's also made us lazy – and dull. It's now such a comfortable crutch that we barely even think about presenting our data any other way. What happened to the standout and impact that we aim for in the rest of our communications? In the Age of Infomagination, the imperative is to make our analysis sparkle as much as our ads.

Thankfully, whilst we've been carving up our pie charts, a new breed of computer scientist/artist hybrids - Data Punks by any other name - has been pioneering new ways of presenting data, to expose the beauty and life that lies beneath the world's information.

Our first piece of inspiration comes from Seattle-based 'artist' Chris Jordan, whose work involves taking beautiful photographs he hopes will disgust you. His exhibitions take large-scale waste and consumption out of the realm of statistics and place it squarely in front of our faces (see figure 11 for an example). As Chris says, "because statistics are so hard to connect with, we're not going to find motivation from them... My idea... is to provide the visual. To give you the statistic in a different way that allows the viewer to experience the number more directly with their heart."<sup>48</sup>

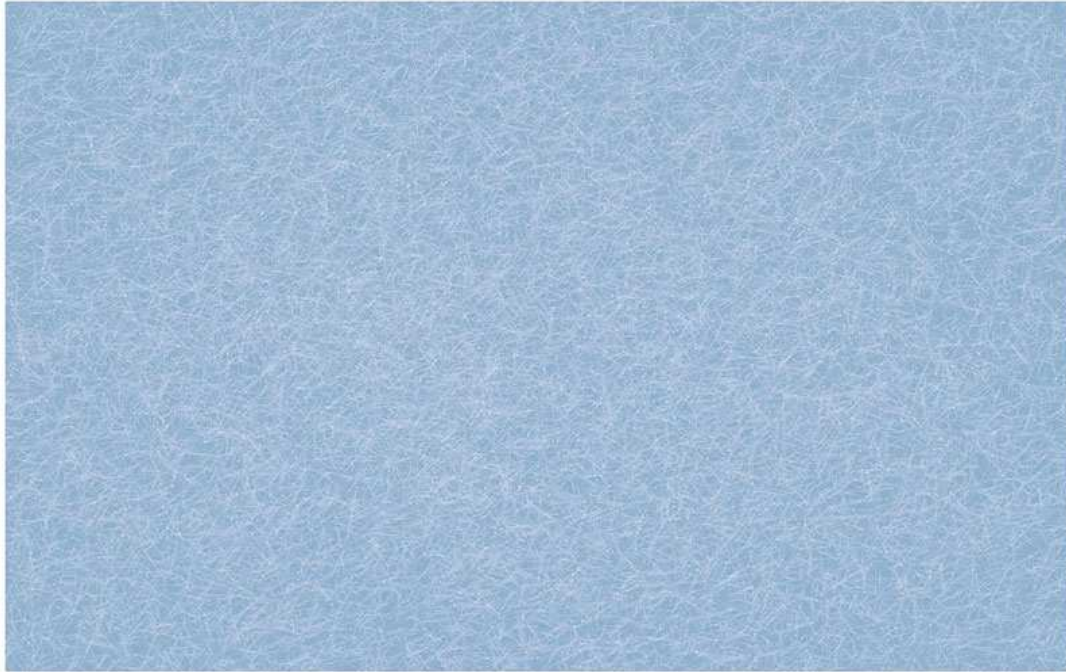


Figure 11. Chris Jordan's "Jet Trails" depicts 11,000 jet trails, equal to the number of commercial flights in the U.S. every eight hours<sup>48</sup>

The goal of creating data that people can experience with their eyes and hearts is vital for our industry. After all, whilst we human beings like to think we're rational and verbal, the truth is we're emotional and visual<sup>49</sup>. So, as the author David McCandless said at this year's Under the Influence conference/booze up, it's no surprise that "we don't want to read information any more. We want to see it. Feel it."<sup>50</sup> Pure human nature is the driving force behind a new phenomenon that's spawned whole communities on the net (see appendix) – data visualisation.

Visualisations turn data into pictures (or "infographics"), so that we can explore and understand even highly complicated information. They come in many formats, with the nature of the information having a big say in how it's presented.

