

Keynotes in conversation

Mark Earls, Author of *Herd: How to Change Mass Behaviour by Harnessing Our True Nature*

Chaired by Simon Drysdale

Introduction

This session was a chance for delegates to ask questions of Mark Earls following on from his keynote presentation, and to make their own points in developing the topic. The key points are outlined below, with questions from the floor and Mark's responses reported as accurately as possible. [note from report writer: due to large amounts of background noise, some questions were slightly unclear, as were the names of those posing these questions. Apologies to delegates who took part in this session].

Rachel Escott from Audiences London: You know the comments about certain arts organisations are using say community representatives and agencies are using arts ambassadors models, and you commented that organisations tend to use them as [unclear on recording], what do you suggest might be an alternative way of exploring ...

Mark Earls: OK, right, so the question for those at the back is, I'd commented about some organisations, arts organisations included, who use individuals within communities as if you like staging posts, or ambassadors was your word, to have a conversation. And I said, critically, I think you're right, that we tend to use them as little mini broadcasts or relays of what we want to say. So I think the first place to start is silence and listening. Because there are conversations going on all the time, in every combination of human beings that exists in our populations, and we'd be better to start there. What are they interested in, what are there enthusiasms, and how can we serve their interaction with each other around those enthusiasms. Not what we want to tell them. Cos we've normally got a programme of stuff that we want to get out to them. I mean I just recently, I'm a long-term supporter of the Royal Shakespeare Company, and living in Camden, I was very excited about the RSC coming to the Roundhouse for the winter season, very good. And um, but I was bombarded with information, and the only piece of information that actually got me to get off my arse and do something about booking was a conversation about 'I'm not an RSC member, but I'm a member of the Roundhouse, and that opens on Monday'. So, it was other people doing stuff, not me. It's necessary but not sufficient to get the information out. So we need to set out what are they interested in, who are they connected with, who do they interact with in their world, and how do we serve that, how can we take advantage of that. So that's overall a kind of ... approach. It works from the other end from the way we're used to doing it.

Dave Jeffries: I guess what you're saying is that it's contagious. So, in other words, why aren't I thin, when a lot of other people I know are thin?

Mark Earls: That's two very different questions I think – what makes some ideas contagious? I think we're over enthused by the idea that there is some sort of alchemy into making sticky ideas. Most of the choices that face us in most of the aspects of our lives are pretty damn equal, frankly. I mean if you think about the automotive industry – when I first bought a car a few years ago it was a really good thing to get three years' warranty. Because they broke down. But apart from the recent problems that Toyota are having, cars don't break down. Equally, there's a huge choice of entertainment, including arts and stuff and most of it's pretty damn good, so how do you choose? So that's the problem from the individual audience member's perspective, and we know that in this world where there's a huge amount of choice, it's social influence that people defer to, social learning I should say, that people use to make that choice, which in itself means that it's really hard to predict. I mean look at the Susan Boyle thing, one example that I mentioned next door. There's nothing special about Susan Boyle, and I've talked to people from the label about her who are convinced that there's something special about her. And people in the US are convinced that there's something special about her, but there's nothing special about her, she just got lucky. And a lot of things that get successful aren't special, they're just lucky, they're not sticky in themselves. It's the people doing the stuff, not the thing doing stuff to people that's really important. So what we've got to do to take advantage of it is do what you would do if you were a gambler, place lots of bets. Have lots of chances to win, not just the one big thing. And I think there's an illusion that many things, that stickiness is, that we can make a thing that will make it safe to have just one bet, and people who create, and marketing services folk are no different, would much prefer to work in that way, and have just one thing to focus on, and see what happens. So, stickiness, don't worry about it. Far better to focus on the things that matter – what do they use, they use other people, get that mechanic to work in the between space. Don't worry about stickiness, really. It's not a very nice thought, we like to be ... Posters, posters do work, but what does it show, and where, and what size, should we have an event of some sort? Would that be different? Could we create a social object of some sort where people could interact with each other? What is it that they in their interactions need in order to make those interactions more successful? Can we provide them with a platform to talk to each other? And so, again, we're looking at their agenda not ours. Because it's the between space that they share the place we need to be in in order to take advantage of social networks.

