The Debating Group

A Parliamentary forum for Media and Marketing Debate

# "WE NO LONGER NEED TO SPEAK DIRECTLY TO PEOPLE TO UNDERSTAND THEM"

**On 27th January 2026 The Debating Group met in The Boothroyd Room of Portcullis House with the debate being chaired by Baroness Mattinson of Darlington and organised by the Market Research Society.**

Proposing the motion, **Dr Ben Warner, Co-Founder of Electric Twin,** explained that after a decade of working in quantum mechanics he had turned to the harder problem of understanding, predicting and influencing human behaviour. In physics, success comes by questioning assumptions and Warner asserted that in market research it is assumed that we are not in the business of listening to people but rather of modelling them. For Warner the real work that separates great from average research starts after data collection, going on to explain how you would not publish raw data from an opinion poll but instead use algorithms to clean it, weight it, analyse it, average it, and transform it into the reality we hope it represents. Election exit polls are therefore the output of sophisticated and carefully calibrated modelling: the raw data would be wrong, but modelling makes the material accurate.

For Warner, the question was more about which models to use. He described large language models as the biggest and most sophisticated representation of our collective unconscious – a model of the beliefs and behaviours of billions. The challenge is how to create a specific audience of a group of people, rather than the average voice. The synthetic audiences Electric Twin builds use real human data and sophisticated algorithms to make these large language representations of ourselves to tell us what people think. These new tools help solve previously unsolvable problems.

Warner reported that, during the pandemic, he was chief advisor to the Prime Minister on digital and data matters. He watched the crisis move too fast for conventional methods of understanding public behaviour for them to keep pace. This brought home the importance of judging tools by their performance in the real world – what actually helps drive better decisions and helps organisations have more impact?

It is not just about the information contained in the data, but the practicalities of how models help us understand situations more thoroughly and allow us to make better, faster decisions. Reflecting on how an insight study normally flows, a research team spends several weeks and £50,000 on the project, before producing and presenting a deck to senior leadership who forget most of it before a product manager many levels below them takes a decision based on instinct because the insights were not quite right - and they cannot rerun the study. The bottleneck was not data quality but the transfer of understanding to the people who actually needed it.

Synthetic audiences change how many questions you can ask, speed up responses and give us the ability to iterate in ways we simply could not before. When research takes weeks and £50,000, only big decisions get evidenced. But synthetic audiences allow more people to make evidence-based decisions. This serves to democratise access to evidence and understanding.

To prove that synthetic audiences work, Warner presented an experiment he had run recently. He argued that it might be the first real-world comparison of synthetic predictions against conventional commercial research methodologies, designed to replicate their use in a commercial setting. They ran eight identical surveys across all industry methodologies and in parallel they generated synthetic predictions using their artificial intelligence engine – all pre-registered in line with best practices. The artificial predictions had a mean average error of 0.05 against the traditional methods baseline making such exercises virtually indistinguishable from conventional research methods.

Warner predicted that the opposition's main argument would focus on synthetic methods being biased – that artificial intelligence merely regurgitates human prejudices baked into its training data. He argued, however, that this is exactly what was done when weighting a population. We explicitly choose which factors matter and model accordingly. This, however, encodes our beliefs into the model of the population. He referenced the 2016 Brexit predictions failing because the models did not weight by education. Our own biases defined this error and were not discovered by listening harder but only by examining the modelling process and comparing it to the census event of the referendum.

But, for example, there is no census event to validate a survey of dentists for toothpaste choices. He challenged those rejecting the use of artificial intelligence because of errors, noise or bias to prove that *their* methods are immune to these problems. While synthetic methods may have blind spots and errors, they have the advantage of being easy to re-run repeatedly, cheaply and quickly. The ability to measure an error and then fix it is a key difference between the traditional and new ways of conducting surveys.

