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An Interview with Dr. James N. Herndon
(Member, American Psychological Association)
MEDIA PSYCHOLOGY AFFILIATES
info@mediapsychology.tv
drjnh@yahoo.com
www.mediapsychology.tv
tel (623) 217-9658 (USA)
tel (49) 174 691 2826 (GERMANY)

Q: Hello, Dr. Herndon. Thanks for your time.

Dr. Herndon: It's my pleasure.

Q: Could you tell us about your academic and business background?

Dr. Herndon: I've got a B.S. in Psychology and Ph.D. in Educational Technology...in 1988...both from Arizona State University. After I got my Ph.D., I worked for Intel for a year, and then started my own business as a media consultant, with a heavy emphasis on film and video design for the corporate and entertainment worlds. In the last few years, I've moved into the political arena as well. Now that my new research tool, Affective Encryption Analysis, is available, I've re-branded my company as Media Psychology Affiliates. We've got bases in Los Angeles and Coburg, Germany.

Q: First of all, exactly what is Media Psychology?

Dr. Herndon: For me, Media Psychology is the use of research-based media to change behavior.

Q: When I hear "change behavior," that sounds a little Orwellian. Is that the objective of Media Psychology?

Dr. Herndon: I can't speak for other media psychologists. But let's be honest. If you're producing media of any kind, you're trying to change someone's behavior. You want someone to go see your movie. You want someone to vote for your candidate. Basically you want someone to buy your product or service...to be satisfied with it...and to stay satisfied. That's behavior change at its most basic.

Q: This sounds like something that the advertising world has been doing for decades. What makes Media Psychology different?

Dr. Herndon: I agree that, to a certain extent, the whole concept of “Media Psychology” is just old wine with new labels. But the media explosion of the last decade means that we have to be more thorough and scientific in planning, designing, producing and evaluating our media. The competitive stakes are now too high to continue to rely on techniques that were effective 25 years ago. Using these same techniques today is going to cost you in both the short- and the long-run.

Q: You say that “Media Psychology is the use of research-based media to change behavior.” Where does “psychology” come in?

Dr. Herndon: When you talk about behavior change, you’re deep into the world of psychology...whether you want to be or not! I believe that psychology is still at least as much of an art as it is a science. Yet we still have a number of useful psychological principles, as well as experimental and statistical paradigms, that we can draw-on in our efforts to use media to achieve the results we’re looking for.

Q: Which aspects of psychology do you think are most valuable in the media world?

Dr. Herndon: If you don’t mind, I’d like to turn that around a bit. For me, the real question is: What are the biggest psychological challenges in the media world?

Q: OK.

Dr. Herndon: Two things. First, the principal challenge is to understand the individuals or groups you are targeting for analysis or change. We can come at this from a number of directions. Personality profiling. Psychopathology. Cultural and social constructs. Affective trends. And naturally, we have this ongoing fear about controlling the validity issue.

Q: What do you mean?

Dr. Herndon: Virtually all social science research...especially experimental research...has significant validity problems. We think we’re measuring one thing, but we’re really measuring something else...or nothing at all! To say that most social science experimental research is questionable is being polite. That’s not a criticism of the researchers. It’s

just that a lot of our traditional research techniques have simply never really worked all that well. But it's hard to admit that to ourselves. So we keep them around like an old pair of shoes that you can't bear to part with. They're too comfortable.

Q: Are you blaming academia for this situation?

Dr. Herndon: Not really. After all, I'm at least a partial product of that world! But, by and large, academics publish to please each other...which means a lot of conceptual inbreeding. I'll leave it to a geneticist to explain the results of that!

Q: So, understanding the audience is the first challenge. What's the second?

Dr. Herndon: The measurement and evaluation issues. Most of our decision-making in the business world is a numbers game. But it's not always easy in psychology to report things in terms of numbers and then make sense of them. My clients are in the worlds of business and politics. These groups typically look to numbers to help guide their decisions. Any practitioner of media psychology is faced with the problem of how to provide his or her clients with understandable, meaningful, actionable data. Business people are awash in a sea of numbers. But they expect it. So there's an understandable suspicion when you suggest that there are some alternatives.

