

**how relevance is changing
the rules of advertising**

**THE
CASE
AGAINST
IDEAS**

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The Case Against Ideas

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THE CASE AGAINST IDEAS

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ALL YOU NEED IS AN IDEA?

Anyone in advertising can tell you what you need to communicate effectively with people. You need an Idea.

It's Ideas that engage people, they'll tell you.

Without a great Idea, no-one will take any more than cursory notice of your communication. Your brand or your client's brand will fail to get its message across. That failure could cost you a client, their account, your job.

Maybe those advertising people once had a point. Perhaps, back in the day, there was no other way of getting people to respond to your communication. Then, when a brand wanted to talk to people, it had few options other than butting into spaces carved out inside some other activity - watching TV, reading the newspaper, driving down the motorway, taking the train to work - an activity that constituted what people were really doing at the time.

Do they still have a point, now?

What if our attachment to the advertising Idea is a result of there being, until recently, no alternative? What if we've depended on the Idea because there's been nothing else, no other connective tissue to make the link between communicator and recipient when a brand wants to say something to us?

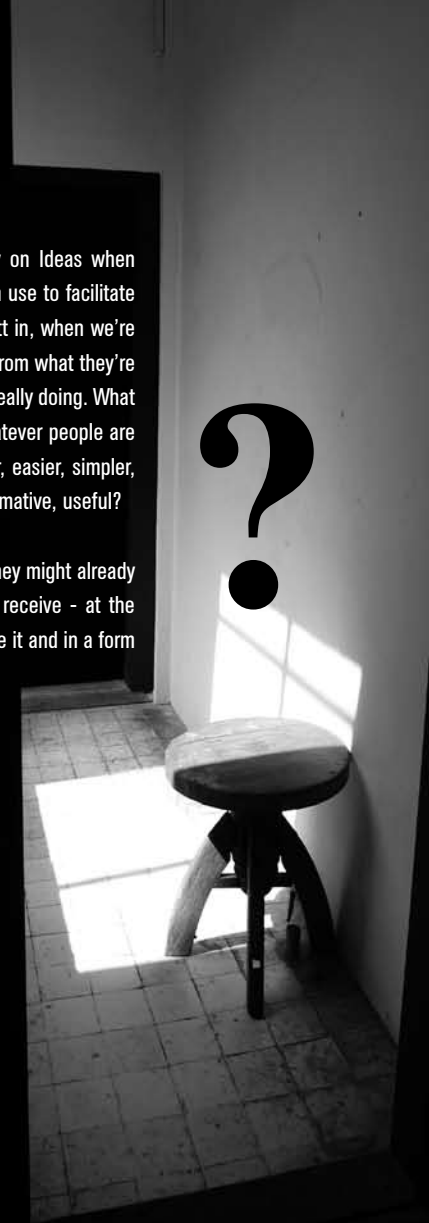
I want to ask what happens to our dependency on Ideas when there is another form of connective tissue we can use to facilitate that conversation: when we no longer have to butt in, when we're no longer trying to prise people's attention away from what they're really doing, because we are part of what they're really doing. What happens when, in fact, we're adding value to whatever people are doing at the time: making it faster, richer, deeper, easier, simpler, more active, interesting, participatory, funny, informative, useful?

What happens if we can give people a message they might already be looking for - or a message they are open to receive - at the time they need it, in the place they want to receive it and in a form they prefer?

In other words, what happens to Ideas when Relevance becomes a reality?

Ever since David Ogilvy declared, more than half a century ago, that 'unless your advertising contains a BIG IDEA, it will pass like a ship in the night', anyone contemplating the future of advertising has been prone to taking comfort in the thought that, whatever happens, it will always depend on Ideas.

The purpose of this book is to ask a simple question: will it?



SLEEPWALKING TOWARDS THE PRECIPICE

The driving force behind this book is frustration: a day-by-day feeling that the advertising, marketing and communications industries are sleepwalking towards a precipice, coupled with a growing sense that advertising, in its conventional forms, seems to exist in a parallel universe, speaking its own private language.

Watch commercial TV for an evening, making an effort to pay attention to the advertisements. Almost all of them will make some attempt to engage your attention via an Idea. How many succeed? If you are honest about your own reactions, how many of the Ideas employed feel bizarrely pointless, pointedly lacking in relevance: any of them; most of them; on a bad (average) evening, all of them? In other words, from your perspective as a recipient, how much communication have those Ideas actually made happen?

Advertising culture is becoming like mainstream hotel culture: weirdly self-referential and unconnected with the way the majority of people's lives look, smell, feel, taste and sound. In the hotel world this explains the continuing success of the boutique hotel that amplifies and idealises the way its customers live or, given a nice windfall, would like to live. There is a recognisable connection between the two experiences.

That connection is starting to wear thin in advertising. The counter-argument that advertising is not meant to be 'like' life misses the point entirely. The refugee camps of Rwanda are starkly unlike 'life' for the majority of people in the West, yet almost no-one would choose them as a destination for a long weekend. The difference – between the everyday and the alternative that is being envisioned – needs to mean something. Put another way, the communication needs to make a difference; it is no longer enough just to 'engage'. People are increasingly prone to ask (and ask explicitly): what are you engaging me for?

The fact that some individuals and agencies are beginning to rouse themselves to these seismic developments is – at this point in the process – of little comfort because, despite this awakening awareness, the overwhelming majority of people in advertising, communications and media continue to tramp on, following the same, well-worn path with minor deviations.

Part of the problem is that, for many of them, the thought that the merry-go-round is grinding to a halt is something they would rather not contemplate. The comfortable (recent) past casts a long shadow over an uncertain present. It's less a question of fiddling while Rome burns than of golfing in the Algarve while the margin goes to hell.

The nub of the problem, however, is not actually in the gravitational pull of salaries, bonuses, options or other incentives – it is in people's heads. The external world of communications is changing so fast, it's hard to keep up, let alone anticipate the near future.

So these industries currently exist in a form of limbo, suspended between an old way of thinking that is producing diminishing returns and a new way that is yet to be formulated.



MAGICAL THINKING

These are industries which are rife with received wisdom, assumptions, presumption and myth. Magical thinking – the irrational belief that one can bring about a circumstance or event by thinking about it or wishing for it; normal in preschool children, it also occurs in schizophrenia – abounds. Things will always be the way they always have been, because (close my eyes and count to fifty) I will it to be so.

In the transitional insecurity that currently defines these industries and the prevailing state of mind of many people within them, there is a tendency to interpret the emerging world of digital and digitised communications using the conceptual framework of analogue reality. It's even more likely if that is the only model you have at your disposal. If that's where your thinking is stuck, it's all you can do. This is where the notion of a simple extension or replacement of analogue channels by digital channels comes in handy. It's a reassuring perspective because it means, surely, that nothing fundamental has to change - does it?

The distinction between those people who are firmly rooted in the analogue conceptual model of communications and those with a grasp on what is emerging next is often encapsulated in the notion of whether A 'gets it' or B 'doesn't get it'. It's not a hugely articulate formulation, because even the people who feel they do 'get it' find it difficult to articulate what it is they feel their colleagues might be missing. What it does do is a capture the sense of a new way of thinking that is emerging and a growing sense of commonality between people who recognise this.

It is also worth noting that 'getting it' has little to do with the otherwise helpful distinction between 'digital natives' and 'digital immigrants', between those who have grown up immersed in digital culture and those older folk (you know, the ones heading inexorably downhill from their mid-thirties) who have had to learn it after the fact. Many of the key figures behind the relentless development of the digital economy and the drivers of the internet's 2.0 and emerging 3.0 incarnations are, in fact, in their fifties, sixties or beyond: Vint Cerf, Tim Berners-Lee, Stewart Brand, Steve Jobs, Esther Dyson.



moi?

