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# SRF or Sovereign? eCommerce and the Promise of Consumer Empowerment

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# SERF OR SOVEREIGN? E-COMMERCE AND THE PROMISE OF CONSUMER EMPOWERMENT

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## Abstract

*This paper will attempt to deconstruct the belief that eCommerce in its current format is empowering customers. It focuses on five of the most prevalent myths surrounding eCommerce (namely that it: will revolutionise retailing, offers greater choice and convenience, offers greater access to information, enables better C2B and C2C communication, and brings about personalisation of services to consumers). The paper demonstrates that these assumptions derive from the technologically determinist school of Information Systems (IS) thinking (grounded in the myth that technology per se brings huge benefits, including wealth and empowerment), and thus merits more sophisticated consideration of the technology, providers and users. A critical epistemology is adopted, and through a series of semi-structured interviews with consumers and consideration of the wider empirical evidence the myths are deconstructed. The paper proposes that there is incongruence in online retail provision and the needs or requirements of customers. It argues that a greater sense of “audience” is required by retailers who adopt eCommerce. The conclusion raises the question ‘how far can commercial enterprises afford to empower consumers?’ Buyer power continues to be regarded as a threat to competitive advantage and as such needs to be managed effectively. This paper offers a contribution to e-commerce literature by demonstrating that the assumption that the consumer is empowered through internet retail is not grounded in reality. It provides a practical contribution to businesses by heightening awareness of the extent to which current internet-based retail fails to fulfill consumer needs.*

*Keywords: eCommerce, Consumer empowerment, Social implications of eCommerce, Critical Theory, Mythology.*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

This paper will attempt to deconstruct five of the most prevalent myths surrounding eCommerce and the benefits it is claimed to bring. It will show the incongruence between the myths of eCommerce and the experiences of customers, and argue that a greater sense of “audience” is required by retailers who adopt eCommerce. The deconstruction of myths is a relatively well established technique in both information systems and marketing research (Hirschheim R. and Newman, 1991), (Grover and Ramanlal, 1999), (Howcroft, 2001). According to Bolman and Deal “myths serve a number of functions, including the provision of explanations and the maintenance of solidarity and cohesion” (Bolman and Deal, 1984). They promote a consensus view and often perpetuate a shared misconception of the phenomena they describe. For example, Howcroft uses mythology to “provide some explanation as to why so many investors were lured into participating in the dot.com share bubble” (Howcroft, 2001). Through a series of seven myths she questions why so many investors were drawn into financially supporting so many internet start-up companies with no attempt to evaluate these companies “in terms of traditional market criteria and conditions based on rational assessment” (Howcroft, 2001).

“Mania” such as was seen in the dot.com gold rush is not a new phenomenon. In 1841, Mackay wrote that “We find whole communities suddenly fix their minds upon one object, and go mad in its pursuit” (Mackay, 1995). It could be argued that the phenomena of popular delusion has gained increased momentum through the technologically determinist myth that technology *per se* brings huge benefits, including wealth and empowerment. This paper will explore the use of myths to establish and perpetuate the justifications for the claim that eCommerce is empowering customers. The paper will critique the assumption that the Internet brings about consumer empowerment through the deconstruction of five myths which are strands of this over arching belief.

Much of the focus for the assertions that the Internet *will* bring about consumer empowerment has been on the *potential* of the Internet, and the *opportunities* for communication and access to information. The needs, attitudes and experiences of the consumer, whom the advocates of consumer empowerment through the Internet claim it serves, have generally been neglected, if not ignored. The commonly held belief is that if information is power then through product, company and market information available over the Internet, consumers *must* be empowered (Pitt et al. 2002; Office of Fair Trading, 2003). Experiences recounted to the researcher in the preliminary stages of this research appeared to challenge that assumption. This challenge to what was increasingly becoming the *status quo* influenced the design of the research.

