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**News and Nuances of the Entrepreneurial Myth and Metaphor:  
Linguistic Games in Entrepreneurial Sensemaking and Sensegiving**

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## **Abstract**

This paper describes a social construction of entrepreneurship by exploring the constructionalist building blocks of communication, myth and metaphor presented in the Independent newspaper. We argue that the sense-making role of figurative language is important because of the inherent problems in defining and describing the entrepreneurial phenomena. Myth and metaphor in newspapers create an entrepreneurial appreciation that helps define our understanding of the world around us. The content analysis of articles published in the Independent newspaper revealed images of male entrepreneurs as dynamic wolfish charmers, supernatural gurus, successful skyrockets or community saviours and corrupters. Finally, the paper relates the temporal construction of myth and metaphor to the dynamics of enterprise culture.

## **Introduction**

The purpose of this paper is to explore the shifts and changes in the metaphoric portrayal of entrepreneurs and entrepreneurship in the media in the period 1989 to 2000. Using data drawn from the Independent newspaper (Nicolson, 2001), we find continuity in a consistent pattern of entrepreneurs portrayed as larger than life, but also a remarkable discontinuity. Entrepreneurs were first made giants but, by 2000, they were discovered to have feet of clay. These interesting accounts may reflect the difficulty identified in the academic literature of defining the term entrepreneurship. (Gartner, 1988; Carland *et al*, 1994; Bygrave and Hoffer, 1991; Johannisson and Sennesth, 1993; Rosa and Bowes, 1993) and weaknesses recognised in traditional methods of conceptualising entrepreneurship (Chell, 1985, Jack and Anderson, 2002). However, metaphors in entrepreneurship description, and indeed, all figurative language, play an important process role in how we think and learn about phenomena. Of all the entrepreneurial discourse, metaphor is the most vivid. In explaining one thing in terms of another, attributes are produced and expectations raised. This sense-making role is particularly important for entrepreneurship because of the inherent problems of defining or even describing entrepreneurship. Even entrepreneurs themselves, as Hill and Levenhaugh (1995) suggest, operate at the edge of what they do not know. At root, entrepreneurship is about creating new realities; transforming ideas into new ventures, transposing old ideas into new situations. To be truly entrepreneurial, this Schumpertian act must be unique and must reach into an unknowable future. With such an intangible definition, it is no surprise that descriptive entrepreneurial metaphors are needed to “generate insight into how things are”(de Koning and Drakopoulou-Dodd, 2002:2).

We attempt to explain this paradigmatic shift by contextualising the changes within the meta analytical framework of Giddens's idea of structuration. This helps us to see how the underlying dominant ideology of entrepreneurial agency is reflected in the changing socio-economic structure. We set our account firmly in the context of social constructionism, arguing that such an approach helps us to understand the complexities of the entrepreneurial phenomenon. Moreover, this conceptualisation allows us to address the different layers of meaning and the production of these meanings that surround and form the idea of entrepreneurship. Our methodological technique is the content analysis of articles published in the Independent newspaper. This is not a post-modern analysis as we do not see the meanings of entrepreneurship as free floating. Whilst entrepreneurship is a transitory act in constant flux and change, and metaphor is itself symbolic and part of the emancipatory narrative, we argue that meaning is firmly anchored in the modernist project. As Nisbet (1980:4) states, the modern condition is an expectation that tomorrow will be better than today, so this progress is the entrepreneurial role. Whilst media may be a "depthless field" (Baudrillard, 1981) and metaphor may well be pastiche, entrepreneurship remains the friendly face of capitalism. Specific meanings, attributes and associated expectations may ebb and flow in the shifting sea of context, time and place. However, this is not the simulacra that Baudrillard describes, the metaphors are not self-referential images but allude to a true (or nearly true) reality of wealth creation, a righteous *production* of modernity. Nonetheless, the conceptual toolbox of post structural analysis allows us to find more solid foundations of entrepreneurial meaning by linking the higher level social theoretical abstractions to the day-to-day cultural productions of journalists.

The paper begins by discussing social constructionism and exploring constructionism's building blocks of communication, myth and metaphor to understand how newspapers create an entrepreneurial myth that defines our understanding of the world around us. This provides the overview for the theoretical exploration of myth and metaphor as sense making tools. We then consider culture and how it is communicated, before exploring newspapers as constructionalist tools. The methodology is explained and examples of unearthed entrepreneurial metaphors provided. After discussion, we offer some conclusions about the production and dynamics of the enterprise culture.

### **Social Constructionism**

For this study, our theoretical orientation is Giddens's idea of structuration. This social constructivist conceptualisation of structure and agency allows us to recognise both change and continuity. Agents, in this case, are the journalists, whilst the structure we describe is that of the enterprise culture. As Giddens (1976:78)

puts it the “hierarchy of purposes, the interlocking or interweaving of different purposes.” To borrow further from Giddens (1984:284), descriptions have the task of mediating the frames of meaning within which actors orient their conduct. Consequently, they must describe the "milieu" to those unfamiliar with it. The social scientist must draw upon the same sources of "mutual" knowledge and "display" the tacit forms whereby practical activities are ordered. This seems fitting because the entrepreneurial phenomenon is a social construct, a set of beliefs about entrepreneurship. Berger and Luckman (1966) note how theoretical formations of reality, whether scientific, philosophical or even mythological do not exhaust all that is real for the members of that society, so that social constructions of reality are founded in intersubjective experiences. Only a limited number of people engage with the theorising of ideas, but everyone in society participates in society’s knowledge (Smith and Anderson, 2002). Chell (2000) shows how social constructionism allows us to understand the ways and mechanisms which individuals use to interpret their social environment. She shows how language guides our sense of social reality, by framing, filtering and creation to transform the subjective into a more tangible reality. Cardwell (2000) reminds us that perception is built from inferences from our experience and memories, so that we construct our own realities. Constructionists asserts that perception is built from “inferences and guesses based on previous experience and memories” which, in turn, actively ‘construct’ our very own reality (Cardwell, 2000:61). In other words, reality is not just the sum of sensory data, but the product of active perceptual constructions (Gergen 1998).