The best visualisations turn data into an involving and engaging story. In the wrong hands, the data about the world's oil production and consumption shown in figure 12 could easily have been expressed in two factually correct, but ultimately expressionless, bar charts. The use of a map instantly helps us to understand and process the information, turning it into a work of art that speaks volumes about America's relationship with the East. As a wise man once said, "you get the picture."

## Who has the oil?

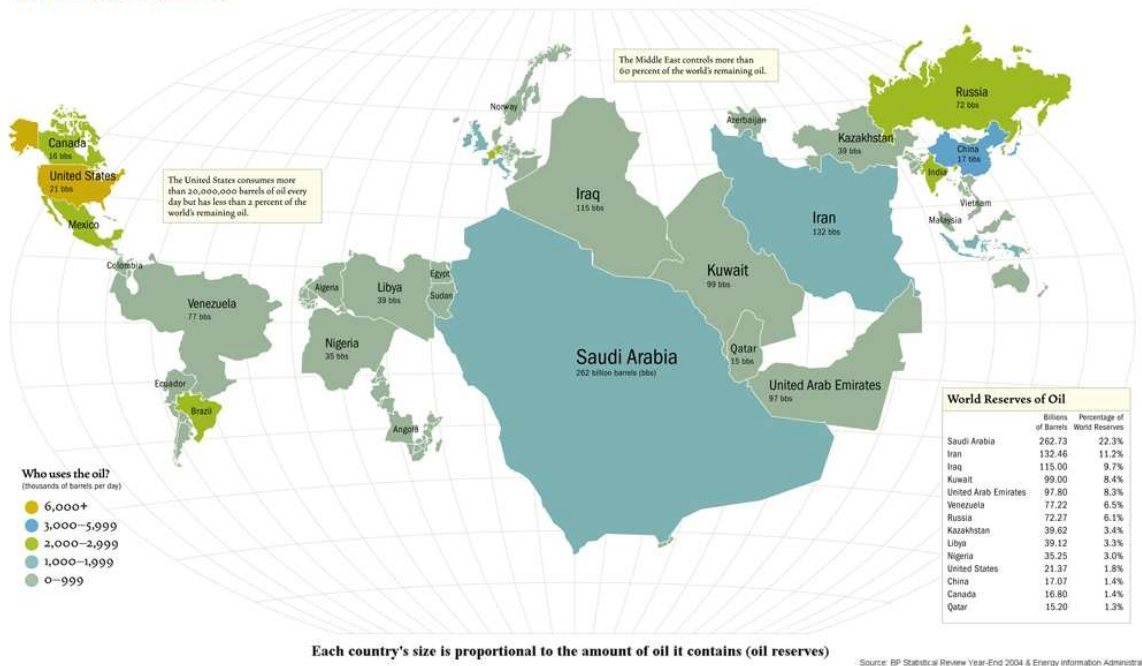


Figure 12. An infographic showing who has the world's oil – and who needs it<sup>51</sup>

Given that brands produce a wealth of geographical data, it's easy to see how we could use similar visualisations to breathe life into regional sales reports, for example.

Verbal data can also be presented visually, using “word clouds” (or “tag clouds”), which size the most common words in a data set or document according to how frequently they appear. This means you can instantly pick out the main themes from amongst a huge mass of chatter. Even if you didn't know what it was yet, the word cloud made from this essay on the front cover would have given you a good idea of what to expect by the time you started reading.

Word clouds have been used to analyse everything from Presidents' speeches (<http://chir.ag/phernalia/preztags>) to people's feelings about brands, as Noah Brier does with his Brand Tags website ([www.brandtags.net](http://www.brandtags.net)), which creates clouds based on spontaneous reactions to brand logos. Tracking surveys could easily incorporate this technology, so that the shifting meanings associated with a brand – the collective “engram”<sup>52</sup> – can be visualised over time. It's also easy to see how instant value could be added just by putting client briefs and literature through these filters, to show brand teams how they and their brand really speak. The software's available for free at [www.wordle.net](http://www.wordle.net). Go try it for yourself and tell me that data analysis isn't fun!