This tooling gives genuine simulation capability. It will not be immediately perfect, but it will improve; it will not replace every form of human contact, but it is better than pretending a self-selecting survey of 1,000 people provides a unique window into the soul of Britain. The Market Research Society champions the principle that evidence matters - and it does. But to deliver on that principle, we must deliver evidence that drives informed decisions. This means giving the most accurate reflection of the world to as many people as possible, as quickly and as easily as possible. Evidence matters, but it is an outcome not a method. On our mission to truly understand the world, we must have the courage to use the tools that finally allow us to model it properly.

Opposing the motion, **Sir John Curtice, Professor of Practice – Politics, University of Strathclyde,** interpreted the motion as meaning that survey and qualitative research was not needed at all - that there was no need to secure oral or written testimony from a participant. He agreed that artificial intelligence might be useful in helping to understand the world and acknowledged that digital technology was already improving how research is conducted. Artificial intelligence would continue to improve the process of acquiring and analysing data, including its use in synthetic data which constructs the results of a survey using large language modelling. But Curtice disagreed that we can dispense with all human testimony.

Our efforts to understand what people think and why they do things was undertaken to secure certain objectives. To know how far we can dispense with derivative research and still achieve those objectives, Curtice proposed a two-by-two matrix. First, we want to forecast behaviour and attitudes at two levels: both what the collective and what the individual will think or do – including the variation between individuals in their attitudes and behaviour. Elections offered a good study, with a big collective behaviour and a definitive result. Information about why a country voted as it did, as well as insights into collective attitude through the correspondence between policy and what voters want becomes available. But we are also interested in individual behaviour: such as why people might vote for a particular party. Equally, we want to know individual attitudes about who is more or less likely to support a policy – which all helps drive targeted messaging.

The argument of the proposers for achieving these objectives without first gaining testimony from actual people comes from three aspects of the digital world. The first is that our behaviour is traced

and recorded by a range of administrative data; second, that our attitudes are expressed on social media which artificial intelligence can analyse; and, finally, that collectively, we already have a substantial trace of our attitudes from previous surveys, so we do not need any more human testimony.

Looking at administrative data, Curtice cited the debate over ending the census because there was already enough administrative data out there to tell us what we need to know. But this approach has crucial limitations, telling us – for example - how many but not who, and not measuring identity, be that national, sexual or something else. Consequently, we cannot just rely on administrative data. Turning to social media as a source, Curtice questioned whether it was particularly representative used as it was disproportionately by younger people and those who are more likely to vote for Reform UK or the Green Party, rendering such platforms pretty unreliable for making predictions. Thirdly, he noted the many failed attempts to use synthetic data previously based on election studies to project outcomes – including some predictions that Harris would beat Trump in 2024.

Curtice concluded by arguing that while short-run predictions for how people might react might work in the near term, over the longer run context changes brought unreliability. For example, Covid changed the context which led people to change their attitudes in an unpredictable way. He added that it would be crazy to think a data set created ten years ago could sensibly model voting behaviour today. Artificial intelligence should be embraced because it is undoubtedly useful, but it cannot wholly displace human testimony because ultimately humans are unpredictable, especially in a rapidly changing world.

Seconding for the proposition, **Kyriacos Bagdades, Regional Vice-President for Client Partnerships, EMEA, at Newton X,** began by asserting that this was not a radical motion because in almost every other field we have moved past self-reporting as the gold standard of intelligence. In medicine, we don't just ask ‘where does it hurt?’, we use tools like MRI to uncover the cause of the pain. Similarly, we don’t just ask ‘What do you think of this product?’, we track millions of online reviews and conversations. For Bagdades, the industry has over-indexed on what people say for too long. His own research with senior leaders confirmed that the best bet for achieving a return on investment was not to root decisions in more surveys but rather in applying artificial intelligence to automate insights generation and workflows. Leaders who integrated artificial intelligence in their analytics stack reported overwhelming confidence - more than 97% of them used AI-driven tools to inform the strategic decisions they took. The question is not *if* we can understand people without directly speaking to them, but why we have waited so long to talk about it.

The first problem is we confuse speaking with understanding. Speaking directly to people gives a powerful but flawed narrative because people forget, simplify and edit themselves constantly, convincing themselves of untruths. Published research confirms that people do not purchase what they say they will and respond differently to the same questions when asked again. By relying on direct conversations, we are choosing a version of the truth that is - at the very - least incomplete.