Simon Drysdale, Chair, AMA: Can I just ask, one thing, can you give us an example perhaps, of something where they've placed lots of bets. Because there's a lot of people sat here I expect thinking well how many bets do I have to place, how many things do I have to do in order to get the return that it sounds like...

Mark Earls: You see at the moment, it's very unpopular in social policy, because ministers really don't want to say we don't know which of these things is going to work. What's the television commercial I can play to journalists that they'll get, and then I can show the research to show it works. There are in fact a lot of examples of experimentation in sexual health at the moment, in different ways of getting engagement, and that's because the Department of Health doesn't know what the answer is. And so can't have an over-arching strategy – it pretends to have an over-arching strategy, but it doesn't. There are lots of things happening at a local level, and that's one example, so you see, you see it in social policy more than the social policy creatives would like you to imagine. You also see it in software an awful lot, in the software industry. People here must have used Twitter, and things like that? So most of the things on Twitter were invented by the users. They didn't know it at the time that 'Retweet' or '@' were going to be taken up by the public, they just thought let's try that and see. We'll encourage people to do that, see if that works. And another thing, there's quite a lot of things about Twitter that fail. It's much easier, that kind of work, because it's a virtual thing, and if it's a virtual thing you think ... In our world, when you do something that's a marketing think, like a brochure or an event, that costs more, it's much more difficult to fail.

Simon Drysdale: I think that's going to be our challenge.

Jason, London Calling: You talked a lot there about trying to generate this interest and get people talking. Is there anything, are there tools you can use for more than one thing, or are these ideas particular to that event?

Mark Earls: There are things you can re-use. My friend John Wilsher came up with this metaphor a while back, we tend to think about marketing in terms of fireworks – create an event that's beautiful, they go up to the sky and everyone says wasn't that beautiful, wasn't the marketing successful. What we need to do is think more about bonfires, and how do we build an on-going conversation with the community. Now clearly, particularly with the news this morning on the front page of the *Guardian* [about art funding cuts] it's going to be harder and harder to resist the pressures of the short term, but where building a longer term conversation really helps, it's understanding that it's not just about this show, or that exhibition, or that experience. It's about continuing to serve that community in the long term, and that's the way that you get the social networks really working for you. Because anything you do in the short term is more likely to be picked up if there's a long-term engagement.

Jason, London Calling: Is that always going to be positive? I mean some things can turn around and be quite negative?

Mark Earls: No, absolutely, I mean I think that's....Look, my experience as someone who speaks and writes about marketing, not everyone's going to like what you do, and as soon as you open your mouth in public, you're going to get

people who don't like it. And that's fine, you just have to, you know, get over it. I mean I've been to a few conferences in the last few years where the Twitter stream is right behind me, and that's scary, but it's always going to be there. So you as an individual, or you as an organisation, just has to accept that it's there and get on with it. Because in the end the real interest that people have is not with the thing that you've got to promote, but with each other, and so therefore they do all kinds of weird shit. Just because they're showing off to each other, or they're angry with each other, or ... and your thing, and you will get dragged into that. And that's the reality that we've all existed with since we were kids and we like to pretend it's not, but that's the reality.

Julie Tait, Culture Sparks: I was just interested to hear how organizations will change the way they're going to do business in the light of what you've been saying?

Mark Earls: I think the most obvious is that the fuzzy membrane between the inside and the outside of companies is just going to become more and more visible, especially in marketing. I mean the idea that they're on the outside and we're on the inside doing marketing to them is....

Julie Tait: Where there are small organisations where there's a sense that everyone's round the table, that's fine, but what about large organisations where there are 50, 60 people, what needs to change there, in the way we work, in order to make ourselves ready for being able to do this?