Q: What are the alternatives?

Dr. Herndon: One thing is plain...but too often ignored: Feelings change behavior. In fact, that's the slogan of Media Psychology Affiliates. But, I'd go farther and say that emotions are the key factors in behavior change. We may be living in an increasingly high-tech world...but the emotional component underlying our actions hasn't changed. In fact, I believe it has intensified in recent years. This indicates that we need to re-evaluate our research and media assumptions. This is what I've attempted to do.

Q: In what ways?

Dr. Herndon: Well...this need for a re-evaluation of assumptions was the reason for the development of our new research tool, Affective Encryption Analysis, which I've been working on for many years. Affective means emotions or feelings. Encryption means that we encode

our emotional reactions in quantum-like bundles. These are largely hidden...and we call them forth, both consciously and unconsciously, as we engage in a variety of behaviors. For example, I may have a certain bundle of feelings related to a certain politician. These feelings come into play when I make my voting decisions...which are almost never primarily issue-related. Affective Encryption Analysis can be used either passively or actively.

Q: What do you mean by passively or actively?

Dr. Herndon: I mean that Affective Encryption Analysis can be used either to passively predict behavior, or as an active tool to mold or change behavior. I initially developed it as a potential tool for the intelligence community. But I've done a significant number of tests in the political arena.

Q: Have you published anything on Affective Encryption Analysis?

Dr. Herndon: No.

Q: Why not?

Dr. Herndon: It wouldn't really have been any advantage for me to do so. And frankly, it's too proprietary. But since it's ready to go, I'm now at the point where I can start talking about it...and promoting it.

Q: But isn't publication in a peer-reviewed journal the usual path for something like this?

Dr. Herndon: Not really. I don't think I've ever seen anything of any significant economic value discussed in any meaningful detail in a peer-reviewed journal. At this stage, Affective Encryption Analysis needs to be financially exploited. It's proprietary. And, for now, I want to keep it that way.

Q: What can you tell us about it?

Dr. Herndon: Affective Encryption Analysis, again, is based on the assumption that emotions, or feelings, are the primary behavioral control mechanisms in humans. At its core is an ever-mutating regression equation with ever-evolving factors and weights. A number of subtle areas are explored...and in a number of subtle ways. Sample sizes are significantly less than in traditional survey research. And...there are no

paper and pencil surveys. And no traditional canned telephone or in-person questioning. The research is all naturalistic. In other words, as real-world as possible. Data reporting is vector-based, and we attempt to get away from raw numbers as the only meaningful way to report and discuss data.

Q: This sounds like the passive aspect of Affective Encryption Analysis. What about the active?

Dr. Herndon: It's a fabulous tool in helping to design media. It lets you focus-in on those emotional factors that will help you achieve your behavior-change objectives. One thing that Affective Encryption Analysis has shown me is that much of our national media campaigns are way too slick and cold. I'm not talking about media production quality...which needs to always be at the highest level. I mean a lot of media just isn't connecting in any meaningful way emotionally. This kind of media is largely a waste of money.

Q: You just completed a study on the 2008 presidential election using Affective Encryption Analysis.

Dr. Herndon: Yes. It was fascinating. The bottom line was...the Republicans should be very afraid of going up against Al Gore. But should Gore not run, it will be a cakewalk for the GOP. We found that Hillary Clinton, without a drastic media image-makeover, cannot win. Even though the election is over two years away, efforts to overturn voters' ingrained ill-feelings toward a candidate need to start early.

Q: How was Affective Encryption Analysis utilized in this study?

Dr. Herndon: We used Affective Encryption Analysis to micro-target a relatively small sample-base...375...and then use naturalistic research strategies to arrive at a feeling trend.

Q: How reliable are your results?