The second problem is that direct human collection becomes untrustworthy at high sample sizes: more than 30% of survey responses are either ‘fraudulent’ or unrepresentative. Such scaling is also costly as, to access trustworthy data, you need customer recruitment and rigorous verification of every response which is prohibitively expensive for most organisations.

And finally, of course, you simply cannot speak with everyone. No research plan can eliminate the real-world sampling challenges or speak to all the humans that need to be engaged. But we do not have to, explained Bagdades. By embracing emerging technologies such as synthetic models and AI-driven research tools that collect data from real humans, we can predict human behaviours with greater confidence. With AI removing mundane tasks, you can focus on better research design and analysis, eliminating sample gaps and biases, accessing fresh intelligence from hard-to-reach people and expediting confident decisions. Acknowledging that this new reality brings challenges including around transparency and lack of infrastructure readiness, Bagdades stressed the urgent need to work

together as an industry to build confidence and trust in the right solutions, prioritising those that enhance rather than replace human intelligence.

Here Bagdades emphasised that the motion was pro-human, because humans should always strive, evolve and innovate to do better. Human data will always be the grounding truth for research, the input that trains the models, the guide for how predicted behaviours link to human emotions, and the source of fresh intelligence to keep models accurate and relevant. We will still need human inputs, but not all of the time and perhaps not even most of the time. We simply cannot speak directly to most people, but tools can accurately predict behaviours, help us understand unreachable audiences and democratise intelligence for more organisations. It is our duty to embrace this future and capitalise on its benefits.

Seconding for the opposition, **Bridget Williams, Head of Public Communications Unit – Public Affairs, Ipsos UK**, agreed the need to balance excitement about the potential for deploying artificial intelligence with caution about its use. Dissecting the motion, she asked what it was to seek to 'understand' people, presenting four key points.

Firstly, that modelling and synthetic data only works when grounded in real people and kept fresh by going back to real people. When artificial intelligence is trained on rich, recent and well-governed human data, modelling and synthetic methods can be brilliant accelerators that fill gaps, boost sample sizes and pressure-test ideas at speed. However, when not properly anchored in that human data you can get false results. Leading with science and rigour was key, citing Ipsos's own Creative|Spark AI ad-testing tool which predicts advertising performance accurately because it is built on a large, sales-validated database made up of real people. Even so, it is constantly refreshed and updated and not used for everything. Here, Williams noted that synthetic tests and models trained on past results tend to reward the middle ground, smoothing the ends of the bell curve. This can undersell distinctive, niche or genuinely new ideas while downplaying small but intense negative reactions. In short, models and simulations can help you move faster, but you should not risk doing so blindly.

For her second point, Williams explained that context decides meaning with the same data telling different stories depending on people's particular circumstances. During Covid, models trained on yesterday's data instantly stopped working because everyone's constraints changed. And in today's fast-moving world, yesterday's context becomes obsolete very quickly. In short: the data describes what happened and the context explains why it happened, and it is only by taking the two of them together that can best inform future decision-making.

Thirdly, Williams explained that in social policy, voice is part of understanding. It was not just about modelling behaviours, but empowering people to shape the society they want through agency, consent and legitimacy. A synthetic population has no agency: it cannot bring unprompted grievances, deliberate between trade-offs or grant permission for what affects it – quite simply it has no skin in the game. Not speaking to people, especially those that may be most affected by a decision, risks producing technically "accurate" answers but which may well be socially unacceptable. Here, the inherent bias of large language models becomes crucial because a small, under-heard group can take a big share of harm as a result of a decision taken, when the model says that on balance it is a fair one. It is therefore very important to take into account real, lived experience and give the most heavily affected groups a voice.

Finally, Williams noted that people are messy and understanding them means loving all their contradictions and uncertainties. Simulated populations were too knowing and analytical, even when trained not to be. There are always moments you cannot simulate and those moments are 'understanding' - the untidy bits are where decisions so frequently succeed or fail.