The beauty of data is a theme explored in detail by Jonathan Harris – a Data Punk, if ever there was one. He's a computer scientist, artist and anthropologist who designs systems to explore and explain the world - although he prefers to be known simply as “a storyteller”. Harris' work includes We Feel Fine, “an exploration of human emotion on a global scale” (<http://www.wefeelfine.org>). We Feel Fine captures words and pictures associated with emotions from millions of blogs, along with the age, gender and location of the author, plus the weather at the time, and presents it all as interactive art (figure 13)<sup>53</sup>.

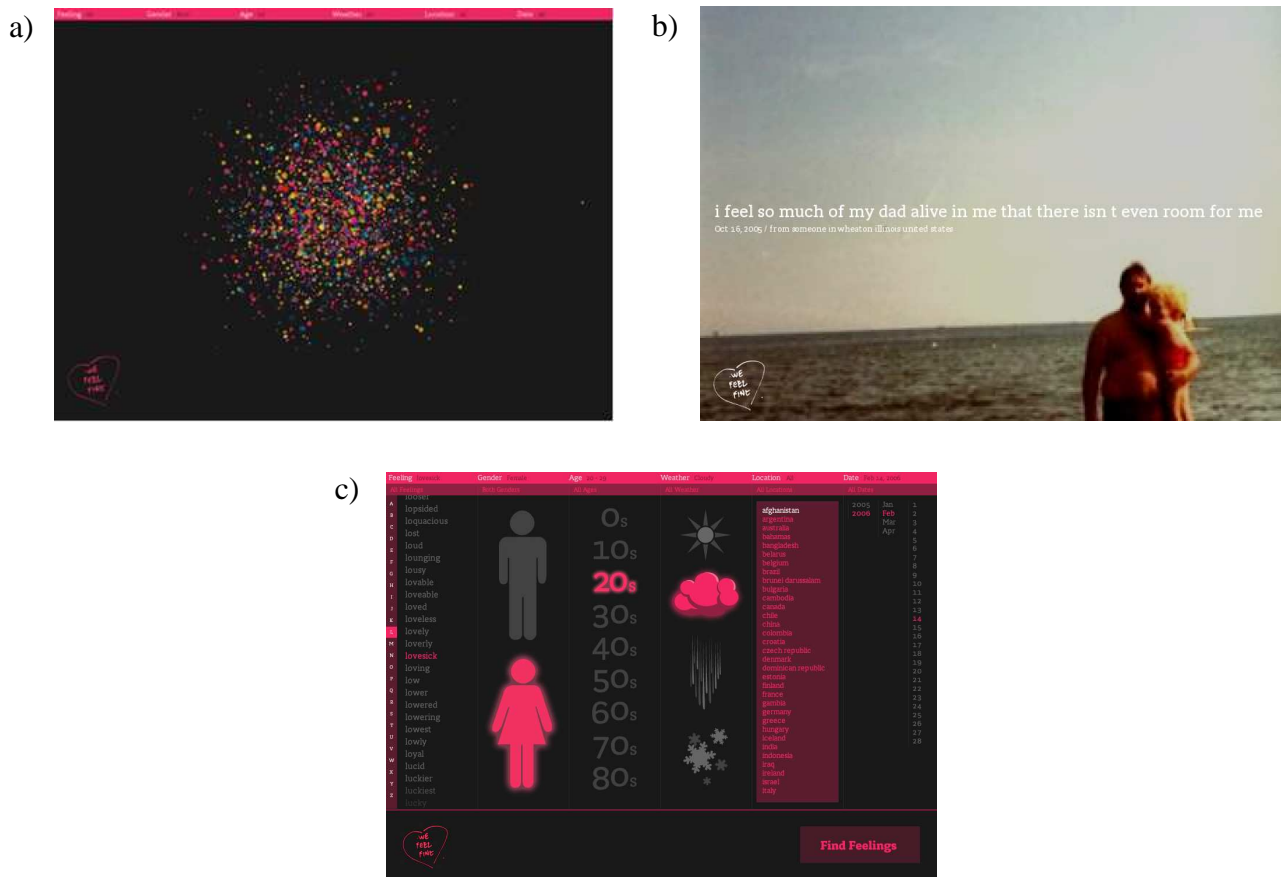


Figure 13. Screenshots from We Feel Fine. a) A swirling mass of colour coded-blobs provide a gateway to b) pictures tagged with feelings. c) The feelings can then be analysed statistically<sup>54</sup>