Dr. Herndon: I'm satisfied that we have a tool with unmatched internal validity and predictive reliability.

Q: Do you believe in traditional political survey strategies?

Dr. Herndon: Only in a limited number of ways. First, all political surveys really revolve around only one critically important question: "Are

you going to vote for this candidate?" Other voter survey questions are usually either leading-questions, or are, in some other way, of questionable value and design. And the whole area of demographics is tremendously over-valued. Significant feeling trends are pan-demographic. Most pollsters still don't understand this.

Q: Any advice you can give politicians from your research with Affective Encryption Analysis?

Dr. Herndon: Yes. Political campaigns need to concentrate on establishing positive feelings, and a dynamic image, in everything they do and say...and not just among potential voters. The politics of persistent attack is horribly counterproductive. Voters are quickly confused by bickering issue arguments. They're ultimately looking for someone they can love. Opposing candidates who engage in finger-pointing remind voters of squabbling siblings. It's an emotional turn-off. For a smart candidate, the opposing candidate doesn't exist. You discuss, and interact with, your opponent only when necessary....and then only in ways that direct positive emotional energy towards yourself.

Q: How effective is the Bush administration's use of media?

Dr. Herndon: The Bush administration has demonstrated devastatingly effective power politics. But a knowledge of power and a knowledge of people are not the same thing. President Bush's approval ratings should now be above 70%. His use of media is almost nonexistent, which has probably been a good thing, since almost every media move made by his people has been misjudged and poorly designed. Media exists to manage feelings. Nothing more, nothing less. When your constituents' feelings are negative, there's something desperately wrong with the way you're using media. The public's emotional patience is not unlimited. Feelings translate into behavior. This is one of the great lessons of history.

Q: You sound a little cynical about the uses of media.

Dr. Herndon: Not at all. Acknowledging human psychological tendencies is not cynical. It's just facing facts squarely. Do our uses of media contain a moral responsibility? Certainly. Can a higher cause ever justify a pernicious use of media? Arguably. But, really, every step we take in life ultimately poses some sort of moral dilemma. I've found that persons who aggressively take a high moral stance are, themselves, typically living in easily shattered glass houses. Perhaps our biggest challenge is

not to become just like the things we denounce. And to realize that no one holds a patent on truth and justice.

Q: So...what's next for Media Psychology Affiliates?

Dr. Herndon: Well...one of our goals is to become involved with a candidate in a major national political campaign. That candidate will win.

Q: You're that confident?

Dr. Herndon: I'm that confident.

Q: So...is the medium still the message?

Dr. Herndon: (laughs) Wow, that's still around, isn't it? This is probably the single most ridiculous thing ever said about media! Of course, the exact opposite is true: The medium is never the message...that is, until you fill it with human feeling. I'd hate to have to count the number of media-comparison studies that have been conducted over the years as a result of this absurdly counter-intuitive statement. But...it certainly shows how easy it is to mislead a whole generation—through the media!

Q: You keep a very low profile.

Dr. Herndon: Well, I've decided to change that to a limited extent. But my clients and I always have a two-way confidentiality agreement. So, I never engage in name-dropping in order to get business. Plus, keep in mind, I'm a member of the American Psychological Association. This means that I'm bound by the confidentiality requirements that any APA psychologist is bound by. My clients expect total confidentiality. And I give it. Always. I don't need to use a list of former or current clients to get business. My work stands or falls on only one thing—results. People hear about you. Let's just say—I'm busy.

Q: What, for you, has been a brilliant use of media?

Dr. Herndon: That's simple. The selling of democracy. It's been the most beautifully-realized media campaign of all time. But it has come at a high psychological cost.

Q: What do you mean?

Dr. Herndon: Well...most of us living in western democracies have a tendency to feel that we have arrived at the pinnacle of political enlightenment. This can blind us to the realities of the world. And the blind can find themselves walking over a cliff.

Q: Thanks very much for your time.

Dr. Herndon: Thank you.