Mark Earls: I think the first thing is to get really good at listening to what's going on outside. I mean there are lots of tools that are largely free, that you can get to help you find out about what people are talking about. I mean do you have Google searches set up, for all the things that you think people are interested in? How often do you look at them? How often do you review them? What are the conversations going on in the community you're talking about? What are the excitements? Here's a thing, I did some work with Ikea last year, and they set their store managers, around Europe, a really simple task, which is to understand the communities around there, so there are three things, aspects to that. One of the things, you must understand their lives. Second, is that it's a community, and third that you serve the community. I mean we say that in the arts often, that we serve the community, but do we really serve the community or do we pump our stuff at them. Question. Most arts organisations who talk about serving don't really. If it's only their agenda, what they need, how can we help them survive, rather than force our agenda on them.

Julie Tait: I suppose my question's about where are these conversations going to take place?

Mark Earls: They take place in all kinds of places. Clearly, digital media allows us to catch up on a lot of stuff. It's only 5 years since Facebook started.

Julie Tait: I suppose it's like within an organisation, a lot of them are quite traditional in the way that they're organised, and they might be hierarchical, so how would that change?

Mark Earls: There's a great book that a Canadian friend of mine wrote, called *Chief Culture Officer*, which I think begins to give a clue as to how we might open up the organisation to the outside world. What he says is just like you have a chief executive officer and a chief financial officer and a chief marketing officer, so you need to have a chief cultural officer who's engaged with the outside world. Who understands the communities you're communicating with and what matters to them, what interests them, what threats there are. So, constantly scanning the world out there and bringing that back in to the senior level. Because unless you have stuff at the senior level, then it's not really going to impact on the organisation's big decisions.

Julie Tait: Although people at the senior level in their personal lives as opposed to their corporate lives are doing the same thing as we all are doing.

Mark Earls: But if you make it impossible to ignore the communities, by bringing them in, by having someone at the senior level who talks to them about what's going on, and it becomes one of the important sources of information for important company discussions. There's one company I know that's a creative agency, and in their boardroom one wall is a constantly shifting, dynamic, map of British culture, with references, and it's impossible for the company to ignore. So, you know, what television programmes people are excited about, what the stories in the press are, what people are talking about online, the latest thing in the playground. Just to get a constant feel of what's going on. So that's one way to physically bring it into the organisation, it takes time and commitment, and in the current environment it's hard, but unless we do that stuff we're going to shrink back on ourselves and if marketing's going to be about anything, it's going to be about the people out there. If you're interested in the history of marketing, in 1960 in the *Journal of Marketing* a guy called Robert Keith, who was then Executive Vice President of Marketing at the Pillsbury Dough Company, wrote this quite serious call to arms for the marketing world at the time, and he said the marketing revolution will be achieved when all operations of the organisation are orientated around the people who buy and use the products. It's not changed, right? Marketing is not about operations, it's not about the tactics, it's about the people out there. The gloss that I'm adding to it essentially is that people live with people, we're not isolated individuals, so it's marketing squared if you like. And that's what I would encourage you to do.

Andy Ryans, The Halle: How do you reconcile the organisations who have been told for years to lead not follow, who have developed the 'quality is king' ethos, and that not all products will necessarily have a match with the tunes that people are singing, even though they'd quite like to, where is the way that the

organisation who is hearing those messages, and who will risk losing quality and innovation and finding new ways of doing things?