DIGITAL TYPES



gets it



doesn't get it



get what exactly?



gets it



doesn't get it



gets it



I LIVE IT



doesn't get it



gets it



doesn't get it



doesn't get it



it's just a phase



gets it



i'm a creative

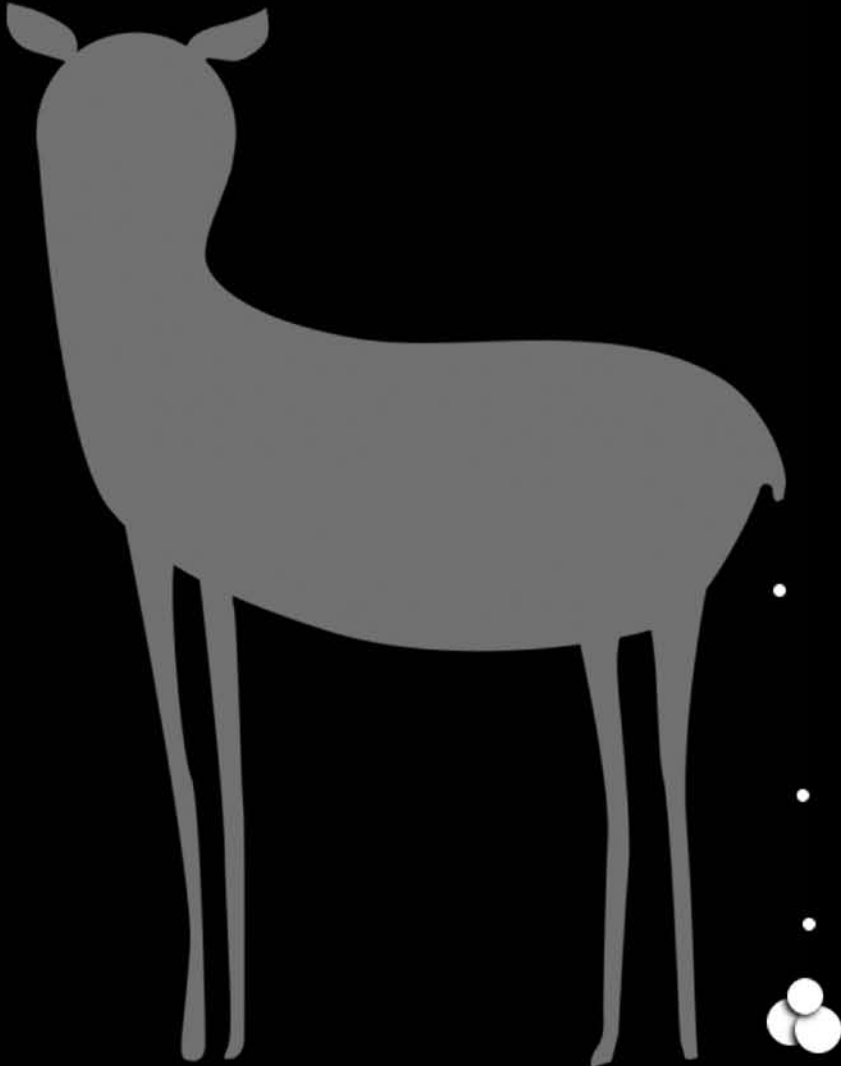


DOESN'T GET IT



COOL!

THE MIRAGE DISSOLVES

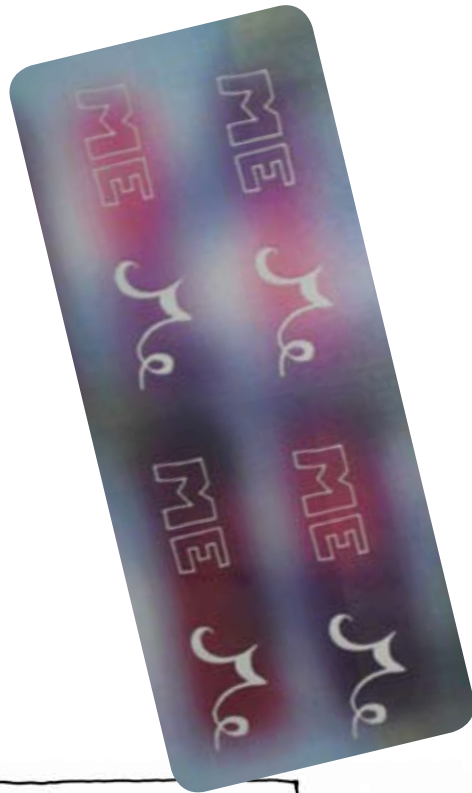


Perilously, short-term financial performance supports the analogue-with-a-nice-dollop-of-this-new-digital-stuff view, a perspective generated by looking at the new world of communications through the prism of the old. Lip-smacking growth rates in digital media (albeit from a low base) are still delivering chunky profit margins. It's a mirage, a false dawn. Everyone in the business, in their heart of hearts, knows it is not sustainable.

So the real challenge, the urgent task that remains undone, is to make proper sense of the future of communications for brands in this digitised and inexorably digitising media environment.

This will not be done on the basis of received wisdom, magical thinking. That which sustained the industry in the past will not sustain it into the future. We have to replace a redundant way of thinking with a fresh one, being prepared in the process to abandon some of our most tenaciously held tenets.

And the one that we seem most reluctant to give up, the one that shackles us and slows our progress more than anything else, is the notion that there is only one way for brands to communicate with people, and that is by means of what the advertising industry calls an Idea.



Note

Clearly, from a very broad perspective, the notion that all effective communication is predicated on an Idea is nonsense.

My wife phones me in the middle of one of those quasi-competent solo male supermarket runs to say: 'Darling, imagine a family, the most contented, radiant, good-looking family in the world. Imagine they are having supper together, the most yummy chicken and chips. The youngest child goes to the kitchen cupboard, reaches for the ketchup bottle and recoils in abject disappointment. It is empty. He runs back to the dinner table in slow motion, howling...'

I cut her short. 'Can you stop right there? If you're trying to say that I missed ketchup off the shopping list and can I pick some up...'

Not all communication requires an Idea.

YES!
YOU TOO
CAN COMMUNICATE
WITHOUT
AN
IDEA

TALK ABOUT CHANGE



We all know, of course, what's driving this massive shift in communications: the progressive digitisation of all media. Not 'digital media'; not 'online media'; not 'new media' and certainly not 'Digital' (whatever that might be).

Digital creation, production and distribution - with all the behaviour-transforming capabilities they offer - are fundamentally altering how we communicate with each other, whether 'we' are brand and customer, government and citizen, guru and acolyte, stalker and victim, or just good friends.

We say we all know this is happening. Yet most people who work on the coalface in advertising, communications and media - including the industry's own professional chattering classes, the bloggers, conference speech-givers, the 'Plannerati' - are, in their daily practice, still doing pretty much what they've always done. While they're talking about change, what they actually do day-to-day is still rooted in a whacked-out conceptual model.

DENIAL AIN'T A RIVER IN AFRICA

I THINK THERE IS A WORLD MARKET FOR MAYBE



FIVE

COMPUTERS

Thomas Watson, Chairman of IBM, 1943

Right now we're slap-bang in the thick of it, in the midst of a massive transition, trying to find our way from 'traditional' advertising to the advertising of the future. After going through a period of denial - brutally cut short by the breakneck pace of change during 2007 and grabbed by the scruff of the neck and shaken forcibly by the financial and economic meltdown of 2008/9 - the advertising business has started to acknowledge that fundamental change is taking place. Phrases like 'paradigm shift' abound. Conceptually, though, in people's heads, the shift has barely begun.

Take 'Digital', for instance: an amorphous catch-all term that fails to distinguish between dozens of distinct new forms of communication, each requiring a distinct approach. It's a word that also manages to completely miss the point. 'Digital' has already become a meaningless distinction. It is the digitisation of all forms of communication that is demanding the reinvention of this industry.

Conceptually, the businesses of advertising, media and communications are simply failing to grasp these changes at a sufficiently fundamental level. The industry is still clinging to a familiar and convenient world view. Hence the frequency with which you hear senior industry figures using phrases like 'we'll always do X' or 'I can't ever imagine that this agency would stop doing Y'. There is a profound emotional pressure to cling to what is known. It is particularly acute in many business leaders, whose entire world view, experience and conceptual framework have been forged in the pre-digital era of communications.

Many - confused, challenged, buffeted by change - would love to have their cake and eat it, 'evolving' their businesses whilst actually changing as little as possible. This may be possible, temporarily, whilst everyone - agencies, clients, media owners - struggles to make sense of disruption; whilst more people are bewildered and threatened by the changes than are inspired by them; and whilst the forces of procurement and commercial accountability take time to get to grips with digital media's new business models.

The signs are there that this brief era is already over as billings and revenues in straightforward digital media (in other words, those forms of digital communication that could be co-opted, short-term, into the conventional advertising/media model - and, oh joy, at artificially higher margins) head the same way as their analogue counterparts - due south.

What if - in this era of upheaval, confusion and denial - brands, corporations and organisations have clung to Ideas as being essential to the business of advertising communications because that is all they have had? What if they have had no choice but to retroactively legitimate Ideas, to 'prove' their effect?

So here's the big challenge: is the religion of Ideas simply a collective delusion/collusion keeping a whole industry afloat - wheels turning, machinery oiled, profits turned, salaries paid, options granted?

Could that cosy ecosystem be breaking down?

Could Relevance be the culprit?