Constructionists persistently challenge the empiricist’s desire to close the relationship between language, observation and truth (Gergen, 1998). The broad shift from the empirical object of representation (‘the facts’) to the vehicle of representation (language, mental models, communication) defines the constructionist paradigm. By considering the cultural, political and economic influences affecting journalist and newspaper reader, this study adopts a community social constructionist stance. Considering the linguistic processes that facilitate community construction, this study also draws in the psychological processes of mental modelling and mythmaking. In this context, it is possible to define the role of newspapers as a *communication mode* constructing mythology that helps us construct and define the world around us. Therefore, for the purposes of this study, the building blocks of constructionism are culture, communications theory, myth and metaphor.

### **Communicating Culture**

Culture is a reflection of group processes and is itself a construct (Hofstede 1993). It is not directly observable but inferable from verbal statements. Raymond Williams (1981) considers culture to be the signifying system

through which a social order is communicated, reproduced and experienced. This model of culture seems fairly close to the notion of the enterprise culture, as understood and intended by its protagonists, whose intention was to communicate and reproduce their vision (Gray, 1998, Drakopoulou-Dodd and Anderson, 2001). Theoretical developments in cultural studies have led us to understand that cultures are not naturally bounded entities, nor can they be completely understood as a shared underlying meaning system. Strinati (1998:5) for example presents culture as a manipulator, “mass media equals mass propaganda equals mass repression”. In contrast Eagleton (2000) argues that it is unlikely that human beings are mere products of their environs, hence culture is produced as well as being consumed. The implication of understanding culture as social construction (for example Barry, 1999) is that we, as social animals, may have a number of ways of seeing, and acting upon, this culture. In consequence such a variable construction cannot be truly hegemonic. This seems to raise the issue of how such cultures are produced and reproduced within the media.

Wagner (1986:ix) proposes that, “Meaning is not, of course, a free-floating intangible, but a phenomenon that stands in a certain relation to the conventions of culture”. So, in terms of cultural analysis, the key question appears to be why has enterprise been turned into a cultural icon to explain and legitimate contemporary capitalist structures? Kumar (1995) suggests that post-modern culture as the promotion of individualist modes of thought and behaviour; a culture of entrepreneurialism with the end of universalism and standardisation. The simple case would be that the enterprise culture is the manifestation of these values and social priorities. In particular, that the enterprise culture is a new configuration of social norms to incorporate and reassert individualism in the context of social and economic flux. The enterprise culture appears then to re-moralise the world of individual social action (Drakopoulou-Dodd and Anderson 2001). As Ritchie (1991) asserts, it becomes a self-sealing discourse. Notions of progress, development and universality are inherent in the enterprise culture paradigm. So, notwithstanding the wish fulfilment elements of enterprise culture, the paradigm is placed firmly within modernism, rather than post-modernism. Chell & Adam (1995:54-55) conclude, “Culture is a holistic, social and collective phenomenon, created and emanating from group sources; as such, it is learned and not inherited.” This summary eloquently indicates the role culture plays as bedrock to the social constructionism of entrepreneurship. Culture influences both journalist and reader by defining the characteristics that distinguish one group (for example, entrepreneurs) from another (for example, managers).

Schramm’s seminal definition of communications states that communication is “The process of establishing a commonness or oneness of thought between a sender and receiver” (cited Brassington & Pettitt, 2000:561).

Frosh (1989:124) defines language as a carrier of sociality and claims that culture changes through the accumulation and layering of linguistic representations over time. Thus, the process of symbolisation is one that carries with it a social change. This aspect of communicating culture seems important to our appreciation of the role of journalistic productions. We see a dualistic interplay between the journalist and reader, but we also see how culture, particularly enterprise culture, provides an overarching frame of meaning. Such culture sets the communication code, but significantly, reiterates and amplifies, produces and reproduces some cultural norms of enterprise. Turning from this general view of the social construction of culture and communication where we have outlined the interactions between the production and consumption of enterprise culture, we look now at one particular linguistic trope, the metaphor.

### **What is Meta-phor?**

We note the emergence of interest in the entrepreneurial metaphor (Koiranen 1995) and the narrative (Steyaert and Bouwen, 1997; Pitt, 1998), thus highlighting the use of language in the entrepreneurship construct. As Clark and Dear (1984: 84) note, “language is used to construct or reconstruct social reality”. However, words are not neutral, they are not a pure picture of the world. Habermas (1976) shows us how words are all subject to specific interests and that only an ideological critique can show the myths, the values or doctrines that underlie apparently neutral claims of truth. As the philosopher Austin (1962) puts it, we engage in a performance with words. According to Edelman (1977:16,17) metaphors evoke, “mythic cognitive structures”. Such sense-making metaphors also “establish images, names and an understanding of how things fit together... articulate what is important and unimportant ... [so] in the context of such models believing is seeing” (Hill and Levenhagen, 1995:1057). Lakoff and Johnson (1980:6) argue that managerial and entrepreneurial activities such as problem solving or arguing are essentially metaphorical in nature and that metaphors affect how we act in organisational contexts.