Mark Earls: Very good point. One of the worst things that the last generation of marketing has done to our practice is to ask consumers what they want. Mostly, we don't know what we want, and we can't know what we want because of the way our minds are shaped. So let's not be lead by the nose in that sense but that doesn't mean that we don't need to orientate ourselves towards the people that are out there. One of the KPIs that I've put in place recently with one of my clients is to get them to see how – and we used the metaphor of The Force, from Star Wars – how can you create a disturbance in the force. Can you create it so that they can get up and do something with it? That's a way of aligning your own commitment to what you believe is important to them. But success is not with individuals, but lots of people interacting with things that you've made. But we've got to stop thinking that organisations can be cookie cutter, or created from a template. Organisations have been created for themselves, for their shareholders, and their customers, by believing in stuff, by very idiosyncratic shared believes. Even if you work, and with the Halle, there are organisations that appear to be in the same part of the arts world, but that are very different, who are different from what you are, and that difference is very important. Who you are as a group of people, that is going to shape how you engage with the audience. There's no simple answer. The way to do it, is one to recognise the way they are interacting with each other, and the other is to be true to yourself.

Richard Langley, Hall for Cornwall: We're very conscious of the fact we get shows in for perhaps one night, and it's not always a big name, how do you create a pull around a one-night show that doesn't maybe have a big name, it may be a local production, how do you create that momentum.

Mark Earls: One, if it really is a local production, is to create a thing around it, an interaction with the community. If they liked this last thing, then they'll like this. That's not always easy, but if it is a show that's transferred from somewhere else, then you can use the conversations that are happening around it elsewhere. We use this a lot in creative and entertainment marketing, don't we, use reviews that have been created elsewhere? So that's a way to think about it. One of the things, and I know he was a terrible old showman, but P.T. Barnum was great at helping people see other people's excitement. And it's a bit like Orwell's view of marketing, that it was the swill bucket, but I think it's still very, very powerful. And one of the things, I don't know if you've noticed in recent years, but in the broadcast TV world, very few long-running series are created in the UK. Part of the reason is that it's expensive, and it's easier to buy things from the US that have already been successful. So we have a lot of things that are four episodes, but you can't build an audience if it's once a fortnight. And you can't build an audience if it's unlike anything they've ever come across before, it has to talk to them in the language that they're already using.

Faye, Morris Hargreaves McIntyre: Isn't that where your brand has to come in, so that you're building up a relationship with the organisation?

Mark Earls: One of the things that arts organisations have done over the past few years is to bring the supporter base together, not just with each other, but around the brand if you like, but again, that's people being people, not the brand being the primary thing, but it's going in the right direction.

Jo Davies, Freelancer: Is the way we present things, you know, theatres herding people in at 7.30pm and herding them out again a couple of hours later, is that going to have to change?

Mark Earls: Yes.

Jo Davies: OK, there we are.

Mark Earls: Here's where TV is a good indicator of our popular culture. 50% of our popular shows are time-shifted. People expect to see what they want to see when they want to see it, with the people they want to see it with, not when you want to provide it. We have to therefore find different ways and different platforms, and it can't just be when we think it's suitable. There are lots of experiments around late openings in museums, for example, and the National Theatre has been very good at opening up the backstage area. So I think all of that is an indication of that, and it's not just doing what we do at different times, we have to think about what we're providing. We're moving from business model A, to business model B, C and D. Some high-profile names in the music industry, they're already doing it: the guy who fronts The Smashing Pumpkins has been selling access to his fans for the writing and recording of his next album. And also uploads the masters of his albums to his fans, so there is a second level of remixes earning money from the start, so we're going to have to think of things in a different way.

No name given: Do you think there's a nervousness about re-appropriating things in that way?

Mark Earls: Yes, here's a thing. Who owns Leeds United Football Club? It's not Ken Bates, right? It's the fans. Without fans, it's nothing. Whoever the shareholder who technically owns it, it's always been the fans, so for folks in the arts centre, we have to recognize it's theirs and not ours. As a writer, and a copyright holder, frankly, my stuff gets copied all the time. Do I worry about that? No. I encourage it. Because in the longer term that will generate value for me. Some of it's on the blog, some of it's me speaking, some of it's the writing. And I think the recorded music industry is a good example of that kind of mentality, because they're going to die if they don't get it together. The people who represent the music industry are just atrocious. Not every piece of music you listen to has to be paid for, it's great if your mate gives you something and says

I've found this, have a listen. That's really powerful marketing. Why threaten to send people to jail for that, when they're working on your behalf. And everyone who owns copyright feels threatened by that, but they're just going to have to get used to it.