A HEART FULL OF DATA

The changes progressive digitisation potentially brings are not only the 'softer' ones: the new behaviours that are enabled; a proliferation of new creative formats; new cultures of communication like the one currently evolving around Twitter.

There's a hard side to this revolution and data is at its core. Data flows inexorably from digital and digitised forms of communication to such a degree that we, as participants in communication, already take an enormous amount of it for granted. When we visit a comparison site for a keener car insurance quotation, look for a cool bar in Bologna or search a social network for anyone else who likes the same Canadian post-rock collective we do, it is data that allows us to do these useful and satisfying new things.

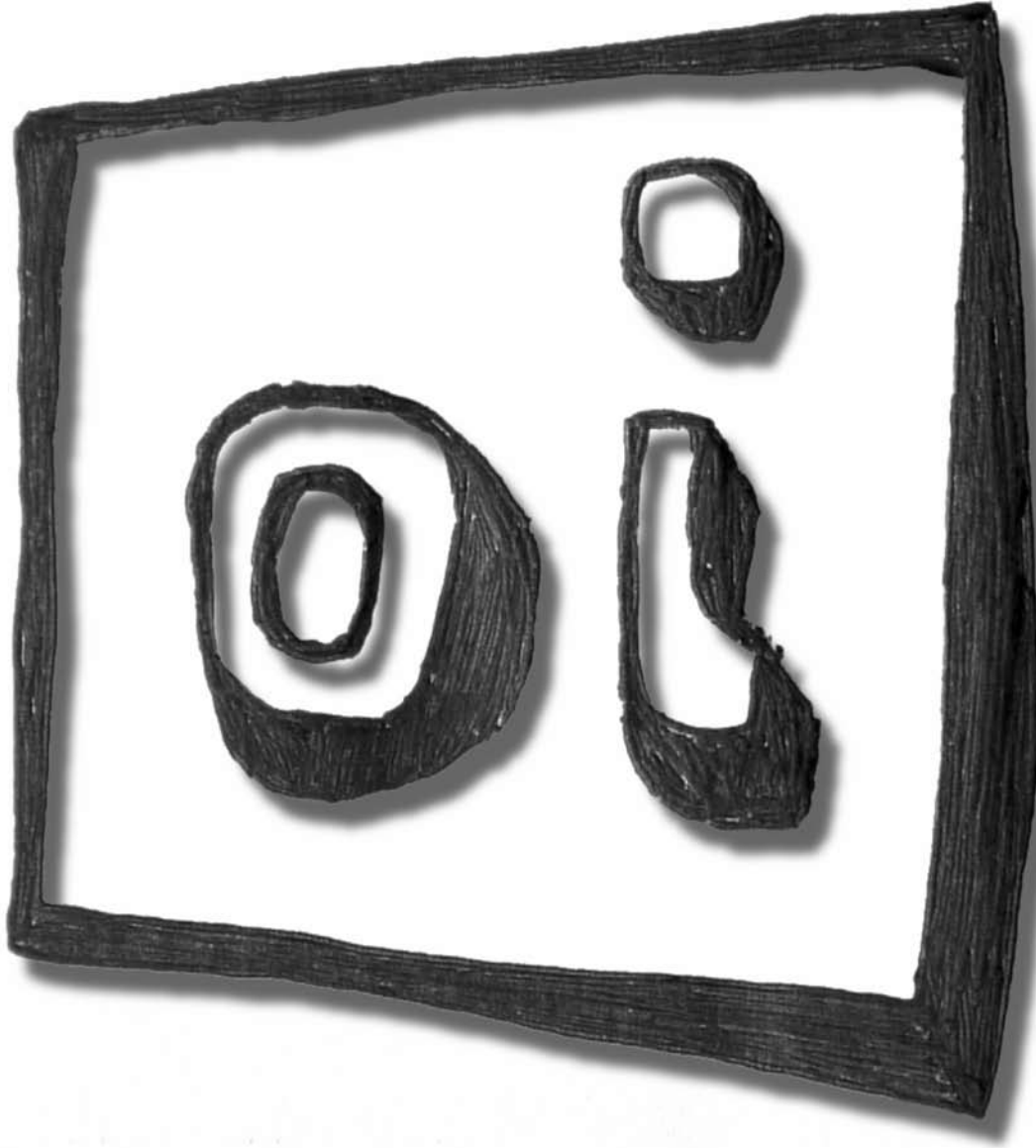
Whilst data-driven benefits are becoming seamlessly embedded into the way people find and buy things or connect with each other, brands are drawn to data for different - yet no less compelling - reasons. The lure of data for brands is twofold: the prospect of eventually being able to have singular and specific dialogues with millions of individuals and the possibility of accounting for the business impact of every cent of marketing budget spent on communications.

FOUND

HEARING AID

**FOUND IN NORTH
STREET – MORNING
OF THURSDAY 8TH
MARCH. PLEASE
ASK IN INFANT
SCHOOL OFFICE**

DIRECT LEARNING



We already do something like this - we call it Direct Communications. It's an analogue version of what is starting to happen now, though it is limited by who we can communicate with, by how much (little) we know about them and by the fact that the communication is only two-way in the most rudimentary sense. Somewhere along the line Direct caught the Idea virus from advertising, but it is significant that it hasn't saved the medium from declining response rates.

The real problem with Direct is one of voice. It pretends to talk (directly) to us when, in fact, there is no meaningful dialogue, no real - i.e. two-way - communication. The more people start to engage in actual dialogue through and within media, the more inauthentic and irritating traditional Direct feels, the more it rings hollow. (It is interesting to consider whether a similar psychological abreaction is already creeping into people's responses to 'above the line' advertising.)

However, the fate of Direct is not, as it was once thought, predicated on it being ousted by those more 'interesting', 'creative' forms of communication we label as advertising and which depend on the notion of the Idea.

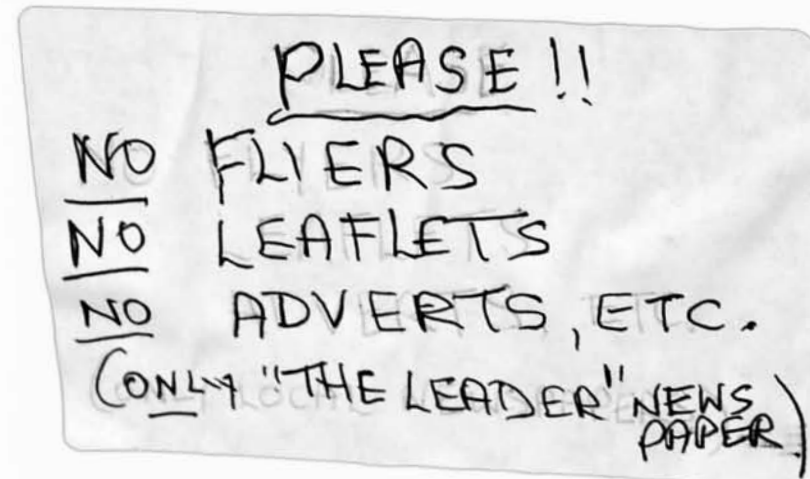
It is actually, in the era of digitisation, about the permeation of some of the key principles and ways of thinking behind Direct into all forms of communication: considering the recipient of our communications as an individual; focusing more sharply on the behavioural substance of the message (vs. Brand - i.e. Idea-based - communications); the crucial role of data and its management. The future of communications has a lot to learn from Direct.

SEEK AND YE SHALL FIND

If data is the necessary precursor to Relevance, then Search is what is embedding it in people's behaviour.

Search is not just what we do on Google, Yahoo or MSN; it is growing exponentially towards becoming the way we find everything, in whatever context or medium. It is much, much more than a powerful new utility; it is fundamentally changing the relationship between us and the stuff we want, including information, entertainment and communications.

More and more of the services we use online are facilitated, at the 'back end' by Search, and we're not even aware of it.



JUST WHAT IS TV

EXACTLY?

Just look at the way **Search** is integral to the transformation of television. It is arguable that TV has already transformed to the point where it is no longer a coherent medium, it's a type of content, somewhere between the clip-length quickies on YouTube and the ninety-minute narrative of the movie.

'Medium-length, frequently episodic, rich media content' doesn't exactly trip off the tongue, so the terms 'television' and 'TV' will probably be around for a while yet.

The way we watch it, though, is undergoing a profound change. Teenagers can put together with enviable ease their own viewing schedule, deploying terrestrial channels, satellite transmissions, hard copy storage media, games consoles, downloading, streaming and more.

When my wife and I handed back our satellite TV subscription in an attempt to regulate our teenage children's viewing, our twelve year-old son had the entire third series of *Lost* on his laptop - in high definition - after a couple of sessions of overnight downloading. He found it, of course, by using **Search**.

