Never mind big data, what we need in media are data that speak the same language

Are big data driven measurement solutions as useful as they claim to be? By Sue Unerman, Chief Strategy Officer, MediaCom UK

Media research may be improving in accuracy in silos, but overall we are building the Tower of Babel.

According to the book of Genesis, the whole world once had a single language. And because they had a single language, they really began to get somewhere. The people of the the city of Babel said: "Come, let's make
bricks and bake them thoroughly." They used brick instead of stone, and tar instead of mortar. Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves". Now, unfortunately for the people of the world, the Lord didn't like what was going on. He is reported in Genesis as remarking: "If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other."

Since then the world has been pulled apart by language. There are over 7,000 in existence, although most people speak one of the 11 main languages. Translation has been big business for centuries because there has been international trade for centuries, and especially since the demise of Latin as the main language of the educated in the West. Although mechanical translation has existed for some time, it has always been regarded as second best by a long way.

Not now. Google Translate is making as sweeping a change to mass market and democratic international communications, just as Google Search did to libraries and e-commerce. It works in a completely different way from previous computer systems for translation; it doesn't just give you the literal translation for a phrase, it gives you the most likely translation given every other translated expression that sits anywhere on the world wide web.

In September 2009, the new White House administration issued the "Strategy for American Innovation" policy roadmap to address "The Grand Challenges of the 21st Century". One of those challenges was the development of "automatic, highly accurate and real-time translation between
the major languages of the world - greatly lowering the barriers to international commerce and collaboration". Google Translate is a revolutionary step forward in this challenge.

Meanwhile what's the state of our own media research translation? Our head of Business Science, Jane Christian, said recently that media measurement is still in silos and that this "is hampering its usefulness. Stakeholders for each comms channel are concentrating on how best to measure the effectiveness of their respective channels, given the techniques that big data and technology allow. The problem here is that each technique is different and not comparable with the others, so when marketers ask the question 'how should I allocate my budget across channels?', there isn't a clear answer. What we need is joined up media measurement across all channels. Without it, all these big data driven measurement solutions aren't as useful as they claim to be. Joined up media measurement will ensure we deploy our budget across channels most effectively."

As far as this is concerned we must ask ourselves whether we are sitting in the Tower of Babel, with little idea of how much exactly better things would be in terms of budget allocation and effectiveness if we had a lingua franca of media measurement.

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