Carol Jones, Chapter Cardiff: I was very interested in what you were saying about Bridgend, and I wonder if there's a way that you can limit the contagion? Are there ways that we can work together to flip that into something that's more positive?

Mark Earls: So your point is about working with the herd mentality rather than trying to stop it. You know this thing about the high-school shootings in America, it happens a lot more frequently than we hear about. Because it's generally agreed in the media in the States that they will not report it. Because they know it leads to copycats, and they've learned that the hard way. And that just stops people seeing what other people are doing, so we can cut the connections if you like, and point them in another direction, harness it to another agenda. There are ways to do it, but if we knew how to do it now, we should be doing it.

No name given: Have you got any thoughts on how we can manage this scheme of allowing our audiences to talk to us more, and getting that through to our boards?

Mark Earls: Yes so here's the thing, with the explosion of market research, the professionalisation of market research, there's been an increase in fear about it. Like at the end of the focus group the moderator says 'would you like to come and see the people behind the glass?' knowing full well that the people behind the glass are crapping themselves about it. So the tools we've got for bringing us closer to them are actually pushing them farther away. So we need to have tactics to get that down, and one of the most important ones is to make it part of people's job description. Another one is a little technology trip I've developed recently, is to set up on executives desktops a live feed of what audiences are saying about them. You basically set up a character, and you use that avatar to re-tweet what they tweet, let's say, clearly that's just Twitter, but you can have a love stream of what your audience is excited about. And that provides a salutary lesson about what's really important to them, and it's not the things you're worried about. It's providing that intimacy for senior people. I've found for years that finance officers are pleasantly surprised when they meet the people that the organisation is providing services for, but they didn't have the first idea who those might be. So too, many chief executives don't really understand the audience, they understand the great and the good, but they don't really understand the audience. There's a terror. Musicians are terrified of meeting the people out there, and there's a whole infrastructure to keep the fans out, now I'm a rock god, I don't want to meet the 14-year-old boys who actually spend their money, or their parents' money, on my stuff.

Tom, London Calling: When feeding into senior teams, I've found, it is about the listening point, and a lot of large brands in the arts are supplied with great stuff to talk about, but not the knowledge about how to talk about it [unclear on recording]. That seems to be something that can be used quite a lot.

Mark Earls: There are a lot of techniques that you can use that force people at the top to go and meet the people they're selling to. They do it a lot in the drinks industry, so it's relatively easy to persuade them to go and meet the people who are drinking their stuff, at the aspirational end, not to so easy to get them to go along and meet hardened drinkers in the Hispanic neighbourhoods, but it's important to do so, because while it's a fleeting experiences, they just see and feel what it's like, and 'living in the shoes of' is the great marketing trick, to see from the perspective of the audience.

No name given: But in particular, going outside of the Twitter demographic, I was really interested in your Ikea example, how did they do it?

Mark Earls: They did lots of things, and there's no set way of doing it, but they encouraged each of the store managers to do it in different ways, and they shared the best practice So they shared the dossiers about the homes they'd been to, and they support the community, so in this part of town it's like this, in this part it's like this. One of the things I would do, though, is to start without your organisation in mind, or even the category in mind. I've done some teaching recently with ethnographic research, so people's real lives, in the drinks industry, so if we can extrapolate from there to the arts industry, where people meet, in cafes, bars, and see them, watch what they're doing. I did a piece recently in France, and nobody spoke French, and that was fine, because they were observing, and one of the things they noticed was that teenage girls in Paris at the moment burst into song for no reason whatsoever, and so that's a really interesting thing, they do that together. So before you even think about what drink they're drinking, you've got a chance to think about how they interact with each other, how they are. And so that kind of thing is something that's really worth doing, just seeing them as people interacting with each other, that's much more interesting than thinking 'let's look at you as an arts consumer', because you're not an arts consumer, you're a person, who happens to like the arts.

