

CONVERSATIONS, A NEW MODEL FOR QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

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Introduction

My aim in this paper is to show that qualitative research deals with something much bigger than many of us realise, namely 'conversations'. As qualitative researchers we have expertise in the kinds of conversations we call group discussions or interviews. But I shall argue that there is *much* more that we can take on. We are good at something really valuable. If we consider what the idea of 'conversation' represents and signifies, we could reframe qualitative research as part of a broader and deeper tradition. There are some philosophical and some political implications to contend with. We could also extend and raise the status of what we do and, maybe, we can have more fun doing it.

I hope that this written 'conversation' adds something to your appreciation of the potential role and value of qualitative research. I hope that it will be *thought-provoking, stimulating* and that it will *engage you* and be *something you return to* from time to time. I also hope that it will develop or *lead somewhere*. I mention these things as they are amongst the things which characterise a good conversation, in my opinion. What would *you* say makes a good conversation?

One thing that is typical of many conversations, good and bad, is that people talk about things that they are not expert in, so I will be doing the same in this paper, by covering topics such as evolutionary linguistics, the ancient Greeks, history of science and economics. At the end of the paper there are references to sources and further reading.

PART ONE - A SHORT HISTORY OF CONVERSATIONS

The very first conversation

Imagine the early humans, *homo erectus*, out on the savannah in Africa, about a million years ago. Somehow or other, they began communicating in a way that developed into a complex system (language). Some experts say that language *per se* can be traced back to *homo sapiens* about 100,000 years ago. Being able to communicate is what distinguished *homo sapiens* as a species. The ability to have a conversation is what makes us human. [1]

What was the very first conversation? How did conversations start, how did they evolve? This is one of these questions that is very easy to ask but quite hard to answer. Was the first conversation a combination of voiced noises and arm-waving or other gestures? It would not have been a complete sentence made up of words, obviously.

Experts say it would have been to do with survival, the basics – food, safety/protection, procreation – and developed out of the fact that more could be achieved together than

individually. The key fact is that human beings are essentially social animals and language and therefore systematic communication emerged out of our essentially social nature.

I reckon that the very first conversation, whatever it must have sounded like or looked like, is the type of conversation we still have today. Think about the essential, core human needs and attributes and how they depend on communication ... like 'watch out!' 'look at that!'

The two key things about this are:

1. conversations are not only verbal
2. we are essentially social beings, connected, whether we like it or not.

Learning conversations

We learn through conversation. Some people have argued that our linguistic ability is innate, we have an inherent 'grammar'. [2] Think about early childhood and how a child learns to speak, how it mimics and practises. In school and throughout our education, we learn about facts and ideas, about right and wrong, through conversation. I'd argue that we continue to know ourselves only through conversation, whether with others, or with ourselves.

If we are talking about knowledge through conversation, we have to be talking about Socrates. You have all heard of Socrates, of course. He lived in Athens, Greece, in the 5th century BC (469 to 399). Socrates was a great talker but never wrote anything down, so we are dependent for our knowledge about Socratic conversations on writers like Plato, Xenophon and Aristophanes.

"The Socratic dialogues were extended conversations with students, statesmen and friends aimed at understanding and achieving virtue through the careful application of a dialectical method that employs critical inquiry to undermine the plausibility of widely-held doctrines." [3]

Socrates teaches us not only to question people and to be really honest about our ignorance but also, not necessarily to accept what people say. In fact,

"In following Socrates it is a point of honor to swim against the stream." [4]

It has been argued that the Socratic method is one that is actually very familiar to us today. Not so much in the pursuit of ultimate virtue, but in deciding which brand of toothpaste to buy.

"The vitality of democracy and the free market depend upon it. We debate matters continually to determine the shoes we buy, the food we eat... These choices flood us everywhere, forcing us to continually question our producers, our politicians, and ourselves ... it is also the hallmark and enabler of today's society." [5]

We shall return to the notion of choosing brands later. Could we call Socrates the first well-known qualitative researcher? He certainly took a pretty hard line in questioning. Clients may have liked him, as he refused to accept any material reward for his conversations or dialogues.

On the other hand, there would have been some frustrations there. 'So Socrates, do we launch the blue or the red pack?' 'You have to question what you mean by "launch"'.

But Socrates did say some very wise things, these being some good examples:

- True wisdom comes to each of us when we realize how little we understand about life, ourselves and the world.
- Beware the barrenness of a busy life.
- We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence is a habit.
- Wisdom begins in wonder.

Conversations that change history

If we fast-forward through history we can find some more examples of how knowledge is gained and how knowledge *changes* through conversation. Three quick examples follow of conversations that changed history a long time ago, then one example which is much more up-to-date but no less influential.

1. If you believed what most people said up until the first century or so (the time of Pliny the Elder), you'd have believed that the world was flat. In fact early explorers and sailors were among the *few* who doubted this. Sailors were probably among the first to experience the curvature of Earth from their daily observations, seeing how the shore or masts of other ships gradually descend/ascend near the horizon. So when the theorists started the world-as-spherical conversation, they would have been the least surprised.

Now here is a fanciful notion: as researchers, we are like the sailors out there at the edge of new conversations, within sight of major discoveries and movements, although maybe we do not always realise it and/or do not enjoy the societal status to make our knowledge heard.