Even the defensive argument that no-one wants to watch TV on their laptop - definitely dismissed by the success of BBC's iPlayer - has been made meaningless (as, over time, will a succession of apparently change-resistant notions) by the inexorable rise of the Wii. Accrue or buy a few Wii Points and you can purchase a browser that enables you to watch internet TV... on your television screen. Bingo! A special version of iPlayer designed specifically for the Wii

makes this even more of a no-brainer for the five million UK households Nintendo estimates will possess a Wii in 2009.

(As I went through the final draft of this book early in 2009, Nintendo announced the launch of a dedicated Wii television channel to deliver video-on-demand to the 18 million households worldwide that have one of the games units connected to the broadband internet. An executive at Japan's largest commercial broadcaster described this development as 'the stuff of television producers' nightmares'.)

We are in the midst of an explosion of online video, enabled by the aggressive roll-out of broadband internet access globally and by the parallel development of new streaming, compression and distribution technologies. Video material in all formats is increasingly being found through **Search** whilst a merger of **Search** with the EPG looks inevitable. Self-scheduled viewing using **Search** looks to become commonplace in the next couple of years.

And just because, for historical and cultural reasons, most people would describe the material in question as 'television' does not mean for a second that the TV advertising model necessarily applies. In this transitional environment a range of alternative advertising formats will be experimented with: some will stick, some won't. Alternative platforms will compete for content and eyeballs - nevertheless, the YouTube of TV will emerge.

Sophisticated **Search** technologies that can identify video content by recognising words within the material itself (rather than just the words it is tagged or labelled with) - or images within material that has no spoken words - are waiting in the wings and represent another key step in the transformation of 'TV'.

As TV feels its way through this changed and changing landscape, there will be some successes and many failures. No matter: the direction is clear. It is about how we get there and how long it will take.

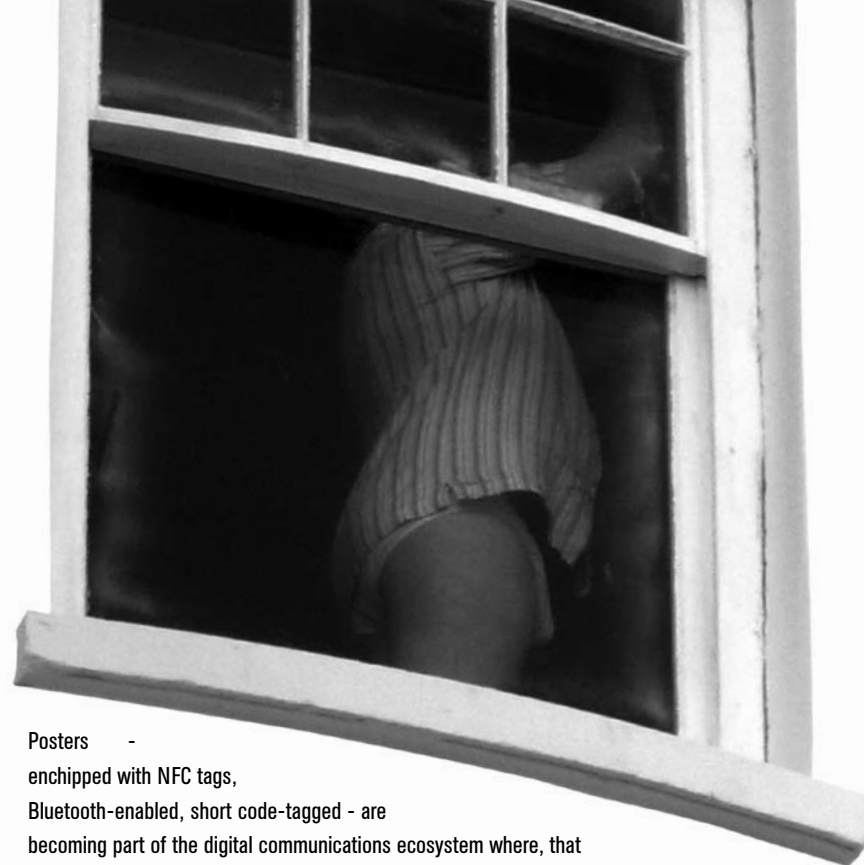
WE KNOW WHERE YOU'VE BEEN

The range of things we now look for using Search grows by the day, from telephone numbers to sexual partners via organic nappies (maybe not in that order). And the more we do this, the more the history of our searches and the things we have done as a result of them - bought something, called someone, travelled somewhere - leave a set of indelible marks in the form of data. One portal/search engine, Yahoo, is already generating 2,500 separate pieces of data about each of its users per month, according to The New York Times.

Also growing exponentially is the data we voluntarily pitch into the public or semi-public arena via social networks, a phenomenon that no longer applies only to digitally native young adults. A middle-aged executive is now just as likely to tell the world he is returning from a conference in Leicester via TriplT as his teenage daughter is to share her mobile phone snaps of last night's party through Facebook.

The more devices and places from which we search - especially now that mobile broadband internet access is spreading like wildfire - the fuller the picture of our preferences and predilections the data can reflect.

Just as the transformation of television by Search is accelerating towards the point where digital broadcasting and broadband distribution, Search and EPG, computer screen and 'TV' seamlessly converge, so other media will inevitably follow. Newspapers are already heading the same way: The Guardian's online version has five million unique monthly users in the US. Digital radio follows the trajectory of television into device-agnostic, time-shifted, context-freed online distribution. Mobile will become simply an on-the-hoof device for broadband access.



Posters -
enriched with NFC tags,
Bluetooth-enabled, short code-tagged - are
becoming part of the digital communications ecosystem where, that
is, they have not already been replaced by a digital screen. Five years ago, who
would have predicted that out-of-home media, a world of vans, ladders and men with buckets
of paste, would be rampantly digitising at such a rate?

Again, all you need to do is look at people's behaviour. My fourteen-year-old son (I make no
apologies for citing my own kids' rapidly evolving behaviour around communications - they're
a fruitful source of insights) is digging in for a long car journey with his iPod. What's on the
headphones? No parent-baiting grime, but BBC Radio 4's I'm Sorry I Haven't a Clue, an anti-
panel game hosted by the late Humphrey Lyttleton, a potty-mouthed octogenarian jazz musician.
Tell me: in that context, is what he's listening to still 'Radio'?



The accelerating convergence of media and Search is tearing up the media landscape by cutting out the middle man. What happens to 'platform' brands like Sky, broadcast brands such as ITV, channel brands like BBC Two, as new generations of viewers search for their favourite individual bits of content...wherever? Powerful content brands - The Simpsons, Lost, Radiohead, Top Gear, The Guardian, ABBA, Gordon Ramsay, Metal Gear Solid, James Bond, Jay-Z, Penguin Books, Cirque du Soleil, Metallica...float free from their points of origin and proliferate across the internet, with Search the only practicable way to retrieve them.

And the more people access their media content digitally, using Search, the more what they watched, read, listened to is known: as is what they said about it, who they shared those views with and what they did next. Crucially, this rich seam of information is about real people, actual individuals.

DEATH
OF
THE
MIDDLE
MAN

GO ON, PROVE, IT!

Advertising's defenders will tell you their industry has become increasingly skilled at demonstrating the efficacy of great Ideas. Logic tells you this is wishful thinking.

In traditional advertising research, the behaviour of the crowd is extrapolated from observing a representative sample or from asking them to record their own actions. A correlation back to the advertising the sample has been exposed to is then inferred. It can never be more than that - an inference. There are two weak links in this argument: firstly, between the sample and the mass and, secondly, between the purported change in behaviour and the advertising reckoned to be responsible for it.

Can a direct causal connection between the communication and the subsequent behaviour ever actually be demonstrated? Or is 'traditional' advertising, to a large degree, an act of faith?

Any implied connection can be imputed only to large, amorphous masses of people. And, when it has been possible in the past to communicate with some smaller groups of named individuals, using 'Direct' forms of traditional media, opportunities to see what they have done in response have been limited.



You can almost feel the frustration about this state of affairs in the bizarre segmentation typologies of conventional consumer insight, the artificial categorisation of people into Functional Style Pioneers or Third-Age Hedonists and the like. These schemas, with their hopelessly tangential relationship to any commonsense social reality you or I would recognise, are symptoms of a desperate attempt to get closer to the individual and further away from the financially wasteful scatter-gun broadcast model of brand communication.

In the 'old world', conventional wisdom held that these were two very different forms of communication - 'Direct' and 'Brand'; in a digitised world, where 'broadcasting' is increasingly used to drive people to dialogue-based, data-rich digital destinations, where people search as much by brand as they do by subject and where the 'copy' that populates communications is, more often than not, some form of branded content, the distinction is starting to become meaningless.

