

The “Big Data” Myth and the Pitfalls of “Thick Data” Opportunism: On the Need for a Different Ontology of Markets and Consumption

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ABSTRACT

The twin pillars of big data and data analytics are rapidly transforming the institutional conditions that situate marketing research. In response, many proponents of culturalist paradigms have adopted the vernacular of “thick data” to defend their perpetually vulnerable position in the marketing field. However, thick data proselytizing fails to challenge outmoded ontological assumptions about consumers and their marketplace relationships that are manifest in the big data myth and ultimately, it situates socio-cultural modes of marketing thought in a technocratic discourse that further exacerbates their precarious institutional status. After discussing the relevant historical continuities and discontinuities that have shaped both the big data myth and thick data opportunism, I argue that culturally-oriented marketing researchers, whether in the academic or applied sectors, should promote a different ontological frame that addresses how big data, or more accurately its socio-technical infrastructure, produces new kinds of emergent and hybrid market structures, consumption practices, modes of social aggregation (and disaggregation), and presumptive capacities. Toward this end, I propose that the analytics of market assemblages, which draws inspiration from Foucault’s analytics of power, offers a more ontologically and ideologically viable discursive counterpoint to the big data myth.

Our dean is pushing all the chips behind data analytics,” says Eric Bradlow, faculty director and co-founder of Wharton’s Customer Analytics Initiative. “We have chosen to make it one of our pillars. And our dean has not taken the shortest path to the dollar but one that is consistent with our brand in the long-term.... There has been a miraculous amount of innovation,” he [Bradlow] says. “Faculty members are coming up with new courses. The courses come in healthcare, finance, marketing. All of those departments have created and submitted courses for the majors. No department wants to be left behind.... Everyone wants part of the analytics pie. Everyone wants to be part of this big massive train that is leaving the station” [quoted in Byrne 2018].

Big data is a direct consequence of the digitization of consumer culture. Consumers’ social media posts, web browsing and on-line shopping histories, smart phone apps, fit bit self-monitoring, GPS tracking, video and music streaming services and “smart home” devices, such as Alexa, all create a dispersed digital record that can be aggregated, searched, and cross-referenced (Deighton 2018). In contemporary marketing and business school discourse, big data, coupled with data analytic methodologies, is portrayed as a technological holy grail that will enable managers to accurately forecast consumer demands, maximize website traffic, improve customer service provision, heighten customer value, and increase supply chain efficiencies, market share, sales, and profitability (Columbus 2016; Dawar 2016).

Big data has three defining characteristics: 1) massive and geometrically expanding volume—for example, it is estimated that by 2020, the total amount of available digital information will be over 50 zettabytes which compares to the 2015 level of 4.4 zettabytes; 2) velocity which refers to the capacity to track consumer purchases, actions, movements in real time; and 3) variety whereby any digital activity can function as a source of storable and analyzable data (Kitchin and McArdle 2016). This heterogeneous data also includes posted pictures, videos, comments on social media forums, along with pre-Web 2.0 inputs like scanner data, credit records, and census reports (see McAfee et al. 2012). To derive useful information from this massive, rapidly changing, and heterogeneous digital amalgam, companies have

become reliant upon increasingly complex data management systems, statistical techniques, analytics packages (e.g., the Hadoop distributed file system, RStudio), machine learning algorithms, and A.I. programs (Deighton 2018; Kietzmann, Paschen, and Treen 2016).

More than just a decision making tool, big data and its concomitant techniques and technologies of quantitative analysis are inscribed in a mythic belief that “large data sets offer a higher form of intelligence and knowledge that can generate insights that were previously impossible, [conveying] an aura of truth, objectivity, and accuracy” (boyd and Crawford 2012, 663). The big data myth promises that marketing management can attain comprehensive, continuously updated, and risk minimizing information about the competitive marketplace and that public policy makers will similarly be able to create data-driven behavioral nudges to redress a broad spectrum of societal problems (see Hugill 2017 on the U.K.’s Behavioral Insight Team). From this mythologized perspective, big data allows for more detailed, accurate, real-time tracking and behavioral management of the targeted consumer-citizen.

Focusing on legal and political risks, Richards and King (2013) warn that big data, if not sufficiently regulated to protect privacy and transparency of use, will allow governments and corporations to erode individual rights and undermine democracy—a quite prescient warning in light of the extensive news media coverage given to Cambridge Analytica’s big data-driven, social media micro-targeting of voters in the United Kingdom’s Brexit referendum and the 2016 United States’ Presidential election. Subsequently, social media and psychographic experts have called into question whether Cambridge Analytica’s data analytic machinations had any consequential impact on these electoral outcomes (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017) with some offering decidedly skeptical assessments; in the blunt words of tech entrepreneur and former

Facebook executive Antonio García Martínez, “What they’re doing is bullshit!” [Quoted in Allen and Abuzesse 2018].

While Cambridge Analytica’s mass profiling of Facebook users may, in the end, be exposed as little more than smoke and mirrors hype, breathless media reporting of its Machiavellian influence over a malleable voting public gave heightened cultural credence to the big data myth and likely enhanced its marketability. To again quote Antonio García Martínez (2018):

The public, with no small help from the media sniffing a great story, is ready to believe in the supernatural powers of a mostly unproven targeting strategy. What they don’t realize is what every ads practitioner, including no doubt Cambridge Analytica itself, knows subconsciously: in the ad world, just because a product doesn’t work doesn’t mean you can’t sell it. Before this most recent leak, and its subsequent ban on Facebook, Cambridge Analytica was quite happy to sell its purported skills, no matter how dubious they might really be.

On a precursory glance, marketing’s current infatuation with big data/data analytics seems to be a case of history repeating itself. From geodemographic segmentation systems to Bayesian analyses of scanner data, marketing has long fetishized quantitative methodologies. In the academic sphere, quantification is integral to marketing’s positivistic idealization of the scientific enterprise (Brown 1996). In the world of practice, marketing managers have been quick to ascribe panoptic power to quantitative measures, in hopes of targeting customers with scientific precision; optimizing their promotional efforts; and garnering increased market share, profitability, brand equity, and customer satisfaction ratings (Goss 1995, 1995a; Tadajewski 2006a, 2006b).