2. And speaking of a whole different worldview, Galileo in the 15th century (1564 – 1642) was one of the first people to say that the earth revolved around the sun rather than the other way round. He may not have invented the telescope, but he improved it and was one of the first people to apply it to astronomy. Some call him the father of modern astronomy or even the father of modern science.

One key contribution to the history of Important Conversations is his conflict with the Roman Catholic Church, an example of how authority – or orthodoxy – can conflict with the opinion of the individual – or heresy. On this occasion, heresy won, eventually. But the example shows how slowly ideas can be to change, or for change to be accepted. Galileo was convicted of heresy in 1633, forced to recant his ideas and put under house arrest for the rest of his life. Closure came a little later, when the Church officially apologised for its role in the Galileo affair, as a result of a study that had been conducted by the Pontifical Council for Culture. That was on October 31, 1992. (That was one long study ... I make that 350 years!)

The moral of the story? Sometimes we may have 'heretical' things to say, things that go against the marketing 'orthodoxy'. If we believe in what we have done, if we have been thorough and true to our methods, we should say it. We're unlikely to get the Galileo treatment.

3. Believe it or not, the reason that America was 'discovered' was a shortage of gold bullion in Europe in the 15th century. The European economy was dependent on gold and silver currency, but low domestic supplies had plunged Europe into recession. So they got into their boats and set off exploring, looking for precious metals and other valuable commodities, like spices. Because Portugal had done so well at this by going down the African coast, the Spanish funded an expedition in 1492 to reach Asia by another route, heading west. And as we all know, Columbus did not reach actually reach Asia, but rather found America.

Now, the fact that many people (in Europe at least) still call the Caribbean the 'West Indies' is an example of a lingering, you may say highly iniquitous or repressive conversation. You could say that colonialism is a conversation gone wrong. This goes beyond the scope of this paper, but we'll come back to 'good' political conversations later. But isn't it interesting that when one group of people becomes the dominant group (often by annihilating another group of people), they get to write the history of what happened and their actions become noble and daring, justified, part of a good cause? It happened with the Romans, who were in many ways far less civilised than the 'barbarians' they conquered; it happened with the Anglo Saxons in Britain, who practised apartheid, which enabled them to vanquish the many native tribes that were around at the time. It happened with the Spanish conquistadors in the Americas. The incomers took over and the rest is history. Or another conversation. [6]

Can such a conversation be 'corrected'? How do the big conversations change, what does it take? Arguably, it happened in South Africa, thanks to Nelson Mandela, the attention and concern of other people and the Truth and Reconciliation Committee. It might be happening now, in relation to climate change. Let's hope it's not too late. The big conversations need work. We can be part of this work.

Here is one final, great example of a conversation that changed history. DNA is the basic building block of life and some people have compared its discovery with Newton's laws of motion. Two scientists, James D. Watson and Francis H. C. Crick, aged 23 and 35 at the time, respectively, were the ones who uncovered the exact shape and make-up of this most important molecule. And how they did it was through conversations.

It was 1953 and there was a race to see who would be the first to make the breakthrough discovery. Young Crick and Watson were up against other scientists, in particular the established and world-renowned chemist Linus Pauling at the California Institute of Technology. Whereas Pauling worked on his own and tried to figure everything out in his own, very capable head, Crick and Watson shared ideas between them and recognised that there were things they did not know (shades of Socrates again). So they formed a multi-disciplinary team, and, critically, they talked to each other. Watson later said:

" I do have a deep curiosity and that is the one thing you can't do without... Discovery happens not by accident but by the careful assembling of a group of people who ... know a lot about a lot of different things." [7a]

On the question of their respective abilities and approaches he said:

"never be the smartest person in the room because if you're the smartest person nobody can help you ... Because (Paulin) was so smart he did not feel the need to talk to anybody, which hampered his ability to figure things out as fast ... as a matter of fact, he was overwhelmed by how good he was. I wasn't, and I'm still not"
[7b]

Watson and Crick's dedication, their preparation, passion and particularly their collaboration won the day. They incessantly discussed the problem, bouncing ideas off one another. They made the most of the fact that each one was inspired by different evidence. Watson was more visually sensitive, for example, so when he saw a certain pattern of spots in an X-ray photograph, he suddenly realised that DNA was shaped like a double helix.

As Theodore Zeldin said:

"(Crick) asked naïve questions, insisting he had to simplify things for himself in order to understand them. That is how conversations yielded new insights." [8]

So, conversations do not assume prior knowledge, but can lead to greater knowledge, discoveries and wisdom. The moral of this story is that talking and sharing ideas and having humility, gets results. More characteristics of good conversations, right there.

PART TWO - CONVERSATIONS, ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIOUR

Three kinds of language

I'd like to say more about the idea that conversations are not only verbal, as it might not make intuitive sense, but it is important to the argument. We've already said that the very first forms of human communication were not verbal (obviously) and that verbal communication evolved out of basic human needs and emotions.

I was on a course recently which featured a really interesting distinction about three kinds of language. It's not that this is 'true', it's just a useful and a relevant idea. The idea is that these three kinds of language are all related or connected and we all use them all the time. But in our (western, Anglo Saxon) culture, the first kind of language (representative) dominates over the other two (structural and immediate). As qualitative researchers, and especially as 'conversationists', we need to be fluent in all three and to understand how they work together.