The role of metaphor has ancient roots, Aristotle in *Topica*, challenged the ambiguities of metaphor (Ortony, 1979). In *Poetics* he criticised metaphor as giving something a name that belongs to something else. Grey (2002) notes how Hobbes (1651) treated metaphor with both veneration and suspicion; venerated because of its ability to express but abuse of language in its ability to obfuscate. Following Rorty (1989), Krippdorff (1993) sees this as unproductive. He sees language as a way of organising experience and notes that Vico, in the Eighteenth Century, recognised metaphor as the most important manifestation of human creativity. Similarly, Foucault (1972) asserts that linguistic fragments or “statements”, such as “thrusting entrepreneur”, form a

coherent “repertoire of concepts” under specific conditions. Mill (1875) saw the benefit of metaphor as “connotations”, systems of associated commonplaces. As Koironen (1995:205) rightly states, “Meaning comes with context”. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) explain how metaphors partially structure our everyday experience and this structure is reflected in our literal language. They argue that many of our activities (arguing, solving problems, budgeting time, etc.) are metaphorical in nature. The metaphorical concepts that characterize those activities structure our present reality, so new metaphors have the power to create a new reality. These points lead de Koning and Drakopoulou-Dodd (2002) to argue that metaphors create realities, guide future action and reinforce experiential coherence. Hill and Levenhagen (1995:1057) suggest that metaphors “establish images, names and an understanding of how things fit together... articulate what is important and unimportant”. Metaphor in the media may have an even more important role since Langwitz and Morgan (2002) point out that popular media is a powerful force in shaping perceptions of reality.

Recent examples in entrepreneurial research are the explorations of metaphor by Kiorenan (1995); Hyrsky (1988); de Koning and Drakopoulou-Dodd (2002). Each examined the role of metaphors in explaining the entrepreneurial construct, in particular the utility of metaphors as descriptors of sets of behaviours, through which reality is constructed. Koironen (1995) unearthed descriptions of warrior, superman, explorer, mother, marathon runner, lion, whirlwind, magnet, captain, even God. It is in this sense that entrepreneurship manages meaning and survives by adopting a stance of unquestionable strength, bravery or authority. All noted examples of metaphors as action orientated (e.g. sportsmen, game player, adventurer, warrior, battler) which help build the heroic status ascribed to the entrepreneur. Entrepreneurial metaphors are thus heuristic action orientated labels which allow us to assemble the complex construct.

### **Newspapers as Constuctionist Tools**

Perhaps newspapers, as one specific communication mode, are an entrepreneurial ‘Greek chorus’ (Kets de Vries 2000:5) and transmit the sense-making mechanisms described above? Semiological processes, or the creating and transmission of meaning, are the reason newspapers exist. As with culture and communication, the role newspapers play in mirroring or manipulating reality seem to converge. In researching journalists’ own perception of their craft, there is a palpable sense that “comment is free but facts are sacred” (Scott cited Allan 1999:7). Accuracy and objectivity are professional ideals for journalists (Clayton, 2000, Allan, 1999:24, The Society of Professional Journalists, [www.spj.org/ethics/index](http://www.spj.org/ethics/index)). However, the drama and glamour of what is caught in the news net leads to the accusation that “good journalism *is* popular culture” (Bernstein cited Allan,

1999:185). In this sense, rather than an inert mirror, newspapers play an active role in the creation and manipulation of reality. Drawing on Hall (1980a, 1980b), it is possible to see that although journalists typically present a news account as an ‘objective’, ‘impartial’ *translation* of reality, it may instead be understood to be providing an ideological *construction* of contending truth claims about reality. The news account, far from simply ‘reflecting’ the reality of an event, is effectively providing a codified definition of what should count as reality. As Barthes (cited Allan, 1999:2) succinctly notes; “The world has to be rendered ‘reportable’ in the first place... What is noted is by definition notable”. Refreshingly, Allen (1999:3) challenges the usual dichotomy of media versus society, urging us to view newspapers as an integral part their social, economic and political context. In the same way, newspaper readers are not empty boxes waiting to be filled with information. Using structuration theory it is possible to see newspaper productions as both creators and reflectors, transmitting and creating culture.

Newspapers were chosen for study as they provide a convenient written daily record of potential entrepreneurial mythmaking and are therefore more easily sampled and analysed than verbal speech, television or any alternative communication mode. There was also William’s compelling urge to reconnect the press with the economic and social history of the society it serves (1961:195). Widely distributed and a potent mixture of fact and myth, newspapers provide a written record of societal conceptualisation of entrepreneurship. Lastly, Ljunggren & Alsos (2001:2) note the media’s dual mirror/manipulator role in relation to entrepreneurship; “Media has an important impact regarding creation of attitudes as well as making potential role models visible... Further, newspaper’s presentations of phenomena such as entrepreneurship can be comprehended as an expression of general attitudes and understandings in society about a phenomenon.”

## **Methodology**

Content analysis is “the objective, systematic...description of the manifest content of communication” (McQuail, 1977:1) to “make valid inferences from text” (Weber, 1985:9). Content analysis has been chosen as a methodology because it generates indicators illustrating the beliefs, values, ideologies and other cultural systems from documents, such as newspapers, over time (Weber, 1985). Essentially, content analysis is the only rigorous way of analysing newspaper text. ‘The Independent’ newspaper was chosen because of its reputation



as a reputable broadsheet, its management philosophy of independent, non-biased reporting, high circulation figures and easy to negotiate database search engine.

### **Sampling**

Using CD ROM, all articles featuring the word 'entrepreneur/s' in 'The Independent' throughout the year 1989 and year 2000 were sampled. The 1261 articles were read to ensure that they contained the word 'entrepreneur/s'. After average article word length was analysed, a further sample was taken to facilitate detailed analysis. The first ten and last ten articles of each month, throughout 1989 and 2000, were selected from the larger sample. From this smaller sample of 480 articles, letters to the editor, 'anniversaries /'birthdays' features, 'Business and City Summary', 'Market Reports' and other share based features were excluded because these articles tended to use the term 'entrepreneur' as description with no other qualifying adjectives. Similarly, court circulars and theatre/arts listings were excluded. Articles of less than 10 lines were excluded to ensure that collocation and context surrounding the word 'entrepreneur' could be accurately analysed.