Simon Drysdale: That whole idea of just watching is really interesting, particularly in the context of what we're doing.

Mark Earls: Yes, thinking what can we do to make their lives more interesting, giving them an excuse to interact with each other. And how can we, partly in the design of the event, partly in the spaces, how can we do something to make them feel excited about it? My nephew is part of the school choir, a beautiful school in North London, and they're just warming up, and halfway through the event you could see that people weren't happy about the way they were supposed to behave, some people were comfortable with it, some people

weren't, there's an etiquette. And so some of them were young, who hadn't learned this thing. And there was one young person who was getting very into the rhythmic nature of the music and was there shaking her head, and eventually someone came over and tapped her on the shoulder, and I'm not asking for a dumbing down or anything, but it's an entirely natural response, so how can we create environments and help to create a new etiquette to help them interact.

Helen, National Theatre: It's interesting how we talk about people who interact, and yet when they go to the theatre, they may interact with the person next to them, but otherwise they do everything possible NOT to interact.

Mark Earls: Absolutely, but that's partly because they haven't yet experienced doing that. The Greek theatre, for example, was designed specifically for that, so that you could interact with people, hear what other people think, listen to their reactions. So are there other ways we can design the spaces? I often say to my clients work out the odd things that people are doing on the edge and spread those through the organisation. It seems like a very odd thing to do. Jameson, the Irish whiskey, is suddenly selling really well in the US. It's because they discovered that it had been adopted by Irish American students as a shot choice. So they noticed it, and spread it, and they've really doubled their volumes. But the same is true, are there things on the margin that we can pick up, and get other people to do. There will be things, if you look closely enough at the audience. It's how do you find those conversations. I think we're at the start of learning how to do this, and were at the stage where the technology that we currently see as being very elitist is slowly spreading through the population. These things will become embedded. Here's an example, my late mother was wheelchair bound, and I taught her to text. It seems like not very much, but she had a completely different engagement with the world once she got it – I got the same message three times a day. So we've got to find other ways, other platforms to find ways of helping people. How can we get people to make it explicit to each other?

No name given: Your music examples about the Smashing Pumpkins, the other big one years ago was Radiohead making it available for free, can you see arts organisations doing something like that?

Mark Earls: Yeah, there's a thing going on at the moment about audience funded, so pledge funding has come out of the music industry, so it's going great guns at getting audiences, fans, to generate the funds to run the tour. Def Leppard have been doing it for years. There's a new company launched last week, Will Carling's behind it, so God knows what will happen to it, but it's called We Back You, so that's the next step for the arts I think, but how that will happen, I don't know the answer. I think it's clearly one of those tensions, some will go right, some will go wrong, it is a danger, clearly. But that being said I do think the arts are going to have an element of audience funding that is much more evident.

Tom, London Calling: You did mention there are people who are very critical of the book, I love it, but I wondered where that criticism was coming from?

Mark Earls: So, where does the resistance come from? In the US, it's built on the individual, but if you've been there, you know it's the opposite. I was there shortly after 9/11 and you could see how quickly the wagons got in a circle, and maybe that was the start of the demise of our good friend Mr Blair, but very quickly the wagons got in a circle. So it has this underlying, collective, social feel, and generally speaking, people buy into what I'm saying very quickly there. People who don't like it – marketing scientists. It's very hard to get them away from the idea of the individual consumer. It's not a theoretical playground, and most marketing planning in my experience tends to be 'what did we do last year?'. And if I'm right about how things spread through populations, and obviously I think I am, because I've seen other people who think the same way, then it will spread through marketing communities in the same way. They won't think about it that much, they'll think 'oh, that herd thing, let's do some of that'. That's what happened with CRM. But the argument itself is kind of irrelevant, because it will spread anyway, because people will see other people doing it.

Bibliography

McCracken, Grant (2010). *Chief Culture Officer*. New York: Basic.