Representational language

This is what we usually think of when we think of the word 'language'. Whether it is written words, spoken words, street signs, diagrams, doodles – these are all representations of the world. We have to learn the system of representations of our culture, obviously, which happens from an early age – although not from birth.

These representations have meaning in a conversation insofar as there is a shared system of meaning, an agreement about these representations. You'll have seen the famous Larson cartoon about a man talking to his dog. It is amazing how often this basic communication flaw happens between humans as well. There may only be one

representation (one word or one idea) that really comes across when someone is talking, everything else is noise.

Representational language is by far the dominant kind of language in developed society; speaking, writing, signs and other representations are all around us. Note also that representational language is where underlying human drives are played out, but often not revealed. So, we lie or exaggerate or fantasise or cajole or complain our way towards what we think we want. The truth is not always available purely via representational language. Someone once said, 'show me the truth and I will show you someone talking'.

Structural language

This can also be called physical language or body language. It is body-to-body, rather than a vocal or visual 'signal'. The dog in that cartoon is reacting to the guy's manner and his tone of voice. And we all do this, much more than we realise.

Structural language is what children learn before spoken or representational language. Imitated behaviour like smiling, actions like crying, pointing, these are all structural. We all know how much the physical appearance of someone, especially their facial expression but also their posture, how they hold themselves, can be revealing something truer about them than what they say.

Think about how much one's body 'shapes' and informs the communication. You see someone hunched over, clutching themselves, wide-eyed and trembling, who says they are fine, not at all scared. You see a person who looks as if they are barely able to contain their anger, clenching their fists and turning red and you take a few steps back.

Sometimes on my way into work guys speed past me on expensive pushbikes, hunched over, calf muscles straining, grimacing and with eyes fixed on the guy ahead who is doing the same (they are usually in twos or threes). It looks clear to me that they are racing - that is what the structural language is telling me. Now if I interviewed one of them, in their work clothes, in an office, later the same day, they may well deny this - it's a workout, maybe, but really I am just trying to get into work on time, they might say.

Of course we've all been in that situation when someone is saying one thing but you suspect that something else is going on - does what they say really match their behaviour? Of course one of the ways we can tell is to pay attention to the structural language at the time that they are telling us that they don't race when cycling to work. I'll bet that they 'leak' a momentary half-smile of recognition.

Immediate language

This is perhaps the most powerful type of language of all and is also the least accessible. It is the pure emotion or feeling. It is animal-to-animal, instinctive and intuitive. When we react without thinking - for example the fear impulse (fight or flight), when we respond to basic drives such as lust or hunger - this is immediate language.

Feelings and emotions are very important, of course and recent developments in neuro-physiology emphasise this. As we understand more about how our brains work, how we retrieve things from our memory, for example, we realise that feelings and emotions have a

really important role to play and cannot be ignored or really separated from other more 'rational' brain functions.

Of course, a lot of advertising works in immediate language - evocative images and sounds operate on a different, maybe a deeper 'frequency' than representational or structural language and yet effect these two. Take music, for example. We all know or sense that music can 'transport' us, evoke deep feelings in us. A recent medical study has found, for example, that music therapy has a significant effect on recovery times. People actually get better more quickly when they listen to music than when they do not.

You should think of the three kinds of language as interconnected, operating at different levels. Our emotions (immediate) affect our bodies (structural) and together they influence what we think and say (representational). This all matters, since conversations involve all three kinds of language. As qualitative researchers, I think that we are instinctively skilled with all three kinds of language, but that we, like most western people, under-estimate the role and importance of the structural and the immediate - the non verbal aspects of conversations.

Non-verbal communication

Just another word about non-verbal communication. I wonder how many of you have heard the statistic, that 93% of all communication is non-verbal? Or a similar-ish figure to that? And I wonder how many of you, broadly speaking, believe that statistic?

I have often wondered about this. First of all, how do you measure it? How can you measure 'all communication' to be able to arrive at a figure of 93% (or whatever) being non-verbal. Secondly, if 93% (or whatever) of all communication is non-verbal, why would anybody learn Spanish? There would surely be no need to learn a foreign language. In fact, there would be no real reason to speak!

But non-verbal communication is clearly important and as I hope this paper makes clear, it is more important than we (wordy) researchers often give it credit for. So we need more clarity here. A colleague of mine did some investigating into this 93% issue and it turns out that it's a huge mis-representation. Ironic, isn't it, that a statistic about communication should be so widely mis-communicated!

The source of the highly misleading factoid is probably a spectacularly bad psychology experiment [9] involving the measurement of the impact of a message on a series of subjects which found that it breaks down like this:

- 7 percent verbal (words)
- 38 percent vocal (volume, pitch, rhythm, etc)
- 55 percent body movements (mostly facial expressions)

The confusion is between 'verbal' and 'vocal'. 93% of communication is non-verbal, meaning (as I would put it) non-semantic, not about what the words mean. But only 55% of the communication is not about words at all. Most experts [10] believe that nonverbal communication (NVC) is normally used as a supplement to the verbal cues we give. It's just that sometimes the NVC is more revealing than the verbal.

So maybe this leads us to another statement we surely all believe, but one which is arguably closer to the truth. Who was it who said, 'it's not what you say, it's the way that you say it (and that's what gets results)'?