### **Coding and Categorising Text**

Analysis involved the development of a coding frame for classification (McQuail, 1977:5). The coding system for sampled text was developed from two pilots; the first analysed ten articles from 'Business A.M.', the second fifty articles from 'The Financial Times'. The first coding framework was based on Koiranen's (1995) work regarding entrepreneurship metaphors. This framework plotted a crude scale from entrepreneurial metaphors. Using this crude framework as a starting point when classifying pilot newspaper articles, it was possible to identify four scales regarding the portrayal of entrepreneurs;

1. The extent to which entrepreneurial *personality or process* is portrayed as key in facilitating a particular outcome. In other words, the characteristics of the entrepreneur's activity and agency.
2. The extent to which entrepreneurial personality and/or process *impacts* on our social/political/economic world, if at all.
3. The portrayal of the outcome of the entrepreneurial action or process, whether the outcome is portrayed as a *success or failure*, and whether the entrepreneur is portrayed as a problem creator or problem solver in that context.
4. Whether terminology and metaphors used to describe the entrepreneur and his/her context are *positive* and active or *negative* and passive.

In addition to these four sliding scales, the biographical details of the entrepreneur detailed in the article and article subject matter were also recorded.

When defining the final categories to code the text, care was taken to ensure the categories in each scale were mutually exclusive (Weber, 1985:23). Key words were developed to form “common sense categories of meaning”. For example, ‘hero’ was further defined as ‘saviour’, ‘magician’, ‘guru’. However, the pilot of the coding system highlighted classification ambiguities. Subsequently, the pilot indicated that Weber’s (1985:41) key-word-in-context method would be useful. This ensures that the content of text is related to the context that produced them and context of words or phrases forms an integral part of the analysis. For example, one sampled article describes the “noble words” of a “modest entrepreneur” but only when read in context does the journalist’s sarcasm become apparent. Consequently, broad interpretation of the key word (‘entrepreneur/s’) in context (the surrounding article) was used in the second pilot and final study. The second pilot of fifty ‘Financial Times’ articles illustrated the depth and richness of material so this framework was used, unchanged, in the final study. Each sampled article was read and the headline, biographical details of the entrepreneur featured in the article and overall subject matter noted. Particular phrases in the article were then written onto the analytical framework in the appropriate box. Each completed analytical framework was entered into an excel spreadsheet which plotted clusters and trends. These trends were compared within and between the two years studied.

### **Findings and Discussion**

We had anticipated that sampled articles would portray entrepreneurs as heroic infallible protagonists within the enterprise culture, rather than educated and skilled businesspeople. However, this research identified an entrepreneurial myth more vivid and persistent than expected (See Nicolson 2001). We present our findings in two sections. First, the numerical results, which contrast the number of articles and their length. Secondly, we provide examples of the metaphoric themes portrayed in 1989 and 2000.

#### **The quantity and length of articles**

As demonstrated in Figure 1, there were consistently more articles featuring the word ‘entrepreneur/s’ throughout 2000, than in 1989. This increased number of articles suggests an increased interest in entrepreneurs, that entrepreneurs became more newsworthy. Alternatively, the increase indicates the word has slipped into common usage so perhaps accurately describes entrepreneurs who, in 1989, existed under different

labels. The increase might also reflect an actual increase in the number of entrepreneurs, rather than a definitional issue.

Insert Figure 1 about here please

Figure 2 demonstrates a substantial increase in the average word length of articles across the study period. This seems to confirm our first hypotheses about the increasing interest in entrepreneurs. This leads us to propose that the press demonstrated greater and deeper interest in entrepreneurship. As there was no general upward trend in the word length of all newspaper articles, this indicates that entrepreneurs were more frequently featured in discursive feature style articles, rather than in short information-giving articles. We also checked for any redistribution of the subjects presented in articles and found there was no shift in newspaper focus towards a more business-orientated subject matter. The increased length and number of articles about entrepreneurial activity was not related to any other change.

Insert Figure 2 about here please

## **Metaphoric Themes**

### **Year 1989**

The entrepreneur in 1989 is portrayed as battle protagonist, fighting a class war or broad range of opponents using psychological warfare. He (as only one female is mentioned in 1989) is heavily criticised if caught ducking battle. The entrepreneur is magician, royalty or giant. He is a hero conquering disability or economics, at the pinnacle of the political evolutionary scale. The entrepreneur is saviour of floundering economies, prosperity, companies and blushing women. He is the protagonist in a 'rags to riches' story, blessed with opportunities and resources, offering answers to prayer and advise as revered guru. He is seductively charming, dripping with enthusiasm and glamour. Excused for his rudeness, the entrepreneur is portrayed as loveable rogue or immoral con man. The entrepreneur may be greedy for a fast buck but is still admired by onlookers. Always the revolutionary, entrepreneurial success demands the entrepreneur has the right idea, a little luck, the right training and works hard. He is a risk-taker with courage, caution and fire in belly. The entrepreneur is always an outsider, seducer, aggressor, pursuer, rather than the object of affection or action. He is portrayed as responsible for bending geographical boundaries, time and reality, whilst creating a 'new order of things'. He is essentially a problem solver with power, agency and frequent success, only occasionally causing human wreckage or misery. Table 1 provides an outline of the themes that can be drawn from this metaphoric portrayal.

Insert Table 1 about here please

### **Year 2000**

In 2000, the entrepreneur is an aggressive protagonist in battle, ‘nuking’ and ‘culling’ rival businesses or governments. Despite opting out of class warfare, hostilities have increased. The entrepreneur remains royal magician, but is also portrayed as wizard, iconic legend, master of universe, giant tree, bearded shadow. Mythological images surge as the entrepreneur is portrayed as God himself rather than just blessed by God. Analysis unearths explicit references to the entrepreneur as a giant or titan, gobbling up companies, reaching up into the depths of outer space. In contrast to 1989, he is rarely portrayed as a hero and is instead affected by human fallibility and tiredness. Neither is the entrepreneur portrayed as saviour, as the objects of entrepreneurial action take a more active role. Although still charming and glamorous, the 2000 entrepreneur is more dynamic, evil and wolfish. Rather than loveable rogue, emphasis shifts to organised crime, corruption, cheating, embezzlement, fraud and exploiting ‘gullible jerks’. Cash is still king but the entrepreneur in 2000 is an object of anger or pity rather than sneaking admiration. Always the revolutionary, the entrepreneur needs the right idea, experience and tenacity to succeed. Forget training, education and luck. Only twelve women entrepreneurs are mentioned in 2000, all of which are defined through their relationships or sexual prowess. The entrepreneurial myth remains resolutely male. The entrepreneur is still the active seducer, aggressor, pursuer, rather than an object of affection or action. He bridges worlds, bends time with an ‘unquantifiable, limitless’ impact on the world around him. Not always a success, 2000 introduces the entrepreneur as problem creator causing misfortune, disruption and embarrassment. But that’s ‘just life’. Table 2 provides an outline of the themes that can be drawn from this metaphoric portrayal.