Like all attempts to post-rationalise the traditional advertising model (Neurosemiotics, Neuroscience, Neuromarketing, Evolutionary Psychology, Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging... you get the drift), they may be reassuring to everyone involved - especially the client who is spending the money - but they continue to beg the question of whether anyone can actually show a concrete connection between the communication and the eventual outcome.

MIND THE CONCEPTUAL GAP!

This fatal disconnect, the vacuum at the heart of traditional advertising, has been filled - with intellectual contortions, retro-engineering and pseudo-science - by the notion of Engagement. It is there to bridge the credibility gap that arises from the impossibility of showing that any actual communication has taken place. Engagement is a quasi-religious manifestation of faith in traditional advertising communications.

When a communication is fully rooted in Relevance we no longer need the concept of Engagement to explain how it secures people's attention.

If I search frequently for flights online and an airline brand provides me with a desktop widget that continually updates me with real-time offers and information on ticket prices to my most travelled-to destinations, the notion of Engagement is irrelevant; I'm already engaged in the activity (being on the lookout for flights to Barcelona, New York and Edinburgh) and the communication from the brand is deeply embedded in that activity. Done properly, it becomes part of it.

And whilst there may well be a need for 'media' to inform people about the widget and let them know where and how to get one, this is not the heart of the communications solution, which consists of the conceptualising, design and implementation of a whole infrastructure of touch points orchestrated to get that app on to people's PCs. The nearest thing to an Idea, in the advertising sense - if one is needed at all - comes downstream in the process and acts as the connective tissue holding together multiple creative executions in the various media that feed the core connective vehicle.

In reality, what links each piece of 'copy' is no longer an Idea, but more a coordinated creative direction that ensures all the communications deployed are serving the same cause and complementing each other's roles in the overall scheme. In this example the primary driver of the whole caboodle is an integrated solution built around a concrete product that people can use, get value out of and weave into their habitual behaviour - not an idea at all.

The endless variations, permutations and reinventions of the notion of Engagement point to its essential insubstantiality and instability.

This desperate need to establish Engagement at the unfathomable heart of the brand communications process has infected the entire industry. Engagement has spread, from its origins as a piece of ersatz empiricism aimed at legitimating traditional advertising, to become a conceptual plague on the way communications are strategised and planned.

Attempts to 'reinvent' the discipline of planning tend to be so firmly rooted in Engagement (and, by association, in Engagement's own roots in conventional, above-the-line media) that they end up reinventing nothing. The incremental gains that are all anyone can achieve whilst dragging this mental millstone around will simply not be enough to give us the conceptual firepower to propel brands into this new era of communications.

Without a clean break from this deeply flawed conceptual model, agencies will be unable to act effectively as the advisers that can secure, for their brand partners, a proper place in that future.



WHAT A LIABILITY

'A company's legacy beliefs are a much bigger liability than its legacy costs'

Gary Hamel

Hamel is talking about business in general; few industries, however, could be suffering more damagingly from this particular problem than communications. And the Idea is one of the main culprits.

Not only does a dependency on the Idea impair the possibility of crafting new-era communications solutions for brands, it sucks up a hugely disproportionate share of creativity and innovation within agencies.

In Hamel's terms, the Idea is a liability in two fundamental ways: it inhibits the development of a new approach to communications strategy and planning, one that fully addresses a digitised world and enables agencies to avoid a future of managing painful, inexorable decline; and it suckers agencies and agency people into the illusion that developing better ways to get Ideas means they are being hugely 'creative' and are evolving their businesses.

Both these effects act as powerful brakes on genuine root-and-branch innovation in, ultimately, agencies' business models. The liability is financial. Weaning the communications industry off the advertising Idea is a commercial necessity.

PLEASE DO NOT OBSTRUCT

The truth is that the Ideas lauded so gloriously as a necessary condition of all successful communication are, in essence, creative concepts for sixty-second television commercials. They represent a specific application of creative thinking to a specific form of creative production for a specific medium.

The inherent presumption that accrued to the practitioners of this very specific craft (after all, what are product designers, architects, composers, user experience designers and so on, if not 'creatives'?) was plausible only while TV, through its reach and richness of content, maintained its position as the prime brand communication medium.

Every other communication opportunity was downstream, secondary, 'below-the-line' (which sounds, tellingly, like a contemporary equivalent of below-the-salt, shorthand in the Middle Ages for the lower orders).

Except that this is no longer where we find ourselves as rampant digitisation changes everything in and around communications.

Where is the line now?



EXPENSIVE PRIMATE

Meanwhile, there is the unmistakable sound of straws being clutched. On the sporadic occasions on which a “Great Ad” is spotted, like some rare avian species, it is hailed as proof of the undimmed vitality of the form. Just like its ‘Gorilla’ predecessor, Cadbury’s ‘Eye-brows’ commercial has been seized upon as a bridge from the old world into the new on the basis of its viral spin-offs, mash-ups and other user-generated extensions - as if a showing on YouTube was incontrovertible proof of media innovation. Yet a hype-free analysis of the ‘Gorilla’ campaign indicates that, despite a 5% sales uplift, that ad’s success depended on a level of media spending that significantly impacted Cadbury Schweppes’s profits, suggesting that, commercially, this particular variety of halfway house is a zero-sum game.



ENTRY

A POINTLESS LAND-GRAB

Most of the transitional 'new' forms of advertising either - at best - extend and adapt the advertising Idea for other channels or - at worst - merely repurpose the TV creative treatment that is the primary (i.e. the only one the 'creatives' can be bothered with) expression of that Idea.

Media agencies get sidetracked into pointless battles with creative agencies over who has the better Idea: a draining distraction from the opportunity they have to reinvent the business.

Digital agencies, fragmented for the most part into a long tail of barely distinguishable 'unique' propositions, similarly fight for their own versions of the Idea.

The real point is that the creative agency template and the TV-led creative Idea continue to dominate thinking about communications across the piece; people inculcated into, or in awe of, that legacy find it extremely hard to invent or adopt new conceptual models.

Relocating the 'strategic' centre of gravity - who can claim credit for the Idea, in other words - from creative agency to media agency; seeking to prove that traditional advertising 'works' through the application of neuroscience; isolating 'Engagement' as a focus for strategic thinking; looking for ways to reverse-engineer the ROI metrics derived from digital media back into traditional channels - however much the practitioners convince themselves they are moving things on, at heart developments like these are doing little more than propping up a collapsing model.

They all leverage off an intellectual foundation that sees effective communication as perennially pivoting around a single central conduit of connection and forever dependent on the big Idea that enables a connection to take place.



NO
SALE

CLOSED
ME SALE
SOBBY

I defy anyone to show me an industry where anyone ever gets paid for 'Ideas'. The movie industry doesn't buy 'Ideas', it options a book or treatment that is a finished artefact the author has spent months or years toiling over; the software business doesn't fund 'Ideas', it invests in partly written code that already delivers some of the promised functionality; pharmaceutical companies don't pay for 'Ideas', they licence scientific formulae that have been lab-tested. Consulting firms don't sell clients their 'Ideas' about how to rationalise or revolutionise their businesses, they 'productise' their advice in the form of reports and other formularised outputs.

Strategy-only agencies are often held up as proof of the value of Ideas; their business performance suggests clients' assessment of that value is limited. In fact, these specialist boutiques are a part of the transitional communications landscape in which we find ourselves – they are, more often than not, a late-period attempt to re-energise an old model, not a harbinger of the new one. Similarly, the twelve-person strategic communications consultancy that has been the same size for a dozen years is not that way solely by virtue of the founders' small-is-beautiful principles. Such businesses are almost impossible to scale because there is finite demand from clients for Ideas (or strategy) without implementation – and in a world of digitised communications it is folly even to think about decoupling the two.

NEW MODEL REQUIRED

There are rational commercial reasons why this should be so. Advertising agencies have historically made much of their revenue from the production of television commercials. It's a cornerstone of their business model. It has proved notoriously difficult for agencies to 'get paid for their Ideas', despite periods when that goal has been elevated to the status of potential saviour of the entire industry.