## 2 METHODOLOGY

In the initial stages of this research, and as a response to the predominant view that the Internet was bringing many benefits and empowering customers, an interpretivist approach was selected. It is established that critical research often starts out from an Interpretivist stance (Walsham, 2001; McGrath, 2004). The researcher aimed to hold up the mirror of interpretivism and show how eCommerce was being adopted by consumers. She aimed to understand the *status quo* or accepted “state of affairs” (Collins, 1983); how business-to-customer and customer-to-customer communication had improved so that knowledge was shared, businesses benefited and the customer was empowered. However, the challenge to this generally accepted situation appeared to be gaining volume. Friends and colleagues recounted stories of dissatisfaction with eCommerce services. Newspapers carried more and more articles on Internet fraud or lack of security. The *status quo* was that the use of the Internet in commercial activity is beneficial and empowering, yet the “broader empirical evidence” (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000) such as friends’ and colleagues’ narratives and newspaper articles recounting Internet fraud or simply dissatisfaction with online shopping increasingly appeared to

challenge this belief, suggesting a “dissensus approach” within this research. On reflection the researcher decided that the most effective lens or “magnifying glass” to investigate this phenomenon would be that of critical social theory (CST). As Howcroft states: “Proclamations to the effect that we are entering into a new age should be examined critically rather than simply accepted without question” (Howcroft, 2001). Adopting a critical approach can be problematic for researchers, not least because there are relatively few critical empirical studies which new researchers can draw upon for guidance. The methods adopted in this study are outlined below.

In explorative research, it is important to survey relevant groups with “high experience levels of the phenomena under study” (Pettigrew, 1990). This research focuses on the individual experiences of those who have used the internet in commercially related activity. Interpretive researchers employ theoretical or purposive sampling to ensure participants have a high level of experience of the phenomena to be researched. Direct postings of questionnaires within two Universities in the North-West of England were initially used to contact consumers. Snowball sampling (Robson, 1993) or the encounter strategy based on principles of snowballing (Arber, 1993), (asking respondents to suggest other possible participants) was then adopted to build up the number of participants. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with twenty-two participants, each one lasting between thirty and sixty minutes. Interviews were recorded with the permission of the participant, and verbatim transcripts were produced from the recordings. In analysis, the researcher made use of transcripts, recordings and field notes. Initial analysis made use of pattern coding and theme analysis (Miles and Huberman, 1994). This method of analysis is an iterative process involving data collection and analysis simultaneously, complimenting the reflexive approach adopted in critical research. Opportunities for reflection (a key part of critical research) are almost ‘built in’ as the data generation and data analysis phases overlap and interweave.

### **3 MYTHS OF ECOMMERCE**

Through a literature review of both academic sources and “wider empirical evidence” which is central to critical social theory (CST) research, and through theme analysis of early interviews, incongruence between the *status quo* and actual experiences of eCommerce became apparent. Through thematic analysis five myths were identified:

- eCommerce will revolutionise retailing.
- eCommerce offers greater choice and convenience
- eCommerce offers greater access to information
- eCommerce enables better communication (C2B and C2C).
- eCommerce brings about personalisation of services to customers.

The myths were then deconstructed drawing again upon wider empirical evidence and upon the experiences of the participants of the research. The following sections will show how each myth can be deconstructed.

#### **3.1 eCommerce will revolutionise retailing**

Initially, it was widely believed that the Internet would revolutionise retailing. De Kare-Silver writes of “the electronic revolution in retail”, an “inexorable force that will drive electronic commerce forward and reach out to make it so pervasive and accessible that it can’t fail to impact shopping habits”, and ultimately “In 30 to 40 years time (around 2030) there may be no shops at all” (Maurice Saatchi quoted by De Kare-Silver (De Kare-Silver, 2000). Kare-Silver goes on to give three scenarios which he states “are no longer stories from science fiction”. These scenarios and others, such as the intelligent fridge that directly orders replenishments, frequently recounted in the popular media

perpetuate the “hyperbole surrounding the Internet” (Walsham, 2001) and fail to address the distance between the promise and the practice or actual experience. Further, as Howcroft argues:

“..they are underpinned by an inherent determinism. This determinism is based upon the premise that technology drives societal change and also that the population is ready to embrace a technological platform that provides a new channel for commercial delivery.” (Howcroft, 2001)

User take up of new technology is generally more evolutionary, in the constructivist tradition (Bijker, 1999). A new phenomena or trend such as eCommerce does not revolutionise current behaviour as if causing a sudden break with the past tradition (Bell 1973; Webster 2000 see (Howcroft, 2001), but evolves out of, and builds upon current practices. The apparent success of eCommerce ventures such as ebay.com which is customer driven, evolving from the auction business model is an example of this.