Williams agreed that with modelling we can infer from behaviour, simulate responses, move faster and more cheaply as well as calibrate to outcomes. But we must use artificial intelligence to augment listening to real people's voices, not replace them. While artificial intelligence may be able to

optimise, only real people can grant consent; the seldom heard must be heard; and we must embrace people in all their messiness, because their sharp edges are often the truth we need the better to inform decision-making.

Critically for Williams, the motion was absolute: not ‘we can speak less’ but ‘we no longer need to speak at all.’ To understand people, their real voices are not optional but: the anchor that keeps models honest,; the context that turns data into meaning; and, the democratic thread that makes decisions durable. They are also the colour that keeps research and insight such vibrant and rewarding areas to work within.

The chair thanked the speakers and opened the debate up to contributions from the floor.

**Discussion from the Floor**

Nicholas, an academic from Hult International Business School, stressed that models were a set of simple rules that give a good outcome but cannot replace the real thing: human data. Artificial intelligence is good at answering many things precisely, but he questioned whether it will ever truly understand what it means to be human.

George Gearty (Manager - Koan Creative) suggested that certain understandings cannot be accessed just by speaking to people but only become accessible through using synthetic populations. He noted, however, that synthetic populations make no distinction between the theory of doing something and actually doing it.

Kishore Budha (Director - We Live Context) noted that the act of asking a question is itself inevitably ideological. The act of asking the question causes a change in thinking, attitudes and behaviours that can create a bias.

Anthony Gould (Executive Chair - RTR Worldwide) opposed the motion, noting that artificial intelligence needs direct human input to keep it accurate. If you do not consult people and bring artificial intelligence up to date, it cannot interpret what is going on.

Emma Kirk (General Manager - Institute of Promotional Marketing) felt the volume and speed of the information we consume leads to rapidly changing opinions. As a consequence, there is an abundance of data that makes deciphering what people think ever harder.

Aakanksha Haran (Director - Smart Move Ventures) questioned how models trained on past behaviour can account for futures that have yet to exist? There are scenarios out there which are simply unpredictable. We must go back to people and understand how they actually feel about a certain situation or situations.

Alex Turk (Head of Strategy, Insight, Evaluation & Data - Department of Health & Social Care) opposed the motion, before raising the question of who does the listening and what does that listening look like? People must feel listened to.

An in-house market researcher at Tesco wondered in her contribution from the floor what people impacted by AI-modelled decisions feel about those decisions not actually being modelled on them, or people like them?

Jonny Zander (Director - The Kaizen Partnership Ltd) opposed the motion, noting that people have a fundamental human need and right to be heard. Having worked on the Grenfell Tower memorial, no synthetic model would be able to set out what a bereaved survivor wants.

Gideon Barker (Founder / Research & Insight Director - Customer iQ) emphasised the difference

between understanding and predicting. Models and synthetic data may be able to predict behaviour, but they will never help us understand why people act in a particular way.

Eileen Irvin (Co-Head of Survey Research Methods Centre - Ipsos UK) stressed that no two people ever think the same. However predictive a predictive model may be, it can never get into what a person thinks about themselves nor how they might conceptualise the world.

Jonathan Fingerhut (Managing Partner – Strategic Marketing for Schools) opposed the motion, noting the importance of people being listened to and how this simple act itself shaped their behaviour and changed attitudes in a way that no modelling could realistically allow for.

Pippa Bailey (Senior Vice-President for Strategy & Innovation - CRG Global) opposed the motion. Despite there being some value in emerging technologies like artificial intelligence, we still need to ask questions because change and people's reactions to it now happens faster than ever. Listening to, observing and understanding people is what drives success in decision-making.

Lee Chan (Insight Lead - UK Health Security Agency) argued it was wrong to strip all the context and messiness out of that data sets because that is the reality with which we are working. Everyone experiences the world differently, so we must ask good questions but expect imperfect answers from them.