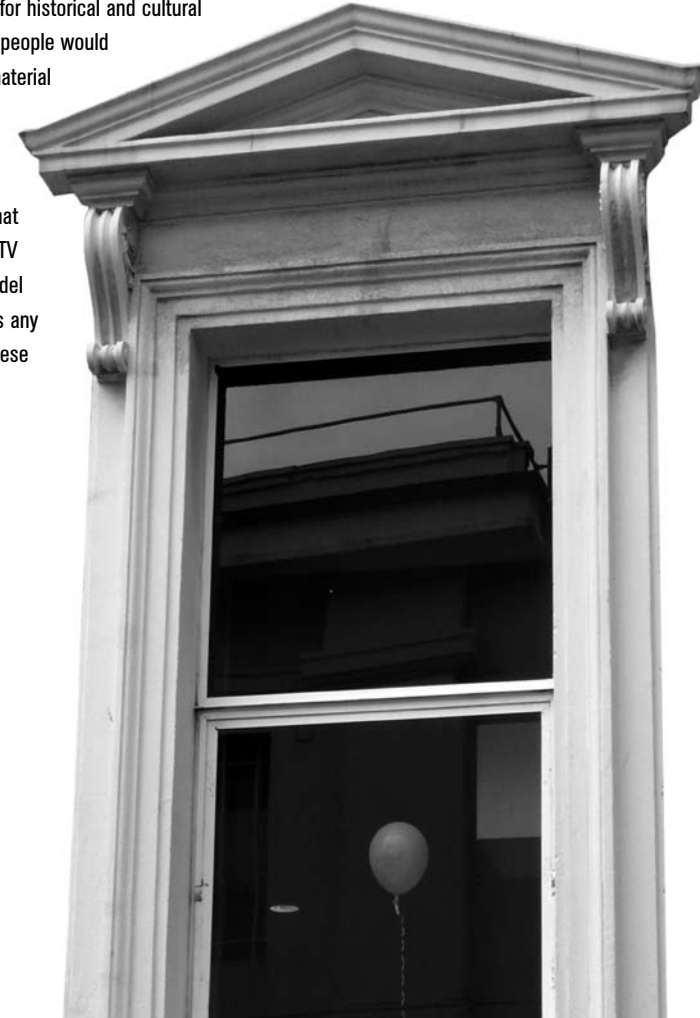
A business model that is predicated on TV advertising could not help but be serious trouble right now. And not because some clients are 'spending less on television': the medium that provided its raison d'être is evolving into something else.

The generation that will be young adults in five years' time is doing less and less of its 'television' viewing on its TV sets. The more that televisual material is aggregated, sourced, distributed, searched for, passed on and consumed online, the less the traditional advertising model - with its dependency on sixty-second commercials based on a big Idea - applies.

As more devices - mobile phones, iPhone-like portable web browsers that happen to make voice calls, games consoles, laptops and PCs - access the broadband internet; as more TV screens come with factory-fitted web browsers; as the EPG amalgamates with the search engine to find TV-type content wherever it lives; as the video clip search engine model of YouTube paves the way for various new 'front doors' on to long-form content - so the old advertising model becomes a less workable source of funding.

Each of these new opportunities to connect viewers with the TV-style material they want requires the invention of new ways for brands to access those same viewers and thereby contribute commercially towards the cost of creating and distributing that content.

Just because, for historical and cultural reasons, most people would describe the material in question as 'television' does not mean for a second that the traditional TV advertising model necessarily has any relevance in these new contexts.



So how does the communications business break free from the tyranny of the Idea?

Essentially, by doing a 180-degree flip in the way it thinks.

The Idea is a brand-centric concept promulgated by traditional agencies. It's a device for grabbing someone's attention when they're actually doing something else. It is predicated on a unidirectional view of how communications work. It's the Trojan horse (or the medieval battering ram, more often) of advertising. Only you no longer need a Trojan horse when the gates are wide open and the people inside are saying: "Come on in, let's talk about what you can do for us..."

The 180-degree flip makes the person, the individual, our starting point. Relevance focuses thinking on what matters to, makes sense to, entertains, inspires, connects and moves that individual. This is definitively not the 'consumer-centric' approach that is yet another half-hearted attempt to breathe life into an expiring model. It is not about fatuous segmentation typologies intended to fine-tune the Idea so it can foist interruption more effectively on to designated groups of people.

Relevance opens up dialogue with real people based on what their past behaviour indicates they may want in the future. It then involves them in a conversation about whether these assumptions are correct or not. They have the opportunity - and the means - to say what they want from brands and how, when and where they would like it delivered. And if they want to see new stuff, random things, brands, products and services they didn't know they wanted, they can just as easily indicate that they are up for some, or a lot, of that too - the way StumbleUpon currently allows them to do with the internet.

IT'S
ALREADY
HAPPENING

WE SELL

MONKEY NUTS

70p
For the Squirrels

DUCK FOOD

70p
For the Ducks

Just how will Relevance revolutionise communications? How is it already starting to?

We have an innate bias towards downgrading the importance of Relevance because of the baggage it carries from the 'old world' of communications, where it was cast in the role of creative advertising's grungy antithesis, its dumb, inbred country cousin.

Relevance then lived in subscriber lists, first-generation customer databases, targeted mailings and the like. It hung out in a very different neighbourhood from the upmarket Idea, which put as much distance between the two as it could. The promoters of the Idea, who boosted it as vigorously as any politician on the stump, were supremely successful at positioning Relevance as a component and signifier of vastly inferior forms of communication, so much so that when Relevance-based 'traditional' media like Direct Mail sought to reinvent themselves, their favoured strategy was to emulate the Idea-led agenda of above-the-line advertising.

How quaint that all seems now, when it looks as if Relevance is on the way to having the last laugh.

Whether we've noticed it or not, Relevance has already embarked on its comeback, big time.

**forbidden to use the
flash, because it rusts
the gold. Please not to
play in the objects, and
to sit down in the
chairs.**

Digital communications for brands are driving the Relevance agenda. How could they not do so? Every bit of digital media people consume, start a conversation with or pass on to someone else produces a data trail marking what they may have looked for, found, clicked on, created, linked through to, queried, asked, said, viewed, played, uploaded, downloaded, listened to, compiled, shared, bookmarked, reviewed, voted on, competed in, bought, sold, compared, researched or read. Depending on the specific medium, the data may also tell us where they were, what kind of device or screen they were using and how much time they spent there.

Brands and their agencies are just starting to figure out how they might begin to collate, analyse and use this data to put Relevance at the heart of communications. The process is only just beginning: the great swathes of data generated by digital media as a matter of course have been ignored by most clients and agencies (including, bizarrely, many digital agencies) until very recently. Their cultures, skill sets and infrastructures prevented them from seeing either the data or its value, let alone enabling them to do anything useful with it.

This has started to change over the course of the past twelve months. Clients' appetites have been whetted by the glimpses they have had of the targeting and accountability that come with the territory when digital media are deployed. And it's starting to affect their expectations of so-called traditional media. Accountability and that baleful trio of letters, ROI, are on every client's lips - and minds.

A PERFECT STORM OF STUFF (WHERE'S MY LIFEBOAT?)

ROI will continue to matter to clients. In an economic downturn it matters even more as marketing budgets are 'challenged', marketing departments are 'rationalised' and those that are left struggle to squeeze more end-outcome value from their communications dollars whilst wrestling with increasingly complex and technically sophisticated media.

Businesses will take advantage of technology to drive efficiencies wherever they can. And Relevance inherently makes communications more efficient. The traditional TV advertisement could start to look like a very expensive fuck-off gesture. How much of their marketing budgets will clients continue to pour into these little movies, given the alternatives?

Relevance doesn't appeal only to brands; it's also a holy grail for whole populations drowning under a tsunami of marketing communications, spam, search results, interruption, dialogue, alerts and ambient clutter: every available piece of space host to a message. People need filters. The unprecedented and incomprehensible amount of content the internet pours into our lives threatens to overwhelm us.

So filters are more than useful; they're a necessity, a life-saver in a perfect storm of stuff. Search engines, aggregators, portals, comparison sites, auctions, exchanges, social networks, communities - they're all either a means to filter this intractable volume of material or they incorporate such means at their centre. Drowning, waving: we welcome them with outstretched arms.



MILESTONES **NOT** MILLSTONES

Creative solutions are beginning to experiment with Relevance - powered, for the moment, by a shallow substrate of data. It's the thin end of a very big wedge.

Campaigns that ask people to submit their own data, which is then used to customise creative content or to produce social media content for passing on; creative executions selected automatically in response to web analytics that identify someone's recent behaviour online; contextualised advertisements automatically matched to the user's selection of content or search results - these experiments with Relevance are beta-testing the advertising formats of the future.

We already have the means to bring Relevance into the heart of communications: it's just that the means currently live in silos - in different teams, departments, companies, countries or continents. No global communications group has yet thoroughly demonstrated the ability to bring

them together - by doing it. Nevertheless, it's coming. Every group has a live project in progress (or, more likely, several running in parallel, coming at it from many angles - and, what's the betting, often unaware of each other).