The deconstruction of the myth that the Internet will revolutionise retail involves consideration of the determinist / constructivist dichotomy and an acknowledgement that the impact of eCommerce will be incremental and evolutionary, building on traditional commerce and retailing practices, rather than revolutionary. For example, many people currently use the Internet purely for personal communication, and many retail companies (including large high street stores) use the Internet for “brochureware” alone, adopting the WWW as an extra advertising channel rather than to radically change the way they do business. Most notably, sectors that show most evidence of being “revolutionised” such as the music industry have encountered numerous obstacles such as legislative issues, and consumer resistance to new formats which suggests that new technology *cannot* revolutionise as if in a cultural vacuum, but needs to evolve and build on traditional practices.

Participants in this research commented that they frequently use the internet to gather information on products, but ultimately go to the physical shop to make the purchase, suggesting assimilation of this new channel rather than a revolutionary effect. For example, two interview participants noted that:

“We used it just to gather information really relating to the product” (Interview 3, female 27)

And:

“I bought a little MP3 player at Christmas, I checked that it was out on line and looked at reviews and whatever, but I wanted to actually see what it looked like. Even though you get 3D diagrams you don’t really get an idea of what the particular product is like. I ended up buying it not from on-line at all.” (Interview 2, male, 38)

### **3.2 eCommerce offers greater choice and convenience**

The myth that through the Internet customers are offered more choice has a number of strands. Firstly, it is claimed that the Internet enables us to do business with any company wherever they are in the world. Through this “global economy” we are offered a greater range of products and a greater range of companies to select from. Secondly, there is the pervasive view that the Internet offers us convenience in the form of 24/7 shopping (shopping, twenty four hours and seven days a week), with no need to leave home.

In terms of the construct of the “global economy”, facilitated by technology, and implying a sense of the “compression of time and space” and “of the world as a whole” (Walsham, 2001) a myth is formed that a “level playing field” is created. All the companies of the world no matter what size, no matter what location are purported to be competing on equal terms. As Howcroft notes, this suggests that eCommerce “enables small firms to compete on the same terms as the larger players....yet it must be remembered that the scalability and flexibility of the Internet yields similar advantages for both large firms and small niche players.” (Howcroft, 2001), and therefore small firms remain at a disadvantage

in terms of market share. The implication of this for customers is that larger firms have more resources to invest in establishing and running a web presence and infrastructure, effectively squeezing out, or buying up the smaller firms and continuing to dominate the market.

With this in mind, it is worth considering the importance of “brand” in the electronic marketplace. Within the context of the myth of increased choice for consumers an important contradiction can be identified. Whilst we are told that it is now as easy for us to do business with the small business on the other side of the country, if not the world, we are also advised that we should stay with “well known and trusted brands”. The UK Department of Trade and Industry, (1999) state that “Consumers can improve their security by shopping with reputable merchants whose products and policies they trust”.

A plethora of academic literature and consultancy reports support this view theorising on brand power, brand and trust, and consumer confidence and brand. (McLean and Blackie, 2002; Brewer, 2000) Deconstruction of the myth of a greater choice of products and companies points to an increasing homogenisation of the commercial Internet, mirroring that of our high streets and shopping centres. It is arguable that a new “superbrand” dominating all channels across a number of sectors and locations has been facilitated by the Internet (McLean and Blackie, 2002) effectively narrowing down, rather than opening up, choice. A number of participants commented that they tend to return to the same sites, or only use “well known and well trusted” companies’ websites (Interview 8, male, 24), implying limitation rather than increased choice.

The second strand to the myth of greater consumer choice is that the Internet offers us convenience and a greater choice of when we shop in the form of 24/7 shopping with no need to leave home. The ‘reality’ of eCommerce falls short of its promise of “convenience”. Many of the interview participants recounted experiences of delays in purchases arriving, and the inconvenience of trying to contact the company to make enquiries. One in particular stated that her online shopping experience had been more stressful than actually going to the shops:

“I’ve done home shopping and that was a bit of a nightmare to say the least.. Half the shopping was missing. Where online it had said things were out of stock were in stock and things that it had said were in stock were out of stock and some of the products were at the sell by date. It was more stressful than going to the shop I think.” (Interview 3, female 27)