Insert Table 2 about here please

### **Comparing 1989 and 2000**

See Table 3. By comparing the portrayal of the entrepreneur in 1989 with 2000, it is possible to observe William’s (1961:65) mythological “continuities” as well as “the new generation [responding] in its own ways to the unique world it is inheriting”.

Insert Table 3 about here please

### **Analysis – The two strands of entrepreneurial mythmaking, mythological surge and the rational undercurrent**

There is a risk that the entrepreneurial myth, depicted in this study portrays the entrepreneur as “someone so full of traits that (s)he would have to be a sort of generic ‘everyman’” (Gartner, 1988:57). The entrepreneurial myth stretches to covers the evil wolfish entrepreneur and the supernatural angel-like guru, the successful skyrocket

and the community corrupter. However, the extensive range of traits making up the entrepreneurial myth have a common element; agency. Whether as creator, seducer, aggressor, charmer, saviour or pursuer, the entrepreneur is always *active*, rather than the object of someone else's agency (see table 3). With only thirteen female entrepreneurs featured in 480 sampled articles, the entrepreneurial myth is male. So how does the male entrepreneurial myth, driven by agency, develop and evolve?

We can identify two strands to entrepreneurial metaphor and mythmaking by tracing the temporal fluctuations of the entrepreneur's agency portrayed in sampled articles (See Nicolson 2001). As Figure 3 shows, first, there is a mythological surge or snowballing of aggressive, magical, giant and religious imagery. Second, there is an increasing undercurrent of imagery depicting the entrepreneur as human, fallible, creating problems and misfortune. This is the Rational Undercurrent. Both the mythological surge and rational undercurrent are social constructions or mental models that make sense of entrepreneurial action observed and reported. Subsequently, neither strand of entrepreneurial mythmaking necessarily reflects the 'realities' of entrepreneurial processes. They are ideological, rather than representational, in nature and offer a sense-making framework for entrepreneurial mythological evolution. Whilst each strand of mythology is driven by its own mechanisms, they also react to each other, creating more and more extreme counter points. Newspaper portrayal of entrepreneurial action swings from myth building conceptualisations to myth challenging conceptualisations. As the mythological surge snowballs by layering mis/understanding and the rational undercurrent is fuelled by increasing knowledge and experience of entrepreneurs, a gap widens between the two stands of myth. This gap represents the backwash created by the evolving entrepreneurial myth.

Insert Figure 3 about here please

Data in the study suggests that this mythological evolution can be set in a temporal context. In 1989 it is possible that the entrepreneurial myth and journalists/readers experience of entrepreneurs is closely aligned. The entrepreneurial myth in 1989 deals with entrepreneurs in general terms with minimal negative coverage of an entrepreneurs' human fallibility or failure. Supernatural powers are granted to the entrepreneur in 1989, but perhaps the journalist or reader does not have enough personal experience of entrepreneurs to either contradict or confirm the myth. The entrepreneur is entrepreneurship's "primary definer" (Allan, 1999:71). In other words, with the lack of familiarity with the paradigm, the entrepreneur's word is accepted as 'truth'. Myth, entrepreneurial action and the critical voice of the rational undercurrent are closely aligned. By 2000, the mythological surge and rational undercurrent have been driven apart. This has opened a mythological gap in the journalist's and reader's understanding of the entrepreneurial myth. Articles depict a more extreme supernatural

entrepreneur (due to the mythological surge) but this is countered by more extreme tales of entrepreneurial fallibility and failure (due to the rational undercurrent). The discomfort felt by the journalist is evidenced by the tone of articles expressing disappointment, frustration, anger, vitriol and ridicule regarding entrepreneurs as they struggle to reconcile their experience of the mythological surge and rational undercurrent. Reported observations of entrepreneurial action tend to confirm one strand of the entrepreneurial myth or the other.

### **The Mythological Surge**

The mythological surge is evident in the shift from 1989's portrayal of the part supernatural, part skilled entrepreneur, to 2000's mushrooming of supernatural and fantastical entrepreneurial images, at the expense of the skilled educated entrepreneur. Enterprise culture has all the defining features of a social anthropological belief system or "way of seeing" (Berger & Mohr, 1982); jargon ("SMEs"), special places (business incubators), gods (Business angels), heroes (Branson, Roddick, Gates), techniques to be carefully followed (strategic planning), storytelling about the past and future predictions (economic forecasting). Within this 'sense making' context, "[Entrepreneurship] is energising as the poet of our dreams, and as the architect of our purposes," (Whitehead in Steyaert & Bouwen, 1997:49). However, an emphasis on entrepreneurial personality traits limits access to this belief system ("I couldn't be an entrepreneur because I'm not like him"). As statistics about female and ethnic minority entrepreneurs (Storey, 1994:28,91, Ljunggren & Alsos, 2001:5) confirm, access to the entrepreneurial 'way of seeing' is selective. Limited access creates mystery. This mystery may start a snowball-effect layering of misunderstanding and understanding, as people do not have access to entrepreneurship to confirm or contradict the mythology. This, in turn, might explain the rise and rise of mythological imagery between 1989 and 2000. In other words, *keeping* entrepreneurship a mystery through the vicious cycle of myth layered on myth. The mythological surge has a nebulous momentum of its own. Sampled articles also indicate that entrepreneurs enjoy the myth surrounding them and frequently sustain the myth through their own behaviour. Myth is fed by metaphor and stereotype which provides an "understanding shorthand" (Persson et al, 2001). Newspapers rely on this shorthand and iconography to communicate succinctly with their readership. However, shorthand stereotypes necessarily bypass the reality and balance of real working lives (NPWF, 1998) so add to the mythological snowballing. Without firsthand experience or access to correct the unavoidable distortions of stereotype, the myth remains the uncorrected "collective memory" (Brisson, 28.08.01).