Yet, this latest incantation of the quantitative-methodology-as-magic-bullet myth has some noteworthy differences to its genealogical predecessors. First and foremost, the big data/data analytics turn extends well beyond the confines of marketing departments, as exemplified by the opening vignette regarding Wharton's school-wide analytics rebranding. A trinity of deans, donors, and corporate executives are privileging big data as a regime of truth (Foucault 1979) that should organize Business schools' academic research and teaching missions (Carter 2018). Rather than being another iteration in marketing's intellectual fashion cycle, the big data myth is reshaping the organizational conditions that govern the conduct of marketing research and it is institutionalizing a nexus of ideological and paradigmatic norms that significantly amplify the field's technocratic tendencies.

The twin pillars of big data and data analytics, in its increasingly variegated forms (e.g., descriptive analytics; predictive analytics, inquisitive analytics, prescriptive analytics, pre-emptive analytics) also have, with remarkable speed, transformed marketing departments, in terms of their desired faculty skill sets, curriculum design, and the selection criterion that guide faculty and student recruiting (Moules 2018), all of which serve to reshape and redirect departmental research agendas. For example, Amado et al. (2018) content analyzed 200 business journals and found that studies related to the topics of big data and marketing analytics doubled each year during the 2010 to 2015 time frame.

The big data myth also serves to discount the institutional value of theories and methodologies that have become integral to the Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) and critical marketing traditions, most notably anthropology, sociology, critical history, gender studies, and literary criticism (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Tadajewski and Brownlie 2008; Thompson, Arnould, and Giesler 2013). Facing this challenge, proponents of marketing's culturalist

paradigms have begun to espouse the vernacular of “thick data” as a means to buttress their perpetually vulnerable position in the marketing field or as Pablo Valero (2017) states the matter “Anthropologists, sociologists and social scientists of tomorrow must learn to defend what they know how to do and the added value that their studies can bring to companies and organizations.... Thick Data is a cover letter, a concept that we should commit to and popularize among all.”

My aim is to place this opportunistic “thick data” discourse under critical scrutiny and to show why it is a shortsighted and likely counterproductive institutional maneuver. In a nutshell, “thick data” opportunism reproduces the anachronistic ontological assumptions (and technocratic orientation) that are manifest in the big data myth. Accordingly, my argument is that culturally-oriented marketing researchers, whether in the applied or academic sectors, should promote a different discursive and ontological frame rather than seeking to pragmatically appropriate the big data myth.

A GENEALOGY OF THE BIG DATA MYTH

The Big Data myth harkens to an earlier era of post-WWII consumer capitalism (Cohen 2003) when households were suddenly inundated—after a long period of material deprivation—with a flood of new consumer goods, rapidly rising levels of disposable income, increased access to credit, and last but not least, televised lifestyle representations designed to stoke nascent middle-class aspirations. Reflecting its status as the dominant post-WWII economy, the United States became ground zero for the emergence of contemporary consumer culture (Cohen 2003; Cross 2000) and the grand laboratory of scientific marketing (Holt 2002). During this period, individuals remained uncertain in their newfound role as consumer-citizens and looked to

marketers as authoritative guides for making the right choices about their make of car, fashion styles, brand of beer, home décor, home appliances, and myriad other material accoutrements needed for a proper middle-class lifestyle (Cross 2000; Holt 2002).

This relatively short-lived phase of post-WWI consumerism marked the apotheosis of scientific marketing, as broad swaths of consumers mobilized around a conformity-inducing vision of the American Dream, further galvanized by Cold War tensions and atomic age anxieties (Sivulka 1998). By the 1960's, marketing's autocratic influence began to wane. Most notably, an experience-oriented youth culture rebelled against their parents' suburban conformity and marketing's endless promotion of stylistic obsolescence and materialist portrayals of the good life. Culturally astute advertising and marketing executives recognized the baby boomers' generational ethos of creative self-expressiveness, experience seeking, and identity experimentation as a potent new consumerist logic (Frank 1997). Also, facing a growing societal backlash for the manipulative agenda of the scientific marketing era (e.g., Packard 1957; see Tadajewski 2006b), marketers had additional political incentive to redefine themselves as supportive allies in consumers' identity projects (Holt 2002). In the ensuing decades, advertisements steadily became a panorama of aspirational lifestyles, displacing a promotional legion of lab-coated authority figures extolling the normative virtues of laundry whitening detergents, breath freshening mouthwashes, maternal-guilt placating cake mixes, and masculinity bolstering cigarettes.

By the 1990's, the consumer marketplace fragmented into a panoply of identity projects. Postmodern consumers could now live as identity bricoleurs who deployed a diversified portfolio of signifying goods and iconic brands (Thompson 2000). Now familiar terms like consumer value co-creation (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2004) began to enter into the marketing lexicon, as

marketers strategically adapted to their diminishing control over consumers' marketplace actions and choices. Nonetheless, the balance of power remain strongly tilted in the direction of corporate capital and its marketing agents. Despite the emancipatory rhetoric that often accompanied academic discussions of co-creative consumers (Firat and Venkatesh 1995), their influence on market structures remained quite limited. More often than not, consumer co-creation equated to acts of unpaid labor that forged quasi-customized brand relationships (Denegri-Knott, Zwick, and Schroeder 2006; Zwick, Bonsu, and Darmody 2008).