In addition to ignoring the distance between the promise and the practice this myth is rooted in the assumption that we all actually want twenty-four hour access to shops from home. Exposure to capitalist consumerism is no longer limited in time (to shop opening hours) or space (the high street or shopping centre), but literally follows us into our homes, and arguably wherever we go through the development of mCommerce (commercial activity over a mobile device such as a phone or PDA). Robins and Webster see information and communication technologies as the vehicles through which consumerism is being spread into the homes, and private lives of individuals. (Lyon, 1993). Further, through online retail we are doing the work of the company assistant, almost subsumed into the company as boundaries begin to fade.

Deconstruction of the myth of greater convenience through the choice of when to shop, and the ability to shop from home, calls into question who this convenience actually serves. Whilst it does enable people to shop at any time of day or night from the comfort of their own homes should they wish to do so, it also allows the “capitalistic enterprise” twenty four hours a day seven days a week access to the ‘target consumer’. It could be argued that advertising *per se* has this level of access, but traditional television advertisements (excepting TV shopping channels), billboards, paper based junk mail and so on do not actually facilitate an immediate response such as that encouraged by the discourse of advertising emails. Deconstruction of this myth suggests that in practice, choice is actually limited to a small number of well known brands, and that the convenience of 24/7 access arguably serves the companies and more specifically the “capitalist enterprise” more readily than the individual.

### 3.3 eCommerce Offers Greater Access To Information

The myth of greater access to information via the Internet is one of the most instrumental in the perpetuation of the myth of consumer empowerment (Pitt et al. 2002), (Economist, 2004). The general belief is that access to such a volume of information on any subject at the click of a mouse *must* be empowering. However, *access* to information alone is not in itself empowering, people must “also be in a position to understand and evaluate the information” (Harrison, 2002)

The information gathering stage of a person’s decision to purchase is well established in the traditional models of buyer behaviour (Howard and Sheth, 1969; Blythe, 1997). However these models were generally developed before the ‘information explosion’. An incomplete search could result in information incompleteness and asymmetry placing the consumer in a *vulnerable* rather than powerful position. The vast amounts of information available today mean that the ability to structure a search and evaluate information retrieved is an essential skill in the avoidance of information overload and the execution of a productive search. Many interview participant’s remarked that they experienced information overload, “there’s too much information” (Interview 3, female 27), and “You can spend so much time just trying to find the information that you want” (Interview 6, male 38). A further participant likened the search for information on a website to being lost in a “labyrinth”:

“Some websites you get a list of topics and it could be in there, it could be in there, so you click on here and that gets you to somewhere else where it might be there or it might be there. It’s a labyrinth and you get fed up with it.” (Interview 5, male, 41)

It is not insignificant that the information available on the internet comes from a range of voices or “discourses” (expert, non expert, customer, professional). This access to multiple perspectives is regarded as contributing to the empowerment of customers through information accessibility. Some participants in this research referred to the range of perspectives of information or *discourses* available through the internet, commenting on how this confused, baffled or was “too technical”. A participant who was planning to buy a camcorder commented that he gathered information from a range of internet sources before making purchasing a purchase:

“It was on company websites, and a lot of reviews were actual consumer reviews, bulletin boards as well, all were consumers. A lot of them were like ... using these professionally whether it’s for weddings or whatever, so they were very technical... There were some criticisms against the camera that we were buying, but the group of people on the bulletin boards were all professional people who would actually notice that sort of difference.” (Interview 2, male, 38)

Information from companies, fellow consumers and professional users was drawn upon here. However, the suggestion that the professional’s reviews were “very technical” and that criticisms were of things that only experts “would actually notice” implies a conflict of interests between the expert/non expert culture (Snowden, 1998) or “speech communities” (Saussure, 1965). This suggests that access to information from a range of perspectives or discourses is not necessarily empowering to the customer.

