



## ***Eliminating Weapons of Mass Distraction***

By Max Sutherland

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*"Verbosity leads to unclear, inarticulate things."* George W. Bush.

Years ago, the iconoclastic Professor Andrew Ehrenberg coined the verb 'to SONK'. Sonking is an acronym that stands for the **S**cientification **o**f **N**on **K**nowledge. It is a wonderfully handy term that deserves to be in more common usage.

With a word like sonking at our disposal, we are more able to see through the bullsh\*t of market research reporting when it uses narrative obfuscation to disguise, what on closer reading turns out to be the bleeding obvious. You know the kind of thing....variations on: *"the latest survey shows that 3 out of 4 people make up 75% of the world's population!"*

Sonking is the opposite of the KISS principle (Keep it Simple, Stupid). A market research report recently reminded me of Ehrenberg's term. This report forced me to work hard and spend a lot of time just to figure out what it was telling me.

Reports like this one that I was reading look hugely impressive in their sophisticated methodology as well as their technical language and their complicated diagrams. They are horribly time-wasting because they are not *easily* dismissed without a thorough read. 'No gain, no pain' so you settle in for the long haul... only to eventually discover. ...that the report tells you precisely nothing that you didn't already know. But gee, it does it impressively!

So what's the solution? Clearly we have to demand a better standard of discipline in market research reporting. But things are not quite that simple because a kind of 'political correctness' gets in the way.

Rarely is it 'politically correct' for researchers to stand up and declare that a research study didn't really discover much. Instead, the pressure to avoid declaring 'a dry well' can lead to the launch of numerous words and diagrams as decoys. These are the market researcher's weapons of mass distraction. Let's face it...not every study will hit a gusher. No-one wants to waste money but I would much prefer researchers tell it like it is than feel compelled to waste everybody's time by dissembling.

Narrative description of figures is a valid part of the research reporting process that can render the numbers more intelligible to the reader... but only if the researcher plays a role as a relevance filter. In attempting to remain 'objective' and 'politically neutral', researchers too often find themselves having to obfuscate. Other than by SONKing, how can they disguise that what they are reporting is really not news?

What is particularly disturbing is when market researchers themselves don't realize they are doing this. Over the long haul it can become ingrained behaviour. As the German author and

philosopher, Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe once said: "When ideas fail, words come in very handy."

Diagrams as well as words are an important part of this armory of obfuscation. My eyes frequently glaze over when I see one of those little flow chart diagrams with arrows connecting various boxes that purport to 'model' or 'explain' something complex.

Such diagrams look all very profound and somehow give you a nice warm feeling that something has been explained. But scratch the surface, think about it for a bit and you find that it is often just an illusion. Chances are that nothing has really been explained at all!

Another personal pet hate is when old knowledge is rediscovered via a new technique or a new survey that leaves people breathless with excitement. For example, last year a research study installed cameras in peoples' living rooms and reported that shock horror, people go out of the room and do other things during commercial breaks. Duh!

When non knowledge is dressed up like this, packaged in new forms of discovery, we perhaps need another term. The word SONK doesn't quite seem to fit. So let me suggest the word MANK ('Masquerade as New Knowledge'). This should come in handy for situations when the research merely confirms what we already know but discovers it using a spiffy new technology or survey.

Anyway it is time to get serious about ridding the world of these weapons of mass distraction and removing them from the market researchers' control. Let's have a commitment to the elimination of non knowledge and a declaration of war on Sonking (and Manking). Call it operation BONKING (banning of non knowledge) and we can build a campaign theme around the slogan "BONK don't SONK".

*"Clarity is the style of all honest men."* (Anon)