However, the technological innovations that underlie the production of big data have had a substantial empowering effect on consumers' co-creative capacities. Studies of platform capitalism, as exemplified by Uber, AirBnB, and TaskRabbit (Srniczek 2017; Peren and Kozinets 2018), hybrid economies (Scaraboto 2015), and emergent markets (Martin and Schouten 2014; Weijo, Martin, and Arnould 2018) demonstrate that socially mediated, collective actions can create new market structures and dramatically transform existing ones (also see Dolbec and Fischer 2015; Scaraboto and Fischer 2015, 2016). Web 2.0 has also given rise to unorthodox uses of brands and brand meanings that are not captured by entrenched concepts of brand loyalty, consumer-brand relationships, or brand communities. For example, Arvidsson and Caliandro (2015) have analyzed how the “#” social mediation device enables consumers to treat high-profile brands as resources for building their own social media following. Thus, “#LouisVuitton” may suddenly start trending on social media but that spike may only indicate that the brand name has temporarily become a useful aggregation device for a brand public that otherwise has no intrinsic interest or emotional connection to the brand, much less purchase intent.

Studies of brand publics (Arvidsson and Caliandro 2015), crowd culture (Holt 2016), convergence culture (Jenkins 2007), and networked consumers (Kozinets et al. 2010) all

exemplify that social media and other digital resources function as recursive forces that have changed the very nature of markets, consumption practices, and modalities of collective action. These rhizomatic networks have created new capacities for reconstructing brand meanings, contesting and subverting marketing strategies, instigating new consumption practices and rituals, and circumventing conventional monetary and banking systems (Denegri Knott and Molesworth 2010; Dymek 2017; Kozinets, Patterson, and Ashman 2016; Figueiredo and Scaraboto 2017; Humayun and Belk 2016; Scaraboto 2015; Schor and Fitzmaurice 2017; Thompson and Schor 2014; Seregina and Weijo 2016; Swan 2015; Weijo, Martin, and Arnould 2018). Whether couched as prosumption (Cova and Cova 2012), produsage (Burns 2008), participatory web cultures (Beer and Burrows 2010) or networked consumers (Kozinets et al. 2010) the 21st century marketplace is a province of proactive, decentered, contextually contingent, and less manageable modes of consumer performativity. As Web 3.0 looms on the techno-horizon (with blockchain and cryptocurrencies being the leading harbingers), these socio-technically distributed, market-transforming capacities will only proliferate.

A methodologically-oriented variation on this idea is offered by Lugosi and Quinton (2018) who propose that netnographic studies of consumers' on-line activities tend to be overly human-centric and, thereby, fail to sufficiently account for the performative capacities of non-human actants. To redress this shortcoming, they propose a "more-than-human netnography" that would investigate the "processes and practices through which human and non-human actors are brought together and deployed in networks of relations that subsequently create effects and outcomes" (Lugosi and Quinton 2018). Such an orientation would also necessitate close attention to the ways in which software and hardware design features enroll human actants in certain kinds of collectively shared actions and routines rather than others. For example, personalized web-

search algorithms are not just reflections of consumers' search histories (and their latent interests and preferences). Rather, they exert a performative influence on what information a given consumer receives and how it is utilized and the ensuing search patterns that are constituted through these mediated interactions. Much like wearable self-monitoring technologies, personalized search algorithms enact new forms of surveillance and create "digital doppelgängers" (see Bode and Kristensen 2016) that guide and transform the routines of human actants.

Rather than presenting an objective, statistical portrait of consumers who happen to use social media and other digital technologies, big data are residual markers of reticulated market assemblages (Arsel 2016; Bettany et al. 2014; Cluley and Brown 2015; Epp, Schau, and Price 2014; Lugosi and Quinton 2018; Parmentier and Fischer 2015; Scaraboto and Fischer 2016). Seen in this ontological light, (big) data analytics abstracts these presumptive capacities—which transcend subject-object dualities—from their contextualizing figurations and reinterprets them in relation to a late 20th century model of the self-possessed, *sovereign consumer* (see Denegri Knott, Zwick, and Schroeder 2006; Holt 2002).

The paradox of the big data myth is that it reinforces marketing's commitment to this anachronistic ontology while simultaneously making the field less receptive to theoretical perspectives and research orientations that are better suited to analyzing the radical reconfigurations of market structures, consumption practices and consumer identities that are being constituted in the age of digitized, platform capitalism (Karababa and Scaraboto 2018; Srnicek 2017). The big data myth, however, directs marketers' attention away from these sweeping structural complexities, suggesting instead that the socio-technical innovations that

produce these voluminous, heterogeneous interlinked databases do nothing more than leave a comprehensive digital ledger of real-time consumer behaviors and revealed preferences.

THE BIG DATA MYTH AS A GOVERNING DISCOURSE

Big data has proven to be quite useful for enhancing the efficiency of supply chains, optimizing the timing and placement of promotions, extending consumers' engagement with a given website (a key goal for on-line newspapers and information aggregation websites like *Huffington Post*), increasing customer retention rates, and improving customer service interactions. These big data success stories primarily correspond to tactical benefits rather than strategic innovations or breakthrough new products or services (Mela and Moorman 2018). Data analytics structurally predisposes firms to pursue increasingly marginal, technocratic gains, which inevitably succumb to the paradox of competition, whereby actions that benefit one (or a few) become nullified when many market actors pursue a similar course.

The big data myth ideologically re-frames this limitation as an incentive for companies to invest still more resources in better data analytic technologies and ever more skilled data analysts. From this mythologized viewpoint, marketing nirvana is always in the future and *your* company can attain an imperious, though not impervious, market advantage by discovering the revelatory data aggregation process or path breaking analytic technology that less savvy competitors currently lack. The inescapable fact that any technologically-driven competitive edge can be emulated (and hence tenuous) merely sparks an increased corporate demand for rapid, continuous innovation to stay ahead of the ever shifting data analytics curve; thus, the big data myth becomes a self-perpetuating governmental discourse (Foucault 2008).

By ordering administrative and social classifications, definitions of legitimate and illegitimate knowledge, expert claims, and institutional practices, governmental discourses are a means through which power relationships are enacted and codified in a given socio-cultural matrix (Foucault 1977, 1979, 2008). As business schools and marketing departments institutionalize the big data myth as a governmental regimen, they also privilege particular ideological and paradigmatic interests through a process Foucauldian scholars characterize as “strategies without strategists” (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983, 109)—that is, a set of structural relations among dominant and subordinate positions that are reproduced across institutional fields without any consciously planned, coordination among those in positions of power. Such systematic actions are, instead, treated as inevitable responses to exogenous conditions that operate independently of the social actors who are propagating these discursive regimes. In the parlance of the opening vignette, big data is a “train that is leaving the station” upon which Business schools and marketing departments had best be on board, lest they risk being left behind (and where the presumably dire consequences of such a Luddite fate can go without saying). Rather than being acknowledged as a network of governmental discourses and practices that serve some interests at the expense of others, big data is hypostatized as an objective reality that necessitates a delimited set of “rational” actions.