Pitt et al (2002) hold up Edmunds.com ([www.edmunds.com](http://www.edmunds.com)) as an example of information available to inform a buyer’s decision and ultimately bring empowerment. They argue that the customer can now enter the car showroom in a much more powerful position. However, not all individuals are able to effectively evaluate such information. Harrison (2002) draws the distinction between information as passive “relevant data” and advice which is “information shaped to the needs of the individual”. Through the perpetuation of the myth of the informed consumer, customers could actually be experiencing a poorer service. Firstly, the responsibility for actively gathering information has been thrust on to the consumer. Terms such as the “prosumer” (Toffler, 1980) and the “responsible

consumer” (Gilliatt et al. 2000) have emerged and a UK government white paper explicitly defines the “better consumer”. “The better consumers are informed about what the market offers” (Department of Trade and Industry, 1999) constructing the dualism of the good consumer/ bad consumer hierarchy (Derrida quoted in (Macey, 2002), with the implication that an uninformed customer is irresponsible. Again, this construction of the “informed consumer” as the norm is of benefit to companies. Information seeking and retrieval incur costs to the customer in terms of time, connection charges, print outs, subscriptions and so on. These are charges which have been passed to the customer by the company (Bakos, 1991). The “better consumer” is doing the work of the company, cutting costs for them in terms of the need for informed staff, staff time and expensive manuals or brochures. Deconstruction of this myth is not intended to imply that information cannot empower, but that a certain level of skill is required to retrieve and evaluate relevant information. Finally, a challenge to the hierarchy of consumer types suggested in the Government white paper *Modern Markets, Confident Consumers*; perhaps it is the “worse consumer” rather than the “better consumer” who places greater demands upon a company and so assumes the position of power or sovereignty.

### 3.4 eCommerce Enables Better communication C2B and C2C

It is as a communication channel that individuals have most readily adopted the Internet into normal routines and practices. Ironically, here the constructivist tradition or evolutionary user approach could actually be fuelling the determinist myth; people use the Internet to communicate, the technology is available for people and companies to communicate electronically therefore eCommerce *must* be enabling better communication between companies and their customers. Further, it is suggested that improved producer - customer communication removes distance between the two parties is empowering to customers (Gilliatt et al. 2000). This claim again ignores the gulf between the promise or expectation and the practice. One interview participant noted that rather than bringing increased customer-to-company communication opportunities eCommerce is a “one way thing” (Interview 11, male, 30) allowing companies to communicate *to* rather than *with* customers. In theory, it is suggested that the Internet could bring about a return to the market places of the past, where producers met customers face-to-face and talked about their produce; “marketplaces were conversations” (Levine et al. 2000). Through these conversations knowledge about products and production was exchanged. McAdam and McCreedy (McAdam and McCreedy, 1999) suggest that such informal communication, on an egalitarian basis, could facilitate knowledge creation and exchange. The determinist view is that the Internet *is* facilitating customer to company communication and knowledge exchange and so empowering customers. The challenge to this is, as Walsham notes, “The communication capabilities of the Internet... (do) not eliminate the need to consider the human processes of communication and knowledge sharing.” (Walsham, 2001). Further it does not eliminate the need to consider business processes and practices in relation to communication with customers. In practice, the Internet appears to have opened up another channel for companies to disseminate a corporate line (Levine et al. 2000). Wider empirical evidence and the experiences of the interview participants in this research suggest that companies often reply to emails with a stock message from a corporate script which fails to address the questions posed:

“ If I get something personal saying “so and so has received you order blah blah”, you know, you can tell when it’s not just an automatic reply” (Interview 6, male 38)

or simply do not reply at all. For example, one person commented how email to one company:

“Just sits there for 5 days in an email box and nobody reads it and you’re just “Well what the hell’s going on”?” (Interview 6, male, 38).

eMail is generally used by companies as a marketing tool to send out promotional marketing messages which individuals experience as ‘spam’, often quoted as the most annoying aspect of the Internet:

“I hate it. It irritates the hell out of me. I hate being bombarded with junk email. I can’t stand it. It’s the scourge of the internet. I really think that it needs controlling there’s no control, you know with the internet it’s unstoppable isn’t it? It’s going to put people off” (Interview 6, male, 38)

“I don’t like getting advertising material. I don’t read it because if I want to find out about something then I will find out about it. So it just goes in the bin” (Interview 10, female, 52)

Companies have not adopted the Internet as a means of personal B2C (business to consumer) communication. Few companies have adopted real time chat with customers into their day-to-day practices. Many don’t even respond to emails, or reply with a stock message that doesn’t answer the particular individual query. Current business practice means that customer communication via the Internet amounts merely to marketing messages or SPAM (notably forcing consumers to purchase anti SPAM software) and falling short of the promise.