The mythological surge is also fuelled by socio-economic, political and cultural influences. The increasingly aggressive agency of the battle entrepreneur and narrowing of the entrepreneur's opposition witnessed in 2000 may reflect the wider socio-political perception of fiercer competition (Klein, 2000:36). In this context, the year 2000 entrepreneur may have to battle more aggressively just to "keep the boat afloat" (Storey, 1994:109) and survive financially. Similarly, the political ideologies of Thatcher in 1989 and Blair in 2000 have probably acted as catalyst to the mythological surge. The past twenty-two years have been built on first, Thatcher's "championing of free minds and markets" ([www.pathfinder.com](http://www.pathfinder.com)), then Blair's socio-economic "practical measures in pursuit of noble causes" ([www.labour.org.uk](http://www.labour.org.uk)), in short, the Enterprise Culture. Both used religious, essentially *mythmaking* rhetoric in their praise for enterprise (Anderson et al, 2000).

The mythological surge is the layering of understanding and misunderstanding regarding an entrepreneurial process. The surge is fuelled by stereotyping, inaccessibility, socio-economic and political influences and entrepreneurs themselves. It is always sufficiently removed from reality to avoid being disproved. However, the mythological surge is only one strand of the entrepreneurial myth. We now turn to its counterbalance, the rational undercurrent.

### **The Rational Undercurrent**

It is possible that journalists adopt a "bookkeeping model" (Rothbart cited [www.urich.edu](http://www.urich.edu)). This can be described as the gradual adjusting of 1989's stereotype of entrepreneur as hero and saviour, in response to new information, eventually forming the fallible entrepreneur in 2000. Alternatively, it is possible, that journalists underwent a "conversion" and changed their perception of entrepreneurs in response to dramatic disconfirming information, such as a high profile entrepreneurial failure. Without analysing the newspapers between 1990 and 1999, it is impossible to subsume that this might be the case. The most convincing explanation of the processes driving the rational undercurrent of the entrepreneurial myth is Brewer's (cited [www.urich.edu](http://www.urich.edu)) 'Subtyping model'. As 'entrepreneur' became an increasingly familiar term between 1989 and 2000, a large stereotyped group ('entrepreneurs') is subdivided into groups with separate beliefs associated with each subtype ('loveable rogue entrepreneur', 'wolfish entrepreneur', 'charming entrepreneur'). This "dilution" of the stereotype layers the mythology, ironically ensuring it applies to a wider group of people. As a stereotype is applied to increasingly more people, the entrepreneur is removed as "primary definer" and subsequently may be subject to wider critical scrutiny. The biographical profile of entrepreneurs featured in sampled articles did not change significantly between 1989 and 2000. This reiterates that 'subtyping' of entrepreneurs is ideological, rather than

representational, in nature. Metaphors model myth, rather than reality. This may explain why the entrepreneur built up as the hero in 1989 had, as demonstrated by the lack of heroic references in 2000, only one way to fall.

Like the mythological surge, the rational undercurrent is fuelled by socio-economic, political and cultural influences. For example, the rational undercurrent may be driven by “the drift of secularism” (Blanchard, 2000:240) declaring that this time and world is all there is. Ironically evidenced by the increase in religious entrepreneurial imagery in 2000, a culture with dwindling faith in God, “puts man firmly in God’s place”. From this worldview, the entrepreneur is portrayed as a “god” candidate, a mysterious, magical man. It is possible to identify the rational undercurrent in the frustration and cynicism expressed about this God-like status. “Guru today, gone tomorrow” sighs one journalist regarding an entrepreneurial “fading star”. The backwash is launched by blaming entrepreneurs. Predictably, the entrepreneur is a poor substitute for God and vitriol is reserved for the guru who disappoints. So secularism ironically adds to the mythological surge by allowing the entrepreneur to be put metaphorically in God’s place, yet simultaneously fuels the rational undercurrent which pulls the entrepreneur off the pedestal. This particular mechanism also illustrates how social processes (secularism) fuel the amplification, deconstruction and reformation of myths. Culture remains the bedrock of meaning.

### **The Backwash**

In one article, entrepreneurs are accused of “lapping up the idolatry”. This implicitly acknowledges the gap between the portrayal, worship and reality of entrepreneurs. Whilst the mythological gap is only mentioned once or twice in 1989, it is a trend that dominated the newspaper portrayal of entrepreneurs throughout 2000. Year 2000 articles depict a self-awareness of entrepreneurial mythology, unseen in 1989. The gap is packed with disappointment, frustration, anger, vitriol and ridicule regarding entrepreneurs as journalists struggle to reconcile their experience of the mythological surge and rational undercurrent. Of course, no public figure can claim immunity from a press with historical roots in satire and the self-deprecating British attitude towards success (Paxman, 1999:17). However, the temporal change in article tone, from reverence to ridicule, between 1989 and 2000 is intriguing and seems to represent the backwash between mythological surge and rational undercurrent. In a political climate that unreservedly values enterprise (Drakopoulou-Dodd and Anderson, 2001), might ridicule express journalistic unease with the entrepreneurial process in a politically palatable way? Again we see the influence of the socio-economic and political cultural context on myth evolution, and of course, vice versa!