This Foucauldian dynamic is particularly evident in the enterprising efforts to reorient undergraduate and MBA curriculum toward big data skill sets. Owing to the hegemonic influence of the big data myth, the marketing field now places an institutional premium on those who have extensive training in some combination of statistics, computer sciences, econometrics, operation management, and information technologies. This “data scientist” profile creates numerous pedagogical path dependencies: new data analytics courses are added and existing

ones are modified to include analytic components. Consequently, hiring decisions naturally gravitate toward applicants who have data analytics expertise; additional resources are made available to those who positively contribute to a school's data analytics mission; student expectations, course offerings, learning objectives and evaluation criteria, credentialing standards, and designations of essential knowledge then become aligned with this pedagogical (and ideological) agenda; and these interdependent outcomes, in turn, reshape marketing departments' research cultures. These discrete organizational actions are all governed by a discursively constructed institutional "need" whose tacit ideological and/or paradigmatic affinities (and disaffinities) are naturalized as a form of doxa (see Bourdieu 1977).

This "strategy without strategists" confluence has two other noteworthy effects. It serves to intensify marketing's technocratic tendencies (see Brown 1996; Tadajewski 2006a; Schneider, and Woolgar 2012). Once aligned with a data analytics mission, marketing's legitimate sphere of concern is reduced to an instrumental logic that construes the consumer as an elusive target that can be brought under managerial control through the assiduous use of measurement and tracking technologies. In effect, the consumer is constructed as an epistemic object (Knorr-Cetina 2001; Zwick and Dholakia 2006) who can be fully comprehended, via the purchase of data bases and data analytic systems, by marketing managers, and then subsequently deployed as a source of competitive advantage.

In a related vein, Thatcher et al. (2016, 991) argue that big data is a means through which corporate power colonizes everyday life and magnifies power asymmetries "between the individuals whose actions generate individual datums and those who come to own and profit from the 'big data' they become." As they further discuss, the big data myth justifies the capitalist quest to commoditize formerly private facets of everyday life on the grounds that such

outcomes are the unavoidable consequence of technological progress. As marketing departments reiterate the big data myth and pursue its technocratic directives, their pedagogical goals and research agendas also become functionally aligned with the colonizing aims of corporate power. In this brave new big data-ified world, those interested in critical perspectives on corporate capitalism, the idolatry of economic growth, the commodification of social relationships, and or the ideological reduction of social and political life to monetizable streams of data need not apply.

THICK DATA: COMPLEMENTARITY OR INCORPORATION?

Looking outside the academy, the big data myth has significantly transformed the marketing research industry. For marketing practitioners whose skills sets are directed at generating cultural insights through market ethnographies (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994; Sunderland and Denny 2007) and other qualitatively based approaches (Denny and Sunderland 2014; Zaltman and Zaltman 2008), the big data myth presents a clear and present competitive threat. To meet this challenge, marketing researchers are now promoting the idea that companies need to supplement big data analytics with insights generated through “thick data” (Latzko-Toth et al. 2017): a neologism that pays homage to Geertz’s (1973) famed anthropological maxim of “thick description.”

In this spirit, corporate anthropologist Tricia Wang (2016) argues that thick data is needed because “what is measurable is not necessarily valuable.” Rekindling the classic quantitative versus qualitative distinction that has longed shaped the marketing field, Wang (2016) offers this comparative summary of the defining differences between big data and thick data:

| Thick Data | Big Data |
|---|--|
| Relies on human learning | Relies on machine learning |
| Reveals the social context of connections between data points | Reveals insights with a particular range of quantified data points |
| Accepts irreducible complexity | Isolates variables to identify patterns |
| Loses scales | Loses resolution |

Rather than an epistemological dichotomy, Wang proposes a complementary relationship in which “thick data” captures emotional, contextually nuanced, and emergent consumer phenomena that defy reduction to big data metrics. One of Wang’s (2016a) exemplary “thick data” stories recounts how Netflix’s management had been struggling to improve their customer recommendation algorithms. Their various big-data driven modifications had only generated marginal increases in customer usage of their streaming services. Per Wang’s heroic tale, Netflix commissioned a corporate anthropologist to garner in-depth, qualitative insights about their subscribers’ viewing behaviors. This culturally astute investigator unearthed the previously unrecognized consumption practice of binge watching. Once sensitized to this latent market opportunity, Netflix used data analytics to confirm that binge watching was indeed an exploitable trend and made subtle, but quite profitable, adjustments to their Customer Relation Management (CRM) system to facilitate (and one could argue encourage) binge watching.

Proponents of such thick data complementarity contend that it will enable companies to refine their analytic questions, better understand the cultural meanings that situate the consumer behaviors that are mirrored by big data, and discover nuanced (and profitable) differences among customer types. In the academic domain, proponents of cultural perspectives have invoked similar “thick data” rationales to argue that business education should include ethnographically oriented coursework so that managers will have the requisite tools for making better decisions in increasingly complex global business environments (Rokka and Sitz 2018) and become better

attuned to the “people with complicated lives, existing in rich cultural ecosystems” who stand behind big data’s quantitative summaries (Rassi 2017)

Long before the advent of the big data myth, however, marketing had privileged, quantitative, positivistic, and economically grounded research approaches over experiential, cultural, and generally qualitative paradigms (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Tadajewski 2006a). Seeking to advance a more pluralistic vision of marketing, proponents of alternative ways of knowing (Hudson and Ozanne 1988) have countered that cultural-qualitative approaches can provide an otherwise missing socio-cultural depth to quantitative representations of consumers and their lifestyles (Sunderland and Denny 2007). Thick data is a contemporary re-articulation of these prior initiatives to legitimate cultural-qualitative research in a field dominated by adherents of econometric-quantitative methodologies (e.g., Hirschman and Holbrook 1982; Holbrook and Hirschman 1982).