In contrast, the Internet does appear to facilitate customer-to-customer communication. Through consumer reviews, discussion forums, chat rooms, newsgroups and most successfully through online auction sites such as ebay.com, customers are becoming connected, discussing products, companies and services, interacting socially and sharing experiences or knowledge. Consumers *can* read others’ experiences of products and services and so make a more informed decision over which product to buy. They can even add their own experiences of products and services. However, an interesting question is whether we are conditioned to look for some form of validation for sources of information. Some respondents in this research noted that they would not know whether to “trust” a personal opinion and would usually look for a symbol of validity such as a brand name or logo suggesting that the information was “trustworthy”. This need for validity of ‘trustworthiness’ effectively erases informal customer-to-customer information exchange on independent sites for those customers, and effectively ensures that companies also have some control over the customer-to-customer discourse or C2C communication. As Foucault comments, “Discourse is created and perpetuated by those who have the power and means of communication” (Foucault, 1980). Through the perpetuation of the myth that the Internet can be harmful and deceptive, and our culturally ingrained need for authority’s verification and validation of information, a limited number of large, well-known commercial companies could maintain control.

Significantly, through companies neglecting to engage in conversations with customers via the Internet this medium allows only lateral customer-to-customer communication. It does not facilitate vertical or customer to company communication, reinforcing the boundaries or barriers and maintaining the company fortress. It could be argued therefore that two worlds are operating. The establishment business-to-consumer communications from the corporate script which mirror off line interaction; and the pocket of dissenters, laterally connected through the Internet, muttering and complaining to each other, plotting a virtual revolution but in practice having limited transformative effect on the companies who choose not to listen. Interestingly, strategies suggested to companies who find that their services and products are the butt of “unfavourable hate or spoof sites” include pre-empting and buying “URLs for the firm’s name preceded by “I hate” or followed by “sucks”” or “offer to host the site” thereby gaining some control over the content, and ultimately “sue the site owner” (Pitt et al, 2002). This illustrates how the economic power of the companies enables control of not only business-to-customer communication, but also customer-to-customer communication. Companies can effectively buy up the rights of customers to publicly discuss their products and services.

Deconstruction of the myth that eCommerce enables better communication C2B and C2C shows that although the Internet has the *potential* to empower customers, current business practices ensure that companies maintain a powerful fortress, controlling communication and limiting its effect.

### 3.5 eCommerce Brings About Personalisation of Services to Customers

One of the key promises of the Internet for individuals was that it would enable personalised, relevant and timely marketing. No longer would we be treated as a mass of consumers addressed through broadcast media whether we were interested in the product or not. The internet would enable tailored marketing, treating us as individuals, narrowcasting on a one-to-one basis (Peppers and Rogers, 1996) *whenever we gave permission* (Godin, 1999). As anyone with an email account, or who regularly carries out searches on the Internet will know, the practice is worlds away from this promise. A most vehement attack on the indiscriminate bombarding of internet users with advertisements was made by one interview participant:

“You come off the internet and you realise that there’s three or four windows up of advertising stuff and you weren’t even aware that they had come into your machine and I don’t like that. They do it so that the window is slightly shifted so that you can’t get to the cross. Somebody’s thought all this through and it’s just irritating and they should be shot.” (Interview 5, male 41)

There are many strands making up the myth that the Internet brings about the personalisation of services to customers. The first is that companies send out personal marketing communications. In reality, companies send out a standard email to many people with the individuals name at the top. Inserting a personal name at the top of an email does not make it a “personalised communication”. The second strand is that promotional emails are tailored to the customer’s interests and needs. In practice, many people receive emails about products and services that they have no interest in whatsoever. This is hardly the personalised, targeted and timely marketing that we were promised. Finally, the concept of permission marketing, whereby a person gives their explicit permission for a company to send out marketing material to them, has been lost under a sea of unsolicited, or third party emails and pop up advertisements.