All about attitudes

Attitudes are important in market research - 'usage and attitude studies', what is your 'attitude' to this or that? We talk about attitudes as if they are things that we 'have', as if they are things that we have inside us, like our ribs or red blood cells for example. As if, if you look inside us carefully enough, you can locate and describe our attitudes, measure them, add them up.

Suppose I said that, rather than us having attitudes, sometimes attitudes have us. What does this mean? I would argue that attitudes are conversations that we create, adopt or adapt, try out; conversations that we subscribe to or adhere to, defend or promote. Conversations that can become habitual, conversations that carry us along.

It is not so far fetched to consider that conversations have a life of their own, that they may derive from what people say and write and think (obviously) but that they then come to have their own, intangible existence. They become a kind of invisible, evolving repository for our beliefs and attitudes.

Attitudes (and opinions, beliefs, views etc) all arise in language and therefore in conversation - whether a conversation with yourself (eg thinking to yourself, do I like him or her?) or a conversation with other people. Rather than 'pre-existing', many attitudes are 'made to order' or made up, on the spot.

Suppose you asked me, 'what's your attitude to plain chocolate Kit Kats?' I might say, 'I really like them' or 'I like the sound of that' or 'plain chocolate brings me out in spots'. I have given you my 'attitude' to plain chocolate Kit Kats. But this attitude did not exist before you asked me the question. My brain has sent out a message to various places, memory storage, my assessment of the person asking the question, my imagination etc and I have compiled my 'attitude' to order. The point is that my attitude to plain chocolate Kit Kats only exists as part of a conversation, in this case a spoken question-and-answer session with an interviewer (let's imagine). It may also exist as part of a mid-morning daydream as I sit at my desk, thinking about the sound it makes when you unwrap one and crack it open - a mental conversation.

This model of attitudes is not any more or less valid or any more or less predictive than other models of attitudes, those which position attitudes as things which are held or internalised or predispositions towards behaviour. My attitude may be composed of immediate language (eg hunger pangs), structural language (the way I eat it, reaching out for it at the counter) and representational language (as already discussed). Because it is made up of these different elements, you cannot go from 'I love plain chocolate Kit Kats' to 'I will certainly buy a plain chocolate Kit Kat at the next opportunity' or 'I'd buy one in preference to a plain chocolate Cadbury's Wafer.' (More on attitudes and behaviour in the next section.)

Take another example, my attitude to climate change, or my attitude to a fair society - in other words, big stuff. I think that the principles are the same, even if the practice or the

mechanics of this kind of attitude are much more complex. Our attitudes to such issues probably have early antecedents (ie I will have 'inherited' certain aspects), for example if my parents were very 'green', this will have rubbed off on me. The conversations I was part of (or party to) as a youngster, to some extent become my conversations in later life. I may well have certain strong feelings (immediate language), such as responding with instinctive compassion at the sight of a baby chimpanzee looking terrified as its habitat is destroyed by loggers. And my attitude will be reinforced, developed, expanded - or maybe completely reversed - through the conversations I have had in my life.

I think it is true to say that we only know our own attitudes - especially to big, complex things - through conversations. The point about this model of attitudes, of course, is that we as professional 'conversationists' are experts in the understanding of attitudes and working out what people's attitudes are and where they may lead. And the way to find out what someone may do as a result of what they believe, is first of all, really to know what it is that they believe.

Finding out what people really and truly believe is easier said than done and actually raises some important political issues.

Political conversations

Is democracy working? Is the US truly democratic, is Europe for that matter? Do voters all have an equal say in what happens to them at a local, regional and national level? Just how participative are our democratic processes? Why are we suddenly talking about politics?

Remember the question, what makes a good conversation? Is part of the answer, for you, a conversation that is open to anyone? Or, a conversation that matters? Or, a conversation that helps to make the world a better place? You may have gathered so far that I think that conversations are quite important things. They also have significant political implications. This is especially true in today's internet age, but it has been true for a long time. In fact, conversations that sprang up in coffee houses not long after coffee was first introduced into Europe, some 300 years ago, helped to shape the future of society and politics.

Coffee houses started appearing in London in the 17th century and quickly became a favourite informal meeting place, where anybody could come along and drink coffee, smoke their pipe and have conversations on the issues of the day with the other patrons. This was before newspapers as we know them were common. It became a very popular activity and coffee shops developed strict rules about what was acceptable and expected behaviour.

"According to the posted 'Rules and Orders of the Coffee House, all men were equal in these establishments, and none need give his place to a 'Finer' man. Anyone who swore was made to 'forfeit twelve pence', and the man who began a quarrel 'shall give each man a dish (of coffee) t'atone the sin'. Everyone was expected to 'be brisk, and talk, but not too much'." [11]

Note the rules here – open to anyone, regardless of class, rules of engagement. We are talking about the time just before start of the Industrial Age in the UK (which we were taught in history lessons, lasted from 1720 to 1860), when the cultural divide we have become so used to, between the arts and industry, between culture and science, did not exist.

(Remember how unusual the multi-disciplinary approach was that helped Crick and Watson to discover DNA?).