While prior incantations of this legitimating narrative have had some success in broadening the paradigmatic boundaries of the marketing field, proponents of “thick data” are, rather ironically, ignoring that the big data myth is qualitatively different from its quantitative *über alles*, marketing science predecessors. Marketing’s prior valorizations of quantitative methodologies invoked a positivistic idealization of the scientific enterprise, coupled with a corresponding goal of distancing the field from its associations with art (in the sense of a craft or an enactment of creative intuitions) (see Brown 1996). While big data/data analytics also draws from this logical empiricist legacy, it gains additional rhetorical (and ideological) power by leveraging technotopian discourses (Davis 1998; Kozinets 2008; Thompson 2004).

When confronted by thick data success stories, such as Wang’s (2017a) Netflix tale from the field, technotopian motifs present a rationale for negating claims that qualitative insights are

necessary complements to big data analytics. From this ideological standpoint, any problem can and will be solved by the steady march of technological progress, including limitations of prevailing technologies—as in Moore’s Law. Accordingly, big data’s qualitative knowledge gaps can be reframed as temporary barriers that will be vanquished by improvements in real-time data sourcing, data aggregation techniques, more responsive machine learning algorithms, expanded computational power, more sophisticated AI systems, and better skilled data analysts (Sivarajah et al. 2016). Rather than investing resources in one-off studies undertaken by corporate anthropologists (or devoting a faculty line to someone with a culturally oriented skill set), big data technotopians can assert that pronounced competitive advantages await those who are willing to fully commit their resources to ongoing data analytic enhancements and upgrades.

Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) argue that the robustness of capitalism derives, in large part, from its protean ability to reorganize itself in ways that subsume, and thereby disarm, the criticisms of its value-exploiting order. As a logic of capitalist accumulation, the big data myth also exhibits this appropriative power to incorporate ideological challenges into its hegemonic ordering, including thick data opportunism.

The Ideological and Ontological Pitfalls of Thick Data

Marketing’s methodological and paradigmatic predilections are never ideologically neutral. The discipline’s original turn to logical empiricist methodologies—and its attendant marginalization of the “softer” qualitative approaches that had gained traction in the field, such as motivation research—was grounded in a markedly pro-capitalist ideology that arose from Cold War politics (see Tadajewski 2006a). Marketing—like business education at large—became an ideological means to assert the superiority of free market capitalism over its

Communist foe. This socio-political ethos also engendered an antipathy toward radical (critical) thought and an instrumental-materialist vision of social progress. Marketing research that drew from sociological theory and Continental intellectual traditions—thereby invoking associations to Socialist and Marxian world-views—became disciplinary casualties of this Cold War ordering of marketing thought (Tadajewski 2006a, 2006b).

Some twenty-five years later, marketing's philosophy of science debates sparked a series of disciplinary shifts that eventually led to not only a greater acceptance of humanistic research methodologies (Hirschman 1986; Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry 1988) but also a created an institutional space (albeit a circumscribed one) for critical analyses of the capitalist marketplace and its consumerist, neoliberalizing interpellations (Giesler and Veresiu 2014; Murray and Ozanne 1991; Tadajewski 2010; Varman, Skålén, and Belk 2012; Yngfalk 2016). These critical perspectives have inspired myriad studies addressing the social conflicts and power-resistance struggles that are enacted through the marketplace (Crockett 2017; Karababa and Ger 2011; Peñaloza and Barnhart 2011; Ulver-Sneistrup, Askegaard, and Kristensen 2011; Üstüner and Holt 2007, 2010; Üstüner and Thompson 2012).

Fast forwarding to the present day, innumerable institutional changes are being made to more fully align the marketing discipline with the pro-corporate, neoliberal ethos codified in the big data myth. In response, academic marketers have opportunistically argued that “thick data” is the necessary complement to big data and therefore, has a pivotal role to play in business school's data analytic-oriented missions. As a consequence, however, the ideological frame of the big data myth becomes the governing structure for these instrumental applications of cultural analyses. The legitimate scope of marketing is, therefore, construed in a manner isomorphic with managerial interests whereas critical reflections on the broader societal and ecological

ramifications of marketing activities (see Tadajewski and Brownlie 2008) are cast to the ideological wayside.

As an ontological formulation, the big data myth assumes that digital technologies allow consumers' actions, choices, and preferences to be more effectively tracked and strategically managed while changing little else about their ontological status. Social media posts and reactions are deemed to merely be a different medium for consumers to express and share their extant preferences and affinities and to enjoy more efficient and convenient marketplace exchanges. The "thick data" counter narrative rebukes this data analytic reductionism by demonstrating that consumers' motivations and lifestyle goals are multifaceted and culturally shaped, echoing earlier experiential arguments that marketing's received view of consumers as rational decision makers problematically ignored the emotional and hedonic aspects of consumption behavior (Hirschman and Holbrook 1982; Holbrook and Hirschman 1982).

Yet, these "thick data" justifications stop well short of suggesting that the very nature of consumption and consumer identities are being transformed by their embeddedness in complex market assemblages. For example, social media present entirely new ways of performing the role of the consumer, or more accurately prosumer, as in the case of selfies, which engender new forms of scopic pleasure, socio-political self-expression, and tactical transgressions of public-private boundaries (Murray 2015; Rokka and Canniford 2016). The selfie also allows for easily circulated, radical retextualizations of cultural symbols, including brands, and position particular performances of self in a network of relations that collectively can assert transformative effects on markets (see for example, Dolbec and Fischer 2015; Scaraboto and Fischer 2015). As Kozinets et al. (2017) discuss, social media networks also function to create, enact, and amplify consumer desires and to generate consumer assemblages akin to Deleuze and Guattari's (1987)

“bodies without organs”: that is, heterogeneous arrangements of components and capacities that are not anchored to any holistic organizing principle or inherent unifying structure.