Aside from showing us just how fascinating and beautiful data can be, Harris’ work reminds us of one very important thing – that behind every piece of data is a person and a life. As Harris says, “really, the data is just part of the story. The human stuff is the main stuff, the data should enrich it.”<sup>55</sup> As our industry becomes more and more data driven we must be careful not to exchange our sense of empathy for a fetishistic fascination with numbers and information. In the next section we explore how to apply these thoughts to the ongoing evaluation of a brand.

*Learnings for evaluation: from scoreboards to storybooks*

One of the big pushes throughout the business world is the creation of marketing dashboards that bring together key data sets so that organisations can assess their ongoing performance. So far, most of these are fairly dry affairs (figure 14).

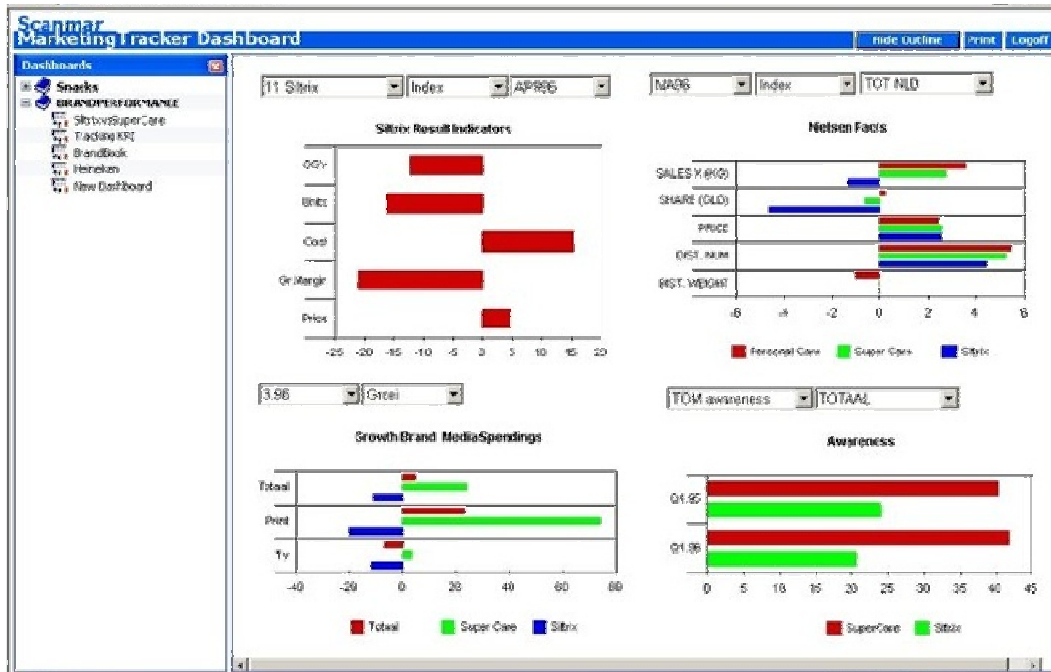


Figure 14. A typical marketing dashboard<sup>56</sup>

Whilst this kind of display seems functional enough, it would be difficult to call it inspiring. In the Age of Infomagination, however, inspiration is both a key input and a key output – especially for the way brands collect and present their evaluative data. After all, evaluative information drives the decisions that guide the future of the brand. And neuroscience has proven that decisions are ultimately made with the emotions<sup>57</sup>. Emotional data is powerful data. Better presented information makes for better decisions.

Just presenting the numbers is not good enough. A dashboard should be an engaging and inspirational tool where a rich narrative about a brand's progress can be told and learned from. Not a scoreboard but a storybook.