Coffee houses have long been places for discussion, debate and ideas; places where people meet and engage in conversation. Many innovative ideas have originated from discussions in coffee houses – the RSA is one of them. The RSA is The Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce and was founded in 1754 by William Shipley, a painter and social activist, on a manifesto "to embolden enterprise, enlarge science, refine arts, improve our manufactures and extend our commerce". [12]

The RSA has encouraged and supported innovation and creativity throughout society with the help of a Fellowship, which includes such famous names as Karl Marx, William Hogarth and Richard Attenborough. The RSA is based in a rather splendid building just off the Strand in London and recently hosted a meeting that I attended along with Judith Wardle, my business partner. We'd been invited along by a colleague who works for nef, the New Economics Foundation [13] and to be honest we didn't really know what to expect - maybe similar to someone who is going to their first group discussion.

The meeting was about conversations as exercises in non-hierarchical, participant-led political engagement, to give it a rather jargon-y description. There were about sixty people in the room, all ages, from all walks of life, some with learning disabilities; there were eight or nine round tables and there was a buffet lunch. People sat and ate at the tables and started chatting. Then a couple of people stood up and introduced themselves and the organisations they represented and invited us to introduce ourselves and to carry on chatting at our tables, then to move to another table after 20 minutes and do the same. There were some guideline notes on conversational etiquette on the table (eg respect other points of view, listen, express yourself) and we were encouraged to write notes on the paper tablecloths with pens provided. A question was posed, one you are now familiar with. 'What makes a good conversation?' As a professional qualitative researcher, it was fascinating and a little disconcerting. The urge to moderate was very strong indeed (we resisted!)

Judith and I found out about several organisations which focus on conversations, including conversation cafés and the world café. I would call their work a kind of gentle, ethical revolution. Much of the work has been done in the States, one organisation started in Seattle and there has been a lot of work done around 9/11. There are references in the appendix and here are some excerpts to give you a flavour. [14]

The reason for mentioning all this is coming in the last section, but relates to the fact that we are undergoing a shift in our culture every bit as significant as the Industrial Revolution. Really major changes are happening in society right now. The way that people relate to each other and to organisations, as citizens and as consumers, is changing. We are part of this and, as qualitative researchers, we are well equipped to play our part. But we need to see what is going on first.

First, some food for thought from conversation café and world café. Compare this with times earlier in our history when big conversations went awry (or did not start).

From Conversationcafé.org:

"Creating a positive future begins in human conversation. The simplest and most powerful investment in renewal any member of a community or an organization may make is to begin talking with other people as though the answers mattered."
(Adapted from 'Who Will Tell the People' by William Greider)

What is a Conversation Café?

It is a one-and-a-half hour hosted conversation, held in a public setting like a café, where anyone is welcome to join. A simple format helps people feel at ease and gives everyone who wants it a chance to speak .. (or) to simply listen.

Why this, why now?

In times of crisis, be it earthquakes, terrorist attacks, war, layoffs, recessions, people overcome their fear of strangers. We recognize that we are all in this together, whatever *this* is ... on September 11, everything about our world changed except our way of thinking ... We can learn, together, the way through to a sustainable peace. Conversation Cafés are places where this collective learning is happening.

Because they happen in public settings, people who don't normally talk to one another can come together to share their thoughts and feelings in a spirit of respect. One person's view, expressed without a need to convince, could open another person's eyes. And being heard without judgement allows each person to feel understood. Good conversation can change the world.

From worldcafé.net:

World Café Conversations are an intentional way to create a living network of conversation around questions that matter ... Consider for a moment the importance of conversation ... virtually every action we take is predicated on a conversation... Learning to attend more consciously to our conversations can bring about a greater degree of coherence between what we intend to have happen and what actually occurs ... When we consciously focus attention on "questions that matter", for our families, organizations, and communities, we are contributing to the evolution of the knowledge and wisdom that we need to co-create the future. **[14]**

PART THREE - BRANDS AND MARKETING

Markets are conversations

Many of you will know this phrase, which comes from an essay of 95 theses called the Cluetrain Manifesto. It first came out in 1999, which of course is an age ago in digital terms. What the authors of Cluetrain Manifesto are saying, essentially, is that the Internet enables people to have "human to human" conversations, which have the potential to transform traditional business practices radically.

"A powerful global conversation has begun. Through the Internet, people are discovering and inventing new ways to share relevant knowledge with blinding speed. As a direct result, markets are getting smarter—and getting smarter faster than most companies"
[15]

Cluetrain Manifesto has been very influential and is well worth a read, if you've not come across it. Not everyone agrees, of course and there has been a reaction against so-called 'Cluetrainees'. One critic had this to say about 'markets are conversations':

"Exactly WHAT is this supposed to mean? To me it sounds like something someone would find written on a napkin after a two-week LSD bender. The manifesto starts with this nonsense and get worse". [16]

Never having been on a two-week LSD bender, I wouldn't know. In my humble opinion, 'markets as conversations' is an interesting and important idea and very apt for the times we live in today. I am going to assume no familiarity with the idea, so forgive me if this is old news. Also, I am drawing on the idea, but giving my take on it.

The idea is that business and markets *started* as a kind of conversation. The marketplace was where people gathered and talked to each other, they would discuss available products, price, reputation and in doing so connect with others. Think coffee houses, everyone talking, everyone (more or less) equal.

Then, when we get to the start of mass marketing and the origin of the brand, it was a case of, producers produced things which consumers consumed. Producers called the shots. Henry T Ford said, 'you can have any colour as long as it's black'. So the way that brands and mass marketing emerged was very 'top down' and very 'them and us'. They had the power, they made things that were pretty much all the same, safe in the knowledge that the mass of 'us' out there would want them.