From a market assemblage standpoint, big data are the digital traces of consumers’ mobilizing (and simultaneously being mobilized by) a network of market-mediated actants and these territorialized figurations need not extend beyond the particular network of relationships in which they are assembled (Clulely and Brown 2015). As Woermann and Rokkas (2015) have shown, even something as seemingly fundamental as consumers’ experiences of time are constituted as different flow relations among an assemblage of socio-technical resources, material conditions, collectively shared rules and norms, teleoaffective structures, and presumptive capacities all of which operate in various states of alignment and misalignments—the latter of which necessitate compensatory and restabilizing strategies among actants in the figuration (also see Canniford and Shankar 2013; Epp and Velagaleti 2014).

These implications follow directly from the flat ontology proposition that agency is distributed across assemblages of socio-technological systems, material, discursive, and symbolic actants, and human actors, all of whom are enrolled in contingent, recursive relationships (Bajde 2013; Bjerrisgaard, Kjeldgaard, and Bengtsson 2013; Clulely and Brown 2015; Lugosi and Quinton 2018). This flat (market) ontology further implies that, once a marketing strategy is implemented, it is rapidly transformed, reconfigured, repurposed, to varying degrees, by these situating webs of connections (Holt 2016). While dynamism, accelerated pace of change, and socio-cultural volatility have been oft noted features of postmodern consumer culture (Bauman 2007; Brown 1995; Goldman and Papson 1996; McCracken 1986), digital and social media technologies have greatly amplified these recursive

effects (Dholakia and Reyes 2018; Dymek 2017; Denegri Knott and Molesworth 2010; Holt 2016).

(ONTOLOGICALLY) FLATTENING THICK DATA

“Thick data” may indeed offer some pragmatic benefits in the short term (a consulting job here; a faculty position there). Less favorably, it perpetuates, rather than contests, an ideological structuring of the marketing field which is disadvantageous to CCT, critical marketing, and the longer term market viability of corporate ethnography. Thick data justifications wed its advocates and practitioners to an outmoded ontological conception of the sovereign consumer and subtly reinforces their subordinate institutional position. Thick data opportunism also acquiesces to a technocratic and neoliberal definition of legitimate marketing inquiry, thereby, devaluing critical inquiries that assert societal and ecological interests over managerial ones.

To avoid being complicit in this hegemonic ordering, culturally-oriented researchers should instead advocate for cutting edge (and far more relevant) conceptions of emergent and hybrid markets, consumption assemblages, and consumer identities as a practices that are distributed across socio-technical networks. Actor-network and assemblage theories can readily address these complex transformations and reconfigurations of the marketplace, consumption practices, and consumer identities (Canniford and Bajde 2016). Central to their respective flat ontologies is the idea that the various quarters of consumer culture, market systems, and consumer identities are constituted by always fluid arrangements among heterogeneous actants, ranging from material conditions and objects, discourses, teleoaffective structures (i.e. socially shared goals, embodied knowledge, and emotional responses that are linked to specific

practices), a broad spectrum of environmental events (e.g., snowboarding assemblages are highly dependent on favorable meteorological conditions), and social actors who exist in a recursive relationship to the presumptive capacities afforded by the heterogeneous elements in an assemblage, including their own embodied forms of human capital (Arsel and Bean 2013; Woermann and Rokkas 2015).

When conducting such analyses, no a priori assumptions are made that any one actant (such as the vaunted consumer) in an assemblage is more influential or central to the arrangement than any other. Rather, the goal is to document the shifting relations of interdependency and relative influence that arise among heterogeneous actants across spatio-temporal events (Epp and Price 2010). While such fluid assemblages may function as a relatively stable (territorialized) entities for a given period of time, they always stand at risk of being destabilized by misalignments and betrayals (i.e. failures in the expected function of one element or more elements in the assemblage). Thus, assemblages exist as an ongoing process of recruitment, enrolment, mobilization, entanglements, betrayals, deterritorialization, reterritorialization (i.e. transplanting elements from one assemblage to another with requisite changes in their functions and effects), and translations through which new assemblages are (temporarily) stabilized (Canniford and Shankar 2013; Epp, Schau, and Price 2014; Giesler 2012).

CCT and critical marketing scholarship has been at the forefront of developing a decentered, networked conception of consumer identities, seeing them not as the expression of an internal essence (personality traits etc.) but as social enactments that arise in relation to a network of cultural meanings, practices, and socio-technical arrangements (for reviews see Arnould and Thompson 2019; Bajde and Canniford 2016; Mason, Kjellberg, and Hagberg 2015).

Building on this implication, this research tradition also places a significant emphasis on movements, flows, and mobilities (see Bardhi, Luedicke, and Sharifonnasabi 2018), whether in terms of immigrants and travelers or objects circulating across geographic and virtual spaces, with different forms of value being generated through these matriculations across spatio-temporal fields (Arsel 2016; Epp and Price 2010; Scaraboto and Figueiredo 2017). This networked, posthuman ontology (Bettany and Kerrane 2011; Haraway 2007) also readily allows marketing researchers to adopt an object-centered approach (Campbell and McHugh 2016) that is highly compatible with marketers' interest in products and the effects of design on consumption experiences. Such an object-centered approach is exemplified by Cochoy's (2008) analysis of how the introduction of the shopping cart reconfigured consumers' choice heuristics, in-store calculations of value, and evaluations of their household needs.

Rather than monitoring and/or deciphering the actions of the presumably sovereign consumer, object-centered marketing research would focus on how products, and their brand-mediated meanings, operate in the context of different assemblages; how their capacities and sources of value change in relation to other actants in these contextualizing figurations (including human actants); and how value is created through movement and translation across assemblages (c.f., Clulely and Brown 2015; Figueiredo and Scaraboto 2016; Scaraboto, and Figueiredo 2017). Such an approach has less intellectual kinship with thick description (Geertz 1973) than it does Mintz's (1985) critical commodity chain history of the sugar trade. This canonical study mapped out how these globalizing, commodity flows restructured agricultural and consumption practices (and consumer tastes and consumer bodies) and re-organized a panoply of colonial power relations, labor practices (and drove movements of human capital via the slave trade) and instigated shifting alliances and conflicts among economic, political, and military interests.