## Conclusions

Smart (1994:12) observes the “alternative, radically different conception” of postmodernity emerging from the “late 1980’s when disillusionment with the prospects for radical political strategy appeared to be extensive”. Perhaps Smart’s “disillusionment” is the negative emotion of metaphoric backwash. The entrepreneurial metaphors portray the agency-fuelled entrepreneur as creator, seducer, aggressor, charmer or saviour. The entrepreneurial myth is influenced by its cultural bedrock and dominant ideologies (for example, a political climate that unreservedly values enterprise). The entrepreneurial myth is transmitted by Hall’s (1980a:129) encoding/decoding processes transforming “raw historical events” into stories to be communicated using metaphor and stereotype. The entrepreneurial myth’s purpose is to essentially define meaningful relationships to mysteries or make sense of an inaccessible, enigmatic entrepreneurial process. 'The Independent' as a communication mode then further translates this story before the reader or researcher decodes the myth. The temporal evolution of the entrepreneurial myth can be conceptualised as the mythological surge, rational undercurrent and backwash.

This said, what is most intriguing about the metaphors and mythmaking is the range of language conjured up to build these stories of entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurs are described so vividly, so much larger than life in both their heroics and their villainies. These descriptive metaphors bear little resemblance to reality, yet, in spite of this, these are the images portrayed in a respected newspaper. In wondering why the images are so much larger than real, we can only speculate on links to socio-economic needs. However, the rise of entrepreneurship in the Thatcherite years is now recognised to be response to economic needs. Perhaps this glorification of the entrepreneur is a social response, the creation and re-creation of the enterprise culture. Similarly, the recognition, by 2000, that entrepreneurs were not the panacea, created the backwash of disapproval. Hence, we see the production and reproduction of culture by the media. If so, we have demonstrated how meaning is manufactured and modified. At the very least we have explored the social construction of the entrepreneur and shown the striking range and depth of metaphoric description.

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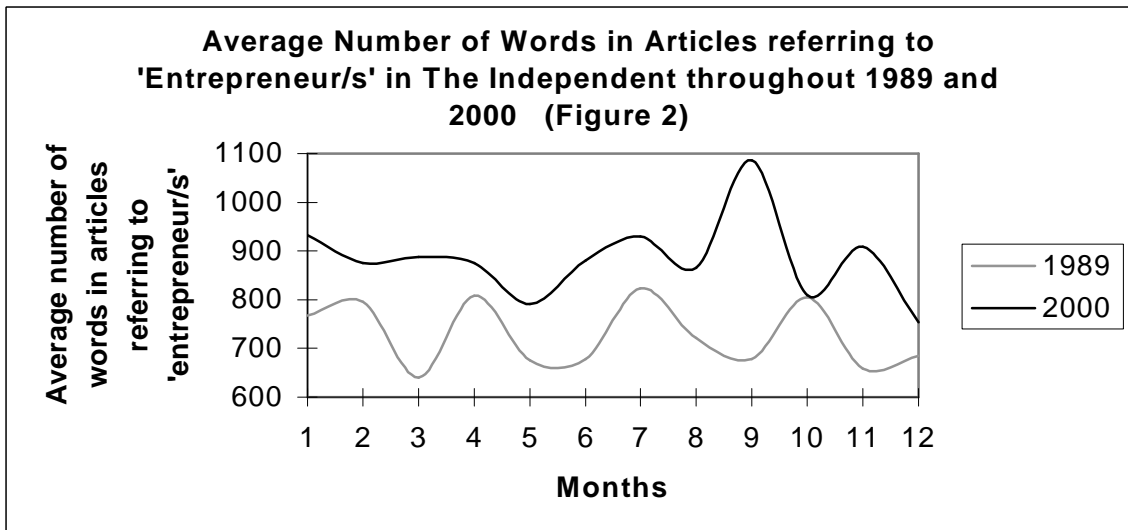
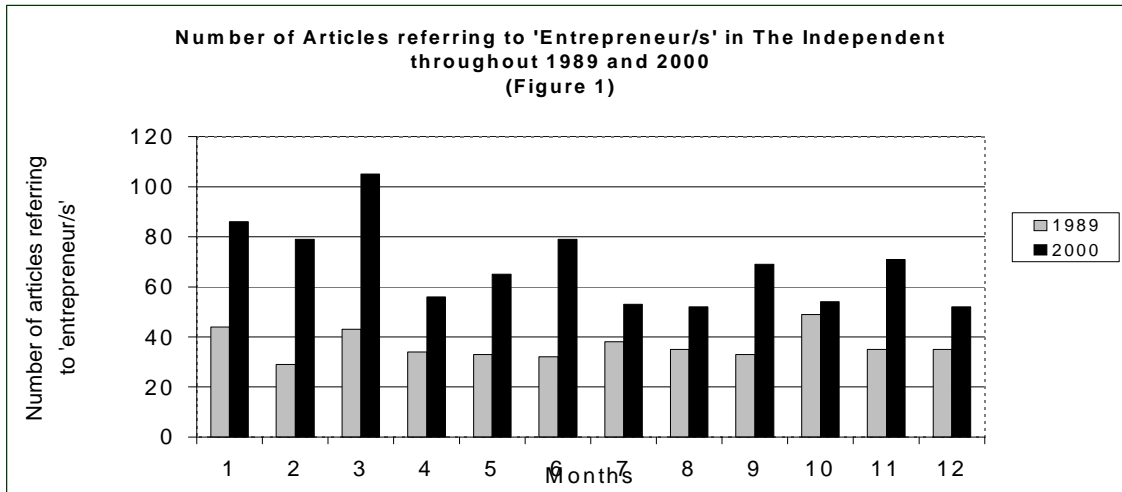
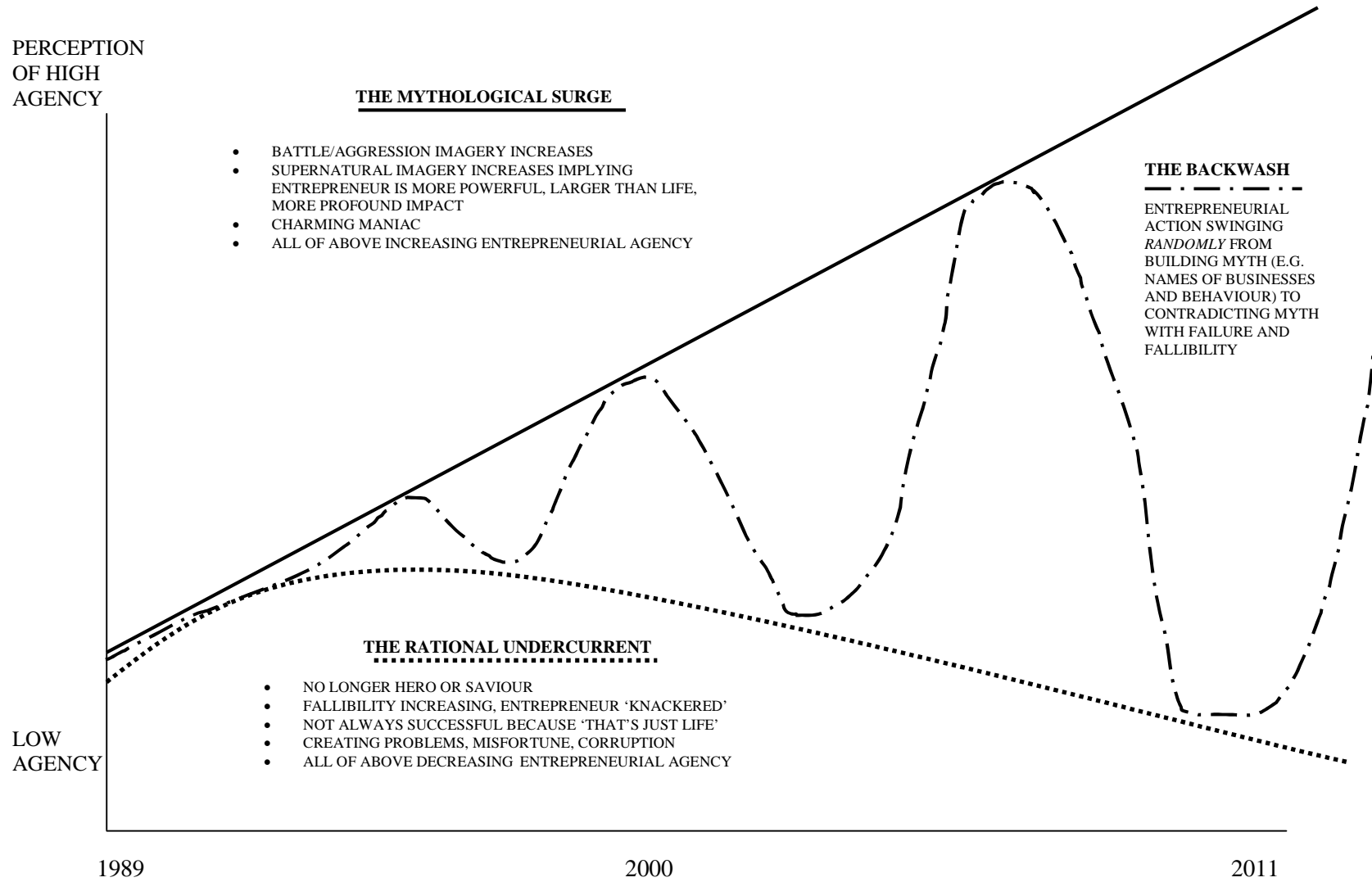


