

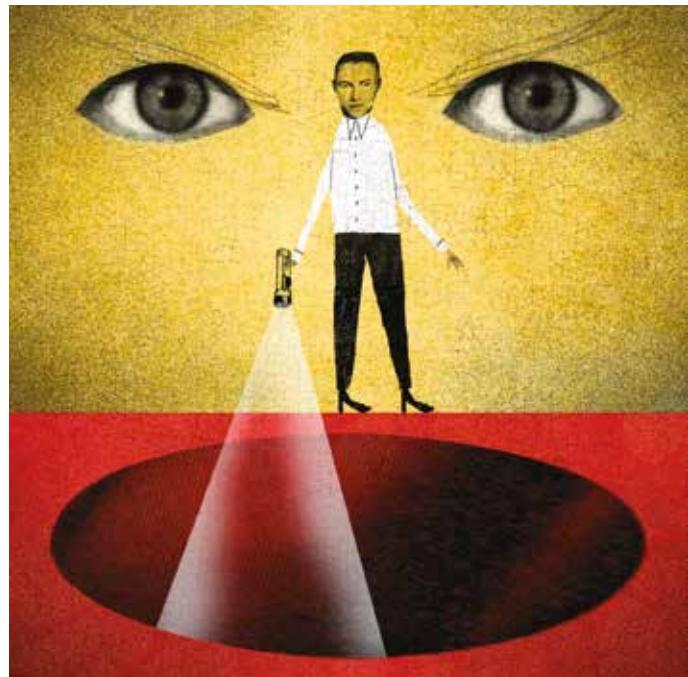
DARK SOCIAL

Twitter data is the tip of the iceberg – but is more data an answer to anything?

DARK SOCIAL,” A TERM COINED in 2012 by Alexis C. Madrigal of The Atlantic, conjures up images of a virtual dystopia. Actually, Mr. Madrigal was using it to refer to the phenomenon of people arriving at his publication by clicking on digitally shared links that couldn’t be tracked.

Fast forward to today and, as well as the sharing of links, millions of conversations are happening behind closed doors every day in social media platforms around the world such as Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, LINE and WeChat. Between them, those platforms boast over 3 billion users.

One of the reasons Twitter has become the go-to reference point for journalists, not to mention communications and marketing specialists, is that its



data is publicly available. With over 330 million active users, it allows organizations to gain an immediate sense of what is happening as it unfolds in Twitter’s major markets like the

US, UK or the UAE. What’s being said on Twitter, however, pales in comparison to what goes on in those closed platforms. Some estimates suggest that 80 percent of all social

conversation is inaccessible. With access to that data, would it have been possible to predict Brexit or the outcome of the US elections?

And in today’s digital world outside of social media, there’s a lot more additional data available from the apps, websites, digital tools and services already available to organizations.

But is more data really the answer? The truth is, data is not synonymous with insight or actionable intelligence. Either of those require going beyond the numbers. And that means putting the effort into compiling a complete picture of what stakeholders think and what they are feeling, not just doing.

The way to achieve that insight is by combining and utilizing the strengths of different sources and data collection methodologies – be it news media, devices, focus groups, surveys or interviews.

It’s the only real way to shine a light in a dark data world. ♦

Jonny Stark, a Brunswick Partner, leads the firm’s digital offering in Asia.

Piercing the VEIL

The business need for seers has never been greater, says Brunswick’s Rob Webb.

MADAME SOSOSTRIS, FAMOUS clairvoyante, had a bad cold, nevertheless is known to be the wisest woman in Europe, with a wicked pack of cards” – at least according to T.S. Eliot in *The Wasteland*. Madame represents the always dark fascination and respect given to fortune tellers by audiences full of apprehension for the future.

Today’s clairvoyants face more skepticism, yet the job remains a mainstream activity – for corporations perhaps even more than individuals.

“Hold to the now, the here, through which all future plunges to the past” is the contrary advice James Joyce counsels in *Ulysses*. But that’s not enough for the

modern company board. They need to know what happens next.

Some predictions are easy: the sunrise, old age, the need to pay taxes. Others, less so: the warming of the oceans, the rising of the Chinese middle class. Yet another group, still more uncertain, belongs to the futurists.

The agricultural revolution yielded to the rise of the industrial revolution, which gave way to the rise of the bureaucrats and the birth of the modern city; these now in turn are giving way to the data scientists. Bill Gates advised us not to be rude to nerds, because we will end up working for one; he was and remains prescient.

The companies that survive are those that not only predict the future with accuracy, but also have the courage and resources to back their predictions. Richard Branson and the hyperloop or Elon Musk on electric cars are well-known examples. Every entrepreneur and workaday CEO now needs perspective on what their market and customer base will look like

in a few years’ time. For the airline industry, my own heartland, CEOs must take a view about what the next aircraft will be, and whether “small and frequent” beats “big and occasional.” For the food industry, what is the future for sugar? Salt? Lettuce? To what question did vaping turn out to be the answer?

The past is a well from which we draw future strength. The present, always with us,

is not enough. The future can no longer be the preserve of boffins, academics or research departments. To be sure of survival, accurate prediction and the courage to implement are now necessary items in the toolkit of any modern board.

A wrong bet can lead to a setback. No bet at all can lead to extinction. ♦

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