Flat Ontology and the Conduct of Critical Marketing

The flat ontology vernacular of ANT and assemblage theory can have the ideological effect of erasing enduring structural differences in access to resources that emanate from social class, gender, and racial hierarchies (Bettany 2016) and the reproduction of relations of dominance and subordination across time and space (e.g., Foucault 1979; Haraway 1997). Relatedly, flat ontologies can also elide the moral dimensions of consumption practices, such as norms of reciprocity and social debts that are engendered by gift exchanges (Marcoux 2009) or the morally charged symbolic boundaries that are created and contested through brand affiliations and consumption practices (Izberk-Bilgin 2012; Luedicke, Thompson, and Giesler 2010).

However, these limitations and elisions have more to do with the manner in which ANT and assemblage theories have been deployed in specific consumer research studies rather than being inherent to their flat ontologies (see Bajde 2013; Bettany 2016). In this spirit for example, Nail (2017) highlights that Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) influential theorization of *agencement*—commonly translated as assemblage though with a loss of some its original connotations—emphasizes that power relationships are imminent to all assemblages, manifesting a hybrid blending that draws from four political orders (i.e., the territorial, the statist, the capitalist, and the nomadic).

Similarly, marketing research can use assemblage and ANT perspectives to analyze shifting balances of relative domination and subordination/advantage and disadvantage that arise among a networks of actants. Such an analytic perspective avoids the conceptual trap of reifying power relationships or falling prey to a mechanical sense of reproduction, rather than a biological one which allows for the prospect that power relationships—including those steeped in structural

distinctions among class, gender, and racial positions—diversify and mutate through their variegated contextual interactions (Gane and Haraway 2006). Such an orientation is particularly well-suited to explicating comparative ensembles of presumptive capacities and socio-economic and cultural constraints that are constituted in different lifestyle assemblages and where social actors may enact a reactive tolerance toward some forms of domination, such as those grounded in gender norms, in return for others, such as those that afford particular forms of class privilege (Thompson, Henry, and Bardhi 2018).

The critical marketing literature offers numerous studies that have used flat ontological frameworks to analyze prosumers' enrollment and entanglement in digitized circuits of capital accumulation (Arvidsson 2004; Zwick and Denegri-Knott 2009). As discussed by Cluley and Brown (2015), these analyses tend to emphasize how consumers are territorialized in a matrix of disciplinary relations (the digital prison model) (e.g., Humphreys 2006) or the ways in which consumer identities are performed across data bases and social media sites and variously commodified through the orchestrated course of these socio-technical interactions. From this latter standpoint, consumers are translated into "dividuals" (Deleuze 1992)—data generating activity flows from which value can be extracted, ranging from credit card transactions; a comedy club visit socially shared through a Foursquare app; a restaurant meal documented in a Yelp rating; a dating preference codified by Tinder swipes; a personal interest profile generated through the aggregation of Instagram and Facebook likes, and so on. As these now routine examples also indicate, it is exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, to perform mainstream consumer subjectivities without the capacities afforded by these digitized networks and performative devices (e.g., the credit card, the smart phone app, social media platforms).

When reflecting on these critical marketing analyses, it is useful to recall that Deleuze and Guattari's (1986) foundational conception of *agencement* referred to an arrangement among heterogeneous entities that generate agentic capacities for action. Thus, assemblages are performative structures characterized by a distributed agency; one cannot pursue the agentic goal of taking an Uber to his/her Airbnb host without the enabling infrastructure of apps, GPS location tracking, cars, drivers, peer-to-peer housing networks, and quality monitoring systems. Whereas marketing management celebrates these arrangements as a broad assortment of value generating options that benefit sovereign consumers, critical marketing studies suggest that market assemblages modulate consumers, rendering them as profit-generating information flows (Zwick and Denegri Knott 2009).

While critical marketers may regard liberation from the capitalist system of value extraction as a definitive emancipatory goal, socially situated actors may experience the market as an escape route from other kinds of power relationships that impose unwanted socio-cultural and economic constraints or subject them to physical and symbolic violence (Crockett 2017; Scott et al. 2012). Rather than seeking to resist the capitalist market per se (as in Kozinets 2002), social actors can leverage their marketized identities (and associated resource networks) to challenge other constraints and sources of subordination that govern their lives, such as finding alternatives to alienating medical authorities (Thompson 2004), opportunity foreclosing gender norms (Martin, Schouten and McAlexander 2006; Thompson and Üstüner 2015), or domineering religious (total) institutions (McAlexander et al. 2014). In some cases, these market-mediated modes of resistance may be blocked by near insurmountable, structural barriers, creating a cascade of deleterious identity effects among socio-economically marginalized consumers who have been ideologically seduced by the (unattainable) allure of middle-class consumer culture

(Üstüner and Holt 2007; Vikas, Varman and Belk 2015). Such despondent outcomes constitute a profound form of market betrayal, albeit of a different variety than typically discussed in the critical marketing literature.

Flat ontologies can be seductive analytic tools that, much like structural analyses of kinship systems (Lévi-Strauss 1969), enable researchers to meticulously detail the socio-technical arrangements (i.e., structural relations) that enroll prosumers in marketing's regimes of surveillance and control (Denegri Knott and Zwick 2004) while narrowing their analytic vision to these imminent relations (and thereby, ignoring the transformative interactions, tensions, and compatibilities that arise *among* culturally proximate assemblages). While it would be an ontological error to analyze prosumers' agency and capacities as traits that exist independently of market assemblages, it is equally problematic to assume that their (distributed) agency is determined by these value-extracting arrangements. Market assemblages operate in contingent relations to other socio-cultural, political, religious, and familial assemblages, thereby, creating an extensive, multifaceted network of interactions, interdependencies, societal consequences, and modalities of power and resistance that cannot be reduced to a totalizing logic of capitalist control.