Personalisation of products and services via the Internet could be regarded as the greatest mass delusion of recent times. We have been seduced into believing that by allowing information to be gathered about us we will get a better, more personalised service. In reality the practice of gathering knowledge enables companies to market more directly to us, to follow us into our homes, and to try to convince us that we need whatever they may happen to sell. It has been argued that this knowledge gathering is a mode of surveillance. It is the gathering of knowledge about the interests, preferences, routines and movements of individuals for the benefit of the company (Lyon, 1993; Robins K. and Webster, 1988). Further, Gandy focuses specifically on ways that personal consumer data has “become a vital ‘information commodity’ within contemporary capitalism.” (Gandy, 2000), assisting companies in their marketing strategies and creation of our consumer identities:

“By gathering ‘electronic fingerprints’, institutions are able to categorize consumers into ‘types’ and create consumer profiles (we are categorised and segmented). This information may then be used for marketing, or sold to other interests for a variety of purposes (by using the information we have provided, power may be exerted over us)” (Robins K. and Webster, 1988).

Significantly, however, the information gathered by the companies does not appear to improve marketing for customers, or to bring about a truly personalised service. The practice of collecting information about customers is experienced by one interview participant as disempowering. He commented:

“I’ve filled in enquiry forms and that sort of thing, where they are basically gathering data on me.....I just don’t like the idea anyway because all they need to do is put in your postcode and your name and there you go! They’ve got you! And how do they link that up with other databases? You don’t know do you?” (Interview 4, male, 49)

The discourse of suspicion and uncertainty here echoes the form of oppression used in Bentham's panopticon "this model of undetected surveillance keeps those watched subordinate by means of uncertainty." (Lyon, 1993) . This trade in knowledge about customers, or in 'consumer identities' created from electronic data gathered about us (Poster, 1984), happens with neither our permission nor our knowledge. Ironically, the very aspect of eCommerce that promised to bring us a more personalised tailored service and so empower us as customers is now highly instrumental in enabling companies to exert power over us. Rather than communicate with customers to create mutually beneficial knowledge, companies gather knowledge about customers, sometimes without them even realising it. Several authors have likened this "electronic surveillance" (Lyon, 1993) to Jeremy Bentham's panopticon, or all seeing prison design (Boyne, 2000) which Foucault highlighted as being greatly significant to modern society (Foucault, 1995) . Foucault proposed that panopticism represents a shift from power over the body, as in corporal punishment, to power over the mind as inmates knew that they could be watched by guards at any time, but they never knew *when* they were actually being watched. In Foucault's words, the inmate is "...seen but he does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication" (Foucault, 1995). It could be argued that by following people into their homes, or in the case of mobile devices wherever they go, and tracking their Internet movements or electronic footprints companies do indeed "isolate and observe" individuals. In some ways the means to observe is 'normalised' and overt through the need to register on company websites. Other methods such as cookie planting are less well understood, and more covert; surveillance without our knowledge.

Many criticisms have been levelled at the adoption of panopticism to interpret contemporary society. (Robins and Webster, 1999; (Kling and Allen J., 1994). However, methods of technological surveillance have advanced since these writings, and the panoptic metaphor is now arguably more applicable. Significantly. it has been noted that one area where the panoptica metaphor has great relevance is in the commercialisation of the WWW (Gandy, 2000). The metaphor can be effectively adopted here to explore the myth of personalisation of commercial services through the Internet.

## 4 CONCLUSIONS

The myths considered here are all strands of the over arching myth that eCommerce empowers customers. This section shows how each myth can be deconstructed, thus exploding the myth that customers are empowered through eCommerce. The empirical material collected in the course of this research supports the deconstruction of the myths.

In order to address the incongruity between online retail provision and the needs or requirements of customers, retailers who adopt eCommerce need to develop a greater sense of "audience" and consider the user's requirements more fully. However, the relationship between "producers" and "consumers" is so culturally ingrained that a true shift in the power balance remains elusive. Customers were redefined as "consumers" with the rise of mass production and became passive objects of the marketing and sales activities of the capitalist enterprise (Levine et al. 2000). A significant twist to the ubiquitous belief that the Internet empowers customers lies in the question 'how far can commercial enterprises actually afford to empower consumers?' Buyer power continues to be regarded as a threat to sustained competitive advantage and as such needs to be managed effectively (Porter, 1996). The maintenance of the *status quo* through distorted communications and an illusionary empowerment of customers through the internet could be serving the interests of companies well.

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