Producers made things, marketing made us need them (or think we needed them). Marketing was an extension of selling and this, of course, is a very one-way communication, or a monologue. The media (traditional media like print and TV) were part of this paradigm, they were the channels through which the 'messages' from the producers were relayed to us consumers. ('And now a word from our sponsors... five reasons to buy Snibbo' etc)

If this sounds like a caricature, I think that this is still, essentially, the way that much marketing is conceived and carried out, today. But you know what is coming next. This way

of viewing marketing is an old, outdated model and the growth of the internet has created a new model. There has been what we used to call a paradigm shift. What used to be a top-down, one-way form of communication is now on a level and two-way. You know, like a conversation!

The old 'them and us' is breaking down, now it only us – the 'us' who work in companies selling things, and the 'us' who maybe stop on the way home to buy things, we are the same. Producers and consumers, we are all people. I predict we shall start to become wary of this term, 'consumer'. (To indulge in a bit of glibbery, there is no 'I' in team, is there a 'you' in consumer?) **[17]**

The internet allows us to gain access to companies 24/7, we are now initiating the contact rather than waiting for the commercial break and we are increasingly taking our lead from the network of other users, rather than from the producer. As Cluetrain Manifesto says '*Hyperlinks subvert hierarchy*'. Or as John C. Dvorak retorts:

'Found on the other side of that napkin. This means nothing. Hyperlinks are a navigational tool not a political one. Get over yourselves'

I think it is John who needs to get over his reaction. I note that he sheepishly admitted to having a blog. It seems as if the heresy of 'markets as conversations' is becoming the orthodoxy and this particular shift is taking a lot less than 350 years. Someone who has written about this very eloquently is James Surowiecki, author of 'Wisdom of the Crowds' in a widely-reported piece called 'Commercial Conversations'. **[18]**

He notes how commercial transactions are a kind of conversation between producer and consumer and how the job of advertising is not simply to convey information about a product, but to 'signal confidence' in it - trying to spread their own confidence on to real people, so to speak. However, the communication between producer and consumer is now changing, forever. The implication is that the role of market research is changing with it.

'market research ... has traditionally been more about figuring out how to get customers to buy what businesses want to make rather than helping businesses make what customers want to buy ... Now, though, everything is up in the air. The tools to change communication from a monologue to a dialogue are already with us, most obviously on the Internet, where customers are already having very loud conversations with each other on sites such as Amazon.com and ePinions and throughout the blogosphere.'

The key point about this is that:

'... as a result, commerce is going to increasingly shift away from older forms of communication - signaling and advertising will be both less necessary and less effective because consumers can now get good information from so many sources - toward something that resembles a real conversation.'

Now, the 'market research' that Surowiecki refers to in the first excerpt is probably not the kind of market research that you and I do for a living, since that is much closer already to what he refers to in the second excerpt as 'real conversation'.

But let me repeat this point, since I think it is crucial. James Surowiecki, well-known author and New York Times columnist, is saying, 'the tools to change communication from a monologue to a dialogue are already with us'. He is referring mainly to the internet, but I think this applies equally to proper qualitative research.

There is a whole raft of inquiry that goes into the Internet here, the emergence of blogs, of Web 2.0, the rise of social networks, decision markets - many fascinating things that would take too long to explore here, but which are all part of the new model of research-as-conversation. I'd like to finish up by outlining one final piece of theory, brands as networks of conversation, then examining how conversations characterise what to me is good qualitative research.

Brands as a networks of associations

There are two kinds of networks that brands depend on, **internal** and **external networks**. The internal network is our brains and our nervous system, the external network is everything and everyone around us, people, places, things - including, people talking and tapping away on their computers. These two networks are inter-linked, in ways that are beyond the scope of this paper and beyond the capacity my own internal network.

Brands do not exist in the physical world as 'things'; they exist as a complex and ever-changing **associative networks**. All encounters with brands we have, our experience of them, comprises what could be called the 'external network' and is stored away in different parts of our 'internal network' (our brains). Associations do not necessarily involve representational language (ie words). For example, a smell or a piece of music can be powerful associations (somatic markers) for brands. The more often an association is repeated, the more that part of the internal network is strengthened; the less it happens, the weaker this connection becomes. We often take mental short cuts (heuristics) in making brand choices and we are often not aware of how we have arrived at these choices. [19]

Now, a great deal of work is being done to further our understanding of how our brains work and the new science of neuro-psychology is making great strides. There are those who are applying brain science to brands and marketing, who believe that fMRI scanners are the new, essential market research tool (the only one we now need, if we believe the 'brain evangelists', assuming we have a spare hundred grand or so).

Someone who is advocating the 'new science' - although not specifically fMRI scanners - is Gerald Zaltman, Professor of Business Administration at the Harvard Business School. Professor Zaltman is highly critical of 'traditional' market research and maintains that focus groups are redundant and do not work. Professor Zaltman, believe it or not, prefers instead his own, patented technique, the Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET), which 'open the windows of consciousness' [*sic*] as outlined in his recent book. [20]

Now, I am not saying that our brains and consciousness are not important (likewise our sub conscious or adaptive unconscious). I am suggesting that they are only half the story. We like to focus on the individual and to isolate and focus on the key 'driver' of any individual, their brain - this is the Western way and it sounds like a neat and 'scientific' solution. It is also reductive and may also be plain wrong.