Creating such a tool means paying attention to both the data that's collected and how it's brought to life. In order to tell a story, we need to dramatise the ongoing who/what/where/when/why and how of a brand in a way that has feeling and humanity. This means breathing life into quantitative data by infusing it with qualitative richness.

A good step in the right direction is MESH Planning's Touchpoints Return on Investment (TROI) tracking system. In TROI, the study begins with a typical tracking questionnaire but then moves into a rich phase of qualitative data collection. Participants are asked to text comments, photos and videos whenever they see, hear or experience anything relevant to the study, adding details about the brand, the occasion and how it made them feel. This data then has the potential to be fed into a dashboard in real time to add instant feedback about the performance of any marketing activity, thus adding richness to other data that's been collected<sup>58</sup>.

Additional information could also be drawn from the web, using increasingly sophisticated software to pick up chatter about your brand on blogs, news sites, YouTube and beyond. Much of this data will also be tagged with a location, allowing it to be visualised geographically by mashing it up with mapping data. This would enable a brand to create something similar to Twittervision ([www.twittervision.com](http://www.twittervision.com)), which shows Twitter conversations around the world, as they happen. Flickrvision ([www.flickrvision.com](http://www.flickrvision.com)) is a similar thing, using photos uploaded onto Flickr (figure 15).

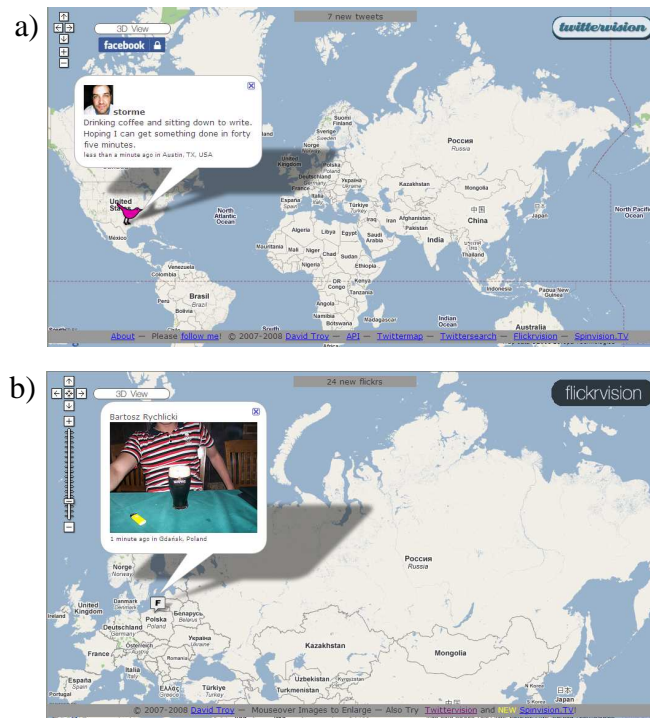


Figure 15. a) Twittervision mashes up Twitter posts with geographical data b) Flickrvision does the same with photos uploaded to Flickr<sup>59, 60</sup>

So what might an “Evaluation Storybook” look like? Here it’s hard to make generalisations, as the thing about stories - not to mention brands - is that the best ones are always unique. Brands should seek to express themselves in everything they do and bring as much of their personality and style to the way they evaluate themselves as they would an advertising campaign. I briefed my agency to create an example for Carling and the result is in figure 16.

However brands put one together, a visually and emotionally engaging Evaluation Storybook has the potential to lead to real competitive advantage. Not only could it be used by the brand team to guide their actions more effectively, but it could also engage a broader audience by making evaluation more accessible. The service could develop into a kind of live brand TV channel that anyone could tune into. Marketers could use it to connect their whole company to its customers and galvanise it towards its goals. Agencies could use it to engage creatives, who are traditionally divorced from the evaluation process (largely to spare them the dullness of the data). Giving them direct feedback from their efforts - with the chance to gain new inspiration and insights through live reaction to their work - would help them feel more connected with its results, driving the industry’s quest for effectiveness from the heart.