Jaan Nellis (Co-Founder & Director - Redsella Ltd) opposed the motion, noting that sythnetic programs use the 'what' to predict the future, but are unable to tell you the 'why'. We should always talk to people to help us understand how they behave.

The chair thanked the speakers from the floor and called for closing contributions from first the opposer and then the proposer.

**Summing Up**

For the opposition, **Sir John Curtice** began by acknowledging that surveys are fragile and susceptible to human vagaries, before stressing that synthetic data has the same issues as it often relies on self-reported information and that as most people tell the truth, a degree of over-reporting does not tend significantly to change research findings.

Secondly, Curtice stressed that modelling data was not new and has always been used in quantitative surveys to understand social and political attitudes. However, it was about more than identifying the best statistical fit for what you are trying to understand: you must also be able to say why A is related to B. Understanding comes from the fact that we are constantly creating theories of why humans think in a particular way. This is not always immediately clear from asking them a direct question, but it can be inferred from patterns or correlations.

Curtice's third point was around context: that people's behaviour depends on the circumstances in which they first come across something, such as where they hear some news or the nature of the store in which they initially see a product. Crucially that context can eventually change the structure of behaviour and attitudes so that what was predictive of behaviour five years ago is not necessarily adequate for predictive purposes now. Here Curtice cited a doubling after the 2024 US election of the proportion of people who think the USA is a threat to the world. Context changes the structure that underlies behaviours and attitudes and the reasons why people do things: a ten-year old model to predict voting now would simply not work.

Finally, Curtice raised the question of ethics. People being able to express their voice and be listened to was arguably an inalienable human right that goes far beyond the wizardry of statistics. He also raised the ethics of using people's data to create synthetic, syndicated models without their consent.

He concluded by arguing that market researchers will not be able to understand what people think and do adequately unless we at least occasionally ask them.

For the proposition, **Dr Ben Warner** disagreed with the line pursued by the opposition that the debate turned on absolutes. Referring to Asimov's story about a supercomputer that only needed to ask a single voter to determine an election, for Warner basing an argument on such an extreme absolute was unhelpful.

Warner felt that the opposition's arguments were based on the way we work today, and implicit in that argument was a one-off interaction where you go out to the world for a project then come back to your desk and try to understand it. But beyond collecting the data, he suggested that we are actually trying to iterate, always to involve, always to improve what we are doing whenever we interact with the world. You can collect data just once and next time you do not have to go back for more. He reminded researchers of all the times they had received survey results and realised that there was one question they should have asked or reframed another to get a better answer. This was where you can go back to real people and get that answer, but what if you don't care about that difference?

Turning to the problem of 'do we understand people?', Warner questioned the popular assertion that our existing tools work and that we can understand people. The big discovery in behavioural science from the last decade was the reproducibility crisis: that our research does not reproduce and as such it is neither real nor scientific. We should therefore be very careful about claiming what we can and cannot do. It is important to be humble and acknowledge that we do not and, indeed, cannot understand the world. It was obvious that AI modelling would struggle during Covid – but all surveys struggled in that period because it was impossible to create a representative sample.

For Warner, the disconnect between the proposers and the opposers was the idea that a representative sample is defined by demographics. Many in the room had said they were not defined by demographics, implicitly arguing that samples are not representative. Consequently, the existing tools do not actually work and are not providing us with the insight to understand people. So, when we say we need to listen to people to understand people, what we are actually calling for is better tools. Just talking directly to people is no longer enough. Referencing advances in medicine, he argued that progress requires big meta-science that uses huge amounts of modelling data – we should not be looking at individual cases but rather seeking to gather all the data we can to inform decision-making. He argued that that is also what the market research industry should be doing. While talking to people matters, we need better tools to use *all* the data available to us. Warner concluded that a poll took up about a megabyte of data, but that large language models allow us to use terabytes of information. We should be using that capacity to better understand people, rather than simply speaking to them.

<u>Pre-debate count</u>
The pre-debate count suggested the audience opposed the motion by a significant margin (4 v 47).

**Result**
The motion was overwhelmingly defeated following a show of hands.