Focusing exclusively on the individual/our brain ignores the world - and people - around and about us. As I have been suggesting in this paper, this is a very important factor in determining how we behave and how we make decisions about brands and everything else. Someone who is arguing strongly for this is Mark Earls, ex-planner and author of a brand new book, '*Herd* - how to change mass behaviour by harnessing our true nature'. [21]

Mark argues strongly that to understand the person we must look **outside** at their interactions, not **inside**, into their heads. He says that our behaviour is not reducible to brains / our unconscious but is **socially determined**. He claims that 'the herd', in other words, how we interact with other people, is hugely influential but also largely ignored at least in the West, by the marketing and business communities, including the research industry. Individuals, he has said, are 'unreliable narrators' of their own motivations - we cannot trust what people tell us, in other words. Mark is also critical of 'traditional market research' but for different reasons than prof Zaltman. Mark criticises research which is 'ask-answer', which does not or cannot go beyond the first response. (I would not call this 'traditional' research. I would call it 'bad research').

Inside and outside

As we discussed earlier in relation to plain chocolate Kit Kats, an attitude or opinion is a conversation. Conversations exist 'out there' (so to speak) as well as in our heads. The 'stimulus' is outside us, all around us, the confectionery counter, our living room, other people (crucially), the TV and so on - the external network. We process all this internally. An attitude can be called into existence in an instant as our brain searches for memories, experiences and triggers (somatic markers) that relate to a particular brand.

The point is that **having good conversations with people reflects (or *instantiates*) the structure and content of these networks**. Conversations are within us and between us - they are what connect the internal and external networks. The best way to find out about the internal and external networks that comprises a brand, is to talk to people, to listen to them, to watch them - in other words, to reproduce their conversations.

Qualitative research is uniquely able to witness and harness these conversations. Preferably not just in the research studio, either. Observing people at point of sale can be important (what is the structural language?). Taking a longer view helps too - participant observation (often grandly called 'ethnography') helps to understand more about how a brand is perceived and used. Another technique is very powerful, too, but often misunderstood. It is part of the 'traditional market research' toolkit, as well. It is called talking, listening and thinking, or, as I would put it, having good conversations with a wide range of people. This reveals how brands are constructed, seen and used. Hold the front page. It works.

Implications: qualitative research as a conversation

People have conversations, out there, in the real world, about brands and marketing. Or put another way, people are *in a conversation*, every day, about brands and products and all sort of related issues. A tiny part of this conversation is spoken ('do you have the new Nike cross-trainers?'). The largest part of it consists of silently held thoughts or beliefs ('do I trust them?' etc) which comprise the evolving mental network of associations held in our brains. Some of those thoughts are 'hard-wired' in our brains so as to be indistinguishable from habits or instincts. An increasing part of the conversation takes place on the external network online, via websites, user groups and so on.

Qualitative research (properly conceived and executed) is uniquely able to access or reveal these conversations and to study them, the better to understand where they can lead. Not any old qualitative research, or should I say, any old focus group. I think that to tap into real conversations and to do this in a way that meets a client brief requires qualitative research of a high standard.

There are two main conclusions that I wish to draw in this paper and one plea that I would like to make. The two conclusions first:

1. Good qualitative research can achieve a great deal. Bad qualitative research holds us all back. Do good qualitative research! (Definitions follow)
2. Go outside the studio, go beyond the discussion guide; go into the real world and follow the conversation (not forgetting structural and immediate language). As an industry we can and I believe we should tap into real conversations and events that happen outside the formal environments of research facility and client meeting room. We maybe cannot predict behaviour but we can tell a lot if we observe well. (See below for more on this and for the plea)

What I would call good qualitative research shares several features with what I would call a good conversation. And this is very different to what some people have called 'question and answer' research. I call this bad qualitative research.

1. Conversations open out topics; questions and answers close them down.
2. Conversations map on to associative networks (neural pathways); questions and answers impose a different, more limited structure.
3. Conversations build rapport, being a natural way in which people communicate; questions and answers are unnatural, can alienate or hinder rapport.
4. Conversations are about a dialogue between equals; questions and answers often assume unequal status (either way) and perpetuate unhelpful power relations.
5. Conversations need a shared agenda, give and take, both parties are empowered; questions and answers are the interviewer's agenda, the interviewee is disempowered.
6. Conversations are rich, revealing and rewarding; questions and answers are more limited, confined, rarely surprising and often frustrating.

7. Conversations provide space and freedom for people to express themselves in; questions and answers force people down certain paths and make them feel trapped.
8. Conversations lead somewhere; questions and answers just start and then finish.
9. Conversations take many forms, involving different kinds of language; questions and answers are only verbal/representational.
10. Conversations yield truths; questions and answers encourage lies.

On that 'truth' bombshell, a final word on the vexed question of what people say versus what they *do*. There are those who say the discrepancy between the two is a fatal flaw with all market research (not just qualitative research). How to deal with the fact that what people say in research does not always match what they then do in real life?

The adolescent response to this is, well, obviously! Doesn't everyone know that what people say is one thing and what they do is another thing? Maybe we in research have acted as if we can guarantee more accuracy, better predictions. But there simply are no guarantees, whether in market research, or in huge, scientific, double blind trials, or in life. People in business meetings or on dates are no more truthful than they are in research groups. (There's an interesting paper in there somewhere!)