Figure 16. Mock up of a Carling Evaluation Storybook, where themed widgets present live qual and quant data in an emotionally engaging, interactive way<sup>61</sup>

### It's time to see things differently

Hans Rosling, Professor of International Health at the Karolinska Institute in Sweden, uses interactive, animated charts to bring world poverty, money and health data to life. As he explains “few people will appreciate the music if I just show them the notes. Most of us need to listen to the music to understand how beautiful it is. But often it’s how we present statistics: we just show the notes and don’t play the music.”<sup>62</sup>

Surely there are symphonies hiding inside every company’s data, if only we can find the right instruments to reveal them. Those instruments are data visualisation. Whilst data visualisation is a relatively unfamiliar field now, striving for leadership within it is vital if we’re to chart the wild waters of the data ocean and remain worthy of our title of “communications industry”. In the future, Data Visualisers - information maestros - must become a regular feature of agency design departments, just as Typographers or Retouchers are today. In the meantime, agencies that pioneer this area will develop a real competitive advantage - especially in pitch situations, where the ability to reframe a client’s problem, crystallise a strategy and engage an audience can be as powerful as the creative work.

Far from being purely cosmetic, making data warm, entertaining and inspiring is vital for cultural change. Only when we can engage the whole of the client/agency world with our information will everyone truly benefit from it.

## **Conclusion: the Age of Infomagination welcomes you**

So concludes our whirlwind tour of the Age of Infomagination.

First, we looked at consumers and saw how data is bringing power to the people. Whilst personalisation and relevance are propelling the data revolution forward, carelessness and distrust are causing people to rise up and take control of the data they've created. The democratisation of information is shifting the balance of power further, as consumers use data to their advantage throughout their lives, including their relationship with brands. Brands need to open up and get involved.

Next, we looked at how breakthroughs in analytics offer brands new depths of understanding. The companies leading the charge, like Google, Last.fm and Tesco, have developed huge competitive advantages through using data to better understand people and deliver on their needs. Most companies, however, are trapped in a data tidal wave - and need partners to help them surf. New technologies, new capabilities and new connections are needed to create multichannel analytics teams capable of synthesising a company's knowledge sources to maximum effect. Whilst the technical nature of data crunching will lead to specialist agencies becoming commonplace, every agency needs to hunt for the ambidextrous minds that can fuse science and art into compelling stories. It's a mixture of brains and balls that will define the next creative hotshops.

After that, we saw how data is driving more creative conversations with consumers – and how the leaders of the future will use on-the-fly analysis to become superstar Brand DJs, capable of keeping people's hands in the air all night long. Next, I demonstrated why Data Liberation is the theme from now on and how brands should mashup original datasets to create new tools and ways of thinking. In doing so brands will realise that using data to their customers' advantage is the best way of turning it to their own – giving them the opportunity to develop not just a relationship with consumers but a long term partnership. I then showed how data is giving us new and original ways of storytelling; be it through dramatic production techniques or dramatic analytical tools. These tools have a vital role to play in touching the humanity beneath the ripples of information, by visualising data in a way that moves and inspires people emotionally; transforming dull marketing dashboards into living Evaluation Storybooks. As an industry that thrives on creativity, making data entertaining and accessible is vital for integrating it into our culture. Once our information becomes warmer, more inclusive and more fluid then so can our ways of working. Ultimately, data should be an inspirational resource and creative tool for all, not just the insights or planning department.

In the future, marketing will operate at the crossroads of information and imagination. To succeed we need to embrace both, equally. Now is not a time for fear, but fascination; not a time for restriction but liberation; and not a time for data to replace humanity but enhance it. In the Age of Infomagination, the Data Punks rule. Now it's time for you to decide if you'd like to come join them.

## **Appendix**

For more Infomagination, visit my blog at [www.infomagination.co.uk](http://www.infomagination.co.uk)

Alternatively, check out some of these cool data visualisation sites:

<http://infosthetics.com>

<http://flowingdata.com>

<http://www.many-eyes.com>

<http://www.visualcomplexity.com>

<http://www.smashingmagazine.com/2007/08/02/data-visualization-modern-approaches>

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