Much of the data is already there, in different forms, from disparate sources, variously named, tagged or labelled.

The technology to bring it together, clean it up, rejig it into a shared format that allows it to be used, analysed, reported on - that's commonplace, proprietary.

The human skills to understand what to do with data to make it useful, to realise its value: they exist, though they are scarcer.

The tools to make sense of it and squirt it back into a reinvented strategic planning process are tried, tested and readily available, as are highly experienced people to work with them.

These observations don't make an argument about technology; they do, however, acknowledge that Relevance relies on a bedrock of data.

**DO NOT
CLOSE.**

BIGGER IDEAS NEEDED?

Despite all this, isn't what's really needed simply a bigger, more flexible Idea?

The problem with this version of the future is that the advertising Idea - essentially the creative concept for a television commercial - is simply not sufficiently big, flexible or intelligent to work as the basis for communications that are informed by Relevance.

Nor will any of its transitional variants, Ideas that are somehow conceived ready to be 'adapted', 'reconfigured', 'translated' or 'repurposed' to perform in digital environments, do the job. They - and the conceptual framework behind them - continue to miss the point.

Relevance-driven communications need at their heart not just a creative concept that can be spun out into a selection of channels - some new, some digital - if required.

What's needed is something that embodies the how and where, as well as the what. It's the engine, the car and the road map rolled into one, indivisible, intertwined: unable to be decoupled without devaluing the total proposition. In agency-speak, it's the creative concept, the media plan, insight, evaluation tools and a connective tissue of data woven together by a new way of thinking.

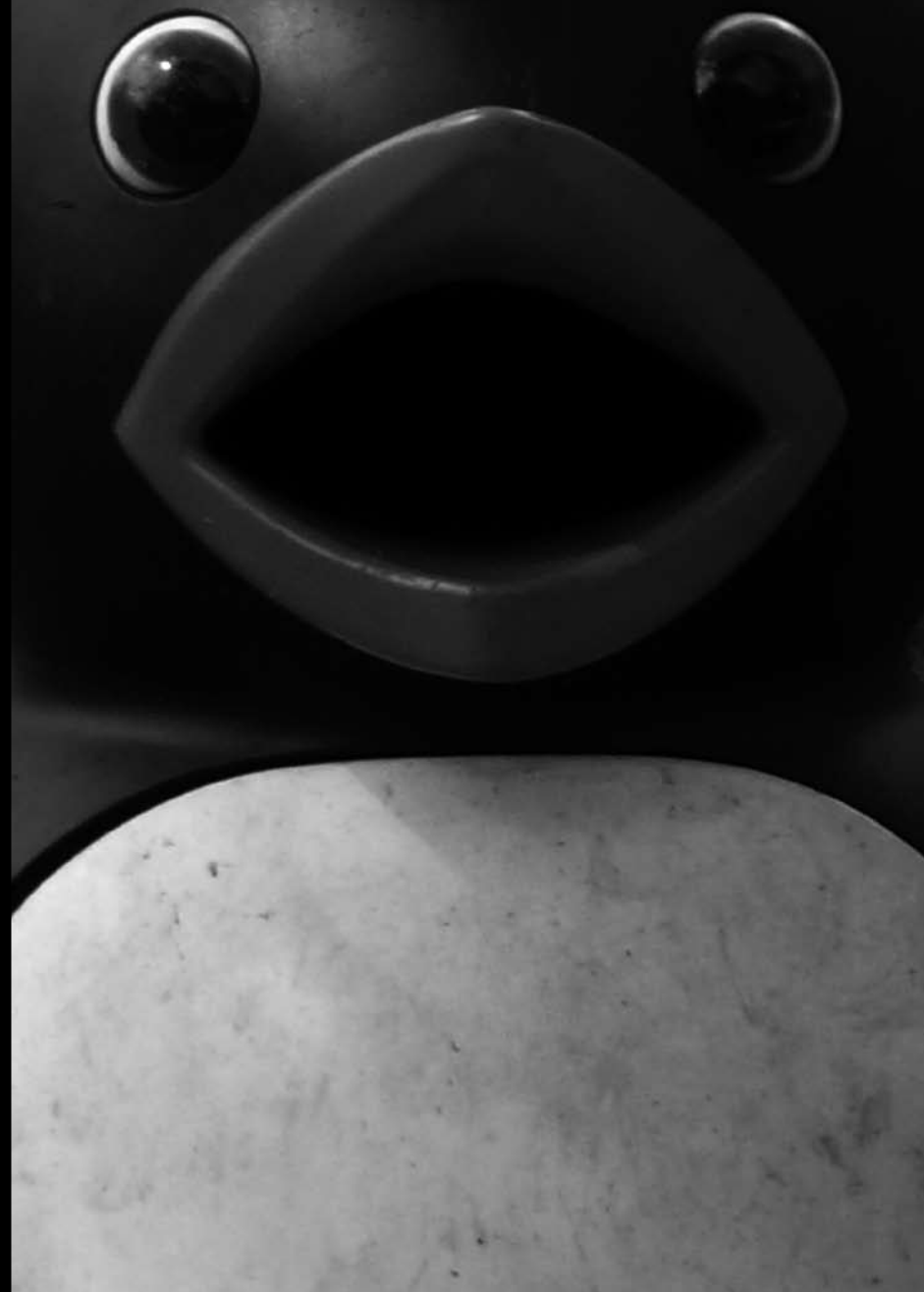
GHERKINS AND MATRICES

It should now be clear that what's required is a radically new discipline. To deliver it requires a new sort of person. It's a creative approach that is new to advertising and communications, one that is more familiar in areas like construction or movie-making. Sophisticated and iconic contemporary buildings are not designed by single-skill 'creatives' who only do Ideas. Even architects for whom, like Will Alsop or Zaha Hadid, the design process starts with a conceptual artwork (making them more fundamentally creative than a lot of 'creatives') are still totally dependent on early-stage computer modelling and collaboration with teams of cutting-edge technical specialists to craft a buildable vision. It would simply not be possible to design a building like 3 St Mary Axe - aka the Gherkin - unless creative, technical, logistical, technological (even, in this instance, mathematical and aerospace design) skills were combined from the outset to conceive a complete solution.

This type of fundamental from-the-get-go fusion of creativity, technology, journey mapping, service design and fiendishly complex logistical planning is virtually unknown in the advertising and media businesses. Other industries could not function without a holistic approach along similar lines: product design, architecture, film, computer games...

Making movies like The Matrix franchise would be impossible without starting from a full integrated vision of how script, art direction, technology, budget and talent need to be brought together to deliver the finished artefact.

For incontrovertible evidence of the commercial potency of this approach, look no further than the iPod. By architecting a totally new digital music ecosystem that innovated not just the storage device, but the user interface, distribution, product aesthetics, charging mechanism and personalisation of content, Apple created a hugely successful new business model for personal music.



DOESN'T SOUND LIKE A PLAN

What will this new holistic agency product actually look like? What will the client get? What exactly is the output from a Relevance-driven response to a client's business challenges?

Let's start with some minimum requirements. It'll be more like a map than a block diagram. It will need to represent the flow and interdependencies between the multiple forms of communication being used. It will embody the customer journey around and amongst many communications 'touch points'. It will need to describe the deployment of brand-generated (whether via an agency/agencies, or not) and user-generated 'content' – and of content that is created jointly by both. It will map the flow of meaning via interaction and dialogue between and through people, brands and media.

What it will articulate is already being described variously as a communications product, a platform, a business solution. These descriptions are in the zone, they are helping us get there. They are progressive in that they get across the essential notion that the output is not a communications plan or strategy. That plan comes downstream from a much bigger, more comprehensive solution that, in turn, drives the deployment of the appropriate forms of communication and what content we put in them.

What these early-stage descriptors do not adequately capture is the sense that interdependency and flow are not merely features of the solution – they are its essence. The solution is the 'product', which is the journey, which is the map. And the simplest way of describing something that works like this is as a system: in other words, 'any organised assembly of resources and procedures united and regulated by interaction or interdependence to accomplish a set of specific functions'.

Maybe not the language any of us would choose to use. Nevertheless, it sounds about right.