For example, social media has enabled new forms of social and political activism that protest and subvert marketing strategies in support of anti-capitalist, post-colonial causes (Izberk-Bilgin 2012; Varman and Belk 2009). Dholakia and Reyes (2018) address a disconcerting variation on this distributed political agency in their theorization of how social media, aided by a gamut of deregulations and new media marketing strategies, has incorporated user-generated violent content into their audience-aggregating, profit-generating circuits of produsage. This particular socio-technical assemblage has also created new pathways for inciting

violence in the material world by magnifying social, religious, and ethnic hostilities and mobilizing terrorist/hate groups, precipitating a cascade of political and societal responses.

To summarize, the recognition that contemporary capitalism is premised on a logic of exploiting prosumers' co-creative labor for profit should remain a guiding consideration for critical analyses of market assemblages. However, power relations are polyvalent and distributed across interconnected assemblages. Accordingly, studies of market assemblages should address the question of what socio-cultural effects—other than generating a heterogeneous portfolio of data that serve capitalist interests—ensue from these prosumerist enrollments in marketing assemblages and the diverse capacities they generate.

THE ANALYTICS OF MARKET ASSEMBLAGES

As a concluding gesture, let us critically assess “thick data” as a branding strategy. Proponents of this market positioning anticipate that “*thick* data,” will signify that cultural interpretation is crucial to the development of marketing insights. However, this *nom de guerre* circulates in a marketing field that epistemologically venerates the term “data”, in its brute empiricist sense. Consequently, thick data is more likely to connote a promise of better, more revelatory, “fly-on-the-wall” information, rather than generating demand for astute cultural researchers, much less analytic frameworks that provide a viable 21st ontology of consumer-marketplace assemblages and practices.

Although not the most elegant or pithy locution,¹ one alternative is the “analytics of market assemblages” which is an analogue to Michel Foucault’s analytics of power, whose logic

¹ Rhetorically, “cultural analytics” may be a more accessible and, hence, marketable alternative. In fact, I originally planned to entitle this essay “the cultural analytics manifesto.” Cultural analytics has semantic kinship with the now ubiquitous shibboleth of data analytics and draws attention to the process of interpretation, culturally-oriented sense-making frameworks, and the culturally contingent nature of marketing insights. On the downside, cultural analytics

he explained in this way: “Once one tries to erect a theory of power, one will always be obliged to view it as emerging at a given place and time and hence to deduce it, to reconstruct its genesis. But if power, is in reality, an open, more-of-less coordinated (in the event, no doubt ill-coordinated) cluster of relations, then the only problem is provide oneself with a grid of analysis which makes possible an analytic of relations of power” (Foucault 1980, 199).

Similarly, the analytics of marketing assemblages is not an extant theory that presumes consumer-market relations are structured by a discrete set of explanatory-predictive principles that apply across contexts. Rather, it is a heterogeneous ensemble of analytic frameworks, and their corresponding methods and techniques, which can be deployed to disentangle the webs of complexity posed by marketplace assemblages and their presumptive capacities, constraints, and betrayals. These analytic frameworks would include, among others, performative economics (Callon 2007), assemblage theory (DeLanda 2006; Deleuze and Guattari 1987), Actor Network Theory (LaTour 2005), practice theory (Schatzki 1996), critical gender studies (Haraway 1997), sociological analyses of spatial relations and mobilities (Sassen 2006; Urry 2016), and historical perspectives that explicate the genealogical connections and reconfigurations among the dispersed market actants (Collier 2009; Haraway 1994). More than just abstract theories, these frameworks can be implemented through an array of (trainable) conceptual and analytic tools that identify how particular actants become *enrolled* in specific market assemblages; how presumptive capacities are produced and *mobilized*; how assemblages are *territorialized* (stabilized), *de-territorialized* (destabilized) and *re-territorialized*; and the *process logics*

does not necessarily disrupt orthodox assumptions emanating from the humanistic, “deep meaning,” sovereign consumer legacy, unless accompanied by extensive elaboration on its flat ontology/dispersed agency orientation. The less elegant, but connotatively appropriate, moniker the “analytics of market assemblages” does offer the ironic benefit of having the same acronym as the American Marketing Association.

through which these arrangements produce a cascade of effects, interactions, interdependencies, and capacities across time and space.

A market assemblage can encompass the interrelations among a broad range of market actants (or relevant subset thereof), including marketplace resources (i.e., brands, services, goods), consumer positions (status seeking or thrift shoppers; brand enthusiasts; market mavens, etc.), marketing agents (sales associates, brand managers, customer service reps), socio-technical regimes (on-line shopping technologies, CRM systems, social media forums, etc.), cultural discourses, social relations and goals (care-extending family purchases, playful identity performances, gift giving norms). Market assemblages are also a scalable construct that can be used to analyze arrangements among actants at different levels of extension and scope, ranging from advertising assemblages (Bjerrisgaard, Kjeldgaard, and Bengtsson 2013), gift giving assemblages (Giesler 2006), brand assemblages (Giesler 2012; Lury 2009), consumer identity assemblages (Barnhart and Peñaloza 2013; Epp, Schau, and Price 2014; Seregina and Weijo 2016), consumer culture assemblages (Canniford and Shankar 2013); value-chain assemblages (Figueiredo and Scaraboto 2016) and still broader global market systems (Ertimur and Coskuner-Balli 2015).

In her argument for the unequivocal importance of “thick data” to the corporate world, Tricia Wang (2015) states “And that is why ethnographers are more needed now than ever. We play a critical role in keeping organizations human-centered in the era of Big Data.” However, human-centeredness, in either its technocratic (Big Data) or humanistic (Thick Data) forms, is the ontological quagmire from which the marketing field desperately needs to be extricated and the ground work for that escape has been laid by researchers in the CCT and critical marketing paradigms. The analytics of market assemblages constitutes a line of flight toward a much

needed and overdue ontological shift in the dominant theoretical and analytic vernaculars of marketing discourse and practice.

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