People often just do not say what they mean. Or, they say something in order to try to find out what they mean, or what they are going to do about it. The point is, all we have to go on is the conversation. The good thing is - as I hope I have shown - that there is a lot more to the conversation than questions and answers. If you really can and do follow the conversation, it will lead somewhere valuable.

How do you do that? In two ways, firstly by accessing the internal network where an individual's conversations are formed (in other words, by doing what we already all do, groups and interviews, but doing it really well). Secondly, by tapping into the external network, the outside world, the TV programmes, the websites and blogs, the shopping centres, the home, the sports and recreation grounds and so on.

All of which leads to my plea. If you ever felt a little under-valued, taken for granted, ignored, short of business... (maybe it's just me!), if you ever feel that we in qualitative research need clients to survive, bear in mind that the opposite is also true. The world of business needs qualitative research to survive and thrive, now more than ever. We have something to offer business and society which goes well beyond the ability to run focus groups and write screeners. There is a much bigger conversation that we can all take part in. If we act together maybe we can stake our claim to it more powerfully.

Qualitative researchers of the world, unite!

APPENDIX

1. "... *homo sapiens* developed linguistic systems that can express a literally infinite variety of separate and distinct thoughts. This incredible evolutionary leap is what distinguished humans from all other organisms on earth" <http://library.thinkquest.org/C004367/la1.shtml>
2. For instance, Noam Chomsky, *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* (MIT Press, 1965) and Steven Pinker, *How the Mind Works* (W. W. Norton & Company, 1999).
3. <http://www.philosophypages.com/ph/socr.htm>
4. Walter Kaufman, *The Future of the Humanities* 22 (1977)
5. <http://mezmer.blogspot.com/>
6. See Jared Diamond, '*Guns, Germs and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*' (W. W. Norton & Company, Inc, 1999.) 'Why did Eurasians conquer, displace, or decimate Native Americans, Australians, and Africans, instead of the other way around? In this groundbreaking work, an evolutionary biologist dismantles racially-based theories and reveals the environmental factors actually responsible for history's broadest patterns.'
- 7a http://www.3dmoleculardesigns.com/DNA_Discovery_Kit/AnnotatedversionofWatsonandCrickpaper.htm
- 7b. http://www.watsoncrombie.com/watson_and_crick_dna-3.html
8. Theodore Zeldin '*Conversation (how talk can change your life)*', Harvill Press, 1998. Also featured in a BBC radio series '*An Intimate History of Conversation part 4*', available via www.bbc.co.uk/education
9. The experiment is reported on in Koneya, Mele, and Alton Barbour, 1976. *Louder Than Words ... Nonverbal Communication*, Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company
10. For example Professor Adrian Furnham, who gave a keynote talk at the MRS Conference, 2006 on 'the body language of business' http://www.mrs.org.uk/res06/downloads/furnham_presentation.pdf
11. J. Pelzer and L. Pelzer, "Coffee Houses of Augustan London," October 1982
12. RSA, the Royal Society for the Encouragement of the Arts, Manufactures and Commerce <http://www.rsa.org.uk/>
13. 'nef is an independent 'think and do' tank. We believe in economics as if people and the planet mattered' <http://www.neweconomics.org/gen/>
14. <http://www.conversationcafe.org/> and <http://theworldcafe.com/index.html>

15. www.cluetrain.com/ The Cluetrain website was declared a "Read-Only Landmark" and is currently off-line. Try <http://www.searls.com/cluetrain/>

16. John C. Dvorak, <http://www.pcmag.com/article2/0,1759,43161,00.asp>

17. 'The game is up, time to play better – advertising research and communication', McLean and Truslove, MRS Conference Proceedings 2002

18. For example, see http://www.forbes.com/2005/10/20/surowiecki-james-economics_comm05_cx_js_1024surowiecki.html

19. Two good papers on this subject are: 'And now for something completely different', Robert Heath, MRS Conference Proceedings, 2000 and 'The Darkroom of the Mind', Wendy Gordon, AQR/QRCA Paris Conference, 'Qualitative Research in the 21st Century', Paris, 2001. Both draw on the work of writers such as Giep Franzen, Antonio Damasio and Steven Pinker (references given in the papers).

20. Prof G Zaltman: '*How Customers Think*: Essential Insights into the Mind of the Market'. HBS 2003. "Technology is revolutionizing our ability to understand customers. Insights about the workings of the cognitive unconscious ... and the neurobiology of figurative thinking, for instance, have already outdated most thinking and current practices".

For two uncritical accounts, see:

<http://www.news.harvard.edu/gazette/2000/05.04/zalt.html>

or:

<http://hbswk.hbs.edu/item/3246.html>

For an example of how his technique works, see:

<http://www.thearf.org/conferences/past/whatsnext/proceedings/thinkers/Zaltman/Zaltman.html>

21. Mark Earls: '*Herd* - how to change mass behaviour by harnessing our true nature' (pub. Wiley, Feb 07). "peer-to-peer or C2C (consumer-to-consumer) influence is the key factor in influencing mass behaviour ... it can be harnessed and ... it is so much more important than (what) ... we in organisations try to do ... to individual customers or citizens to 'persuade' them to do what we want them to do".