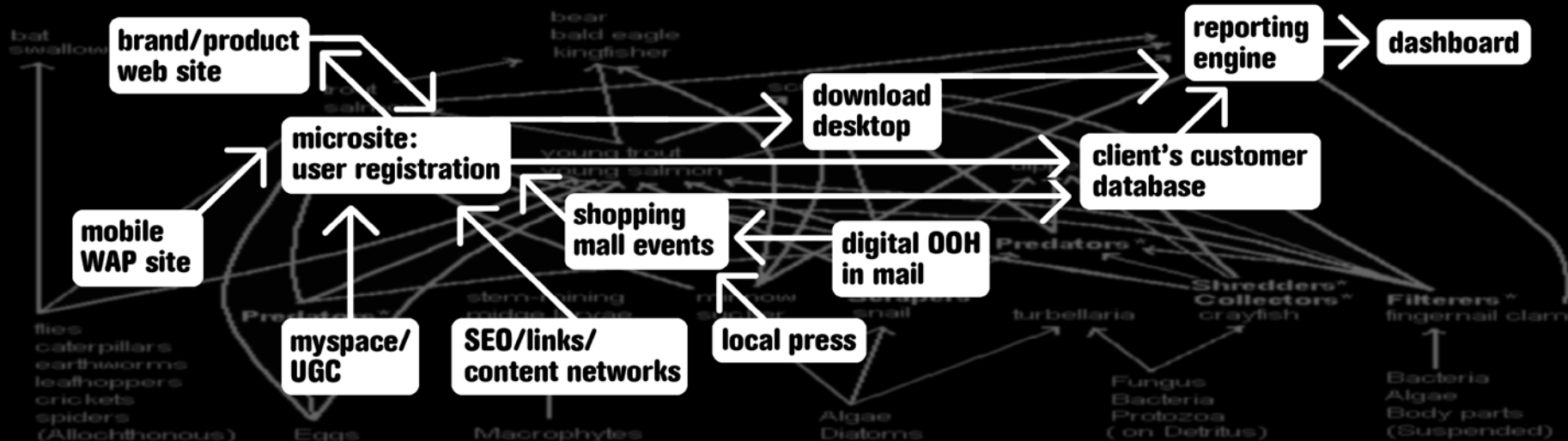
NO NEED TO REINVENT THE WHEEL

Similar models-as-systems are already employed by a diverse range of other disciplines to map complex assemblies of 'resources and procedures' and to describe the interdependencies between elements and how altering one of them will affect the whole. Natural ecosystems, social, political and economic systems, organisational structures and human institutions can all be usefully modelled in this way.

So the search for a new way of conceptualising and strategising communications solutions for brand clients could do a lot worse that to start by learning from these existing system models.

The models that appear to offer the most immediate and applicable lessons for Relevance-based communications are those that describe ecosystems. Principles such as ecosystem resilience (how much disturbance a system can absorb before it needs to change its own processes) or the notion of creative experimentation (a periodic necessity to prevent an ecosystem from becoming so rigid that it provokes a crisis) are extremely useful in designing Relevance-driven digital-age communications systems.

The need to repeatedly, continually, innovate – for example – makes perfect sense in an era of instantly-switchable, interchangeable and interoperable communications devices, platforms and channels, where the recipient is squarely in the driving seat. For a brand, it is no longer enough just to capture someone's attention; you need to hold on to it over the passage of time, during which the recipient may well change (several times) their location, context, role, mood, purpose, maybe even identity. Only a systems approach – one, I would suggest, that models itself on the notion of an ecosystem – can properly deal with this level of complexity and interdependence.



BREAKING OUT OF THE IDEAS GHETTO

This is not an argument against creativity, against thinking. It's the absolute opposite.

It's an argument about what sort of creativity, what kind of thinking and how widely it needs to be applied. Creative thinking in advertising and communications agencies has been narrowly channelled into the production of Ideas, concepts for commercials. So the inventors in agencies are drawn, like moths to a flame, towards the 'creative' department. If they work in one of the increasing number of competing businesses making their play for 'ownership' of the Idea, they may find a home in strategy.

There are no winners in this stand-off because all parties are still referencing the same narrow notion of creativity and its role in communications.

Successful adaptation to the rise of Relevance requires the application of creativity to absolutely everything that needs to happen when brands communicate with people.

Not only that: a further layer of creativity is needed to map the flow and interdependencies between and amongst all the things that need to happen. This is a particular skill that barely exists in advertising and media businesses. Without this layer, it is impossible to get beyond merely replicating the old approach across lots of silos, brainstorming second-level, second-hand sub-Ideas for each 'channel'.

And beyond even this level, in ever-widening circles, creativity is required - in spades - to revolutionise the business, to build the organisation needed to deliver solutions that transcend Ideas. Nothing, from the invoicing process to leadership style, can be taken for granted. The light of creativity needs to be shone into every corner of the business for this transition to be truly realised.

This means dragging creative thinking and innovation out of the Ideas ghetto and into every neighbourhood in the organisation, no matter how settled, comfortable or complacent its residents might be.





The number of recent UK start-ups, many of them built around savvy senior talent from mainstream agencies, seeking to reinvent - or replace - communications planning speaks volumes about the state of the agency business. Frustration with the pace of change within larger groups and a growing awareness of the cumulative drain on positive energy and innovative thinking from recalcitrant leaders and colleagues are key factors in these potentially damaging defections.

In an email from one of these frustrated futurists (who spent months trying to persuade his agency, which has a twenty-five-year reputation for innovation, to invest in a new model he had already proven with one of the largest brand clients in Europe), he offers a bleak assessment of the situation: 'You can't expect the whole company network to change; it will constantly re-adapt to prevent change. Companies are defensive by nature of their structure.'

Unless agencies can discourage these defensive reflexes, especially among senior management, or at least find ways to mitigate them, this 'brain drain' will continue to erode their capacity to reinvent their businesses - just at the moment when they most need to do so.

Agency groups need to invest in the talent that is going to drive the necessary reinvention of their businesses, adopting and implementing internal venturing and EBO (emerging business opportunity) models to offer that talent ways of working entrepreneurially, with agility, speed and minimal bureaucratic restrictions to keep as much of that energy, vision and drive in the family.

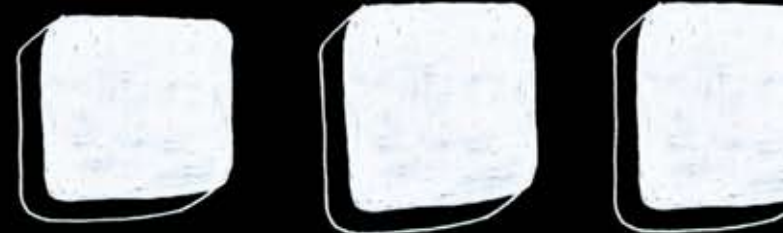
THE END/ BEGINNING

Adapting to the rise of Relevance will undoubtedly trigger radical change in the way agencies operate: in what they offer their clients; in the way they make money; in the way they are structured; in the people they employ. The beginnings of this transition can be seen right now, but they are frequently obscured – wilfully sometimes – by the heaps of baggage accumulated from the previous era of advertising and communications. That era is now in irreversible decline, a decline driven by forces way beyond its control. It is entering a period of what the economist Joseph Schumpeter called creative destruction, the necessary process of economic renewal in which established industries, companies, markets and business models lose their dominance by becoming vulnerable to innovation and entrepreneurship, forces which lower production costs or increase value for customers – or do both.

The process produces short-term hardship and pain – which cannot be gainsaid or avoided – though the new and reinvented businesses that emerge offer more creative and productive opportunities and work for their people. Which, it seems to me, is precisely what the advertising, media and communications industries need right now. Let's not confuse satisfying with comfortable. Comfort, in business, is going to be in short supply for the next little while. But increased satisfaction, from more productive and creative work – that just might be possible. It might also be the thing that, in the medium term, gets us out of the pickle we're in.

Relevance is going to rip up the rulebook in advertising (in its widest possible definition). It's going to redefine how brands communicate effectively with people. It's going to destroy some businesses and build some new ones. And it's going to focus attention on figuring out what's next, now that Ideas are no longer up to the job.

This book (and most certainly its author) doesn't pretend to have all the answers. This argument has simply sought – by asking some pertinent and pointed questions – to accelerate a process of reinvention that is progressing far too slowly at present. For any individual agency or communications business, this question of pace is crucial: it's the difference between spending the next five years managing decline or in building a business for the future, starting now. I don't know about you, but I know which I'd rather be doing.



Who would pay for a message sent to no-one in particular?

Business associates of communications pioneer David Sarnoff, responding to his call to invest in commercial radio, 1921

This book is an argument, a provocation, a rallying cry for a new way of thinking about how brands communicate with people, now that digital technology has begun to irreversibly tear up the way we do more or less everything. Its sense of urgency comes from a stark conviction that the businesses of communications, advertising and media need to fundamentally reinvent themselves as a matter of immediate commercial necessity. This reinvention will fail unless these industries abandon their decades-long dependency on 'The Big Idea' and develop a new conceptual framework that can deal with the complexity and interdependency that digitisation brings.