Figure 3 GRAPHICAL REPRESENTATION OF MYTHOLOGICAL EVOLUTION



**Table 1**

<b>Themes in 1989</b>	<b>Examples of metaphor</b>	<b>Discussion</b>
Marching into battle	<i>The young entrepreneur in full cry is a daunting sight</i>	Battle between tradition and modernity or good and evil
That's magic	<i>Entrepreneurs are the magicians at the heart of it all</i>	Supernatural abilities
Blue Blood	<i>Privileged, blue blooded, royal as a king</i>	Endowed
Larger than life	<i>Giant hands, giant boots, stalking Wall Street</i>	Altering the scale
My hero	<i>Saves dying communities and historic building</i>	Superhero
From rags to riches	<i>One time kitchen cleaner turned millionaire</i>	Almost fairy tales
Redemption through enterprise	<i>Godheads, blessed</i>	Religious imagery
Glitter of profit	<i>Pursuit of liberty and obscene wealth; wallet is the terminal in his nervous system</i>	Admiration for action but with overtones of envy
Flamboyance	<i>Debonair and jet-setting style</i>	Celebrity
Likable rogues	<i>Attempt to sell 45,000 left boots</i>	Combines evil with innocence
Revolutionary	<i>Dawning of revolution; reinventing music</i>	Primary force of change
Charming	<i>Seductively charming</i>	Infectious enthusiasm
The right idea and hard work	<i>Hard working, educated and skilled</i>	Combines dedication with knowledge
Not luck, but effectiveness	<i>I should be so lucky</i>	Emphasis on perseverance
Risk taking	<i>Following hunches with courage and caution</i>	Making luck
The outsider	<i>Entrepreneur plotting a different path; being different and thinking differently</i>	Distinguishing the entrepreneur as different from others
The ultimate outsider- the maleness of enterprise	<i>Emancipated beyond feminism</i>	Only one article about female entrepreneurship
Seduction and sex	<i>Wooring, courting; thrusting; He likes to build great phalluses and name them after himself</i>	The entrepreneur is portrayed as pursuer and seductor, but never as a object of desire
Masters of time and space	<i>Bridge the centuries wide gap; the future is now</i>	Entrepreneurial power
Success	<i>The sort of man who would succeed in any field</i>	Demonstration of entrepreneurial abilities
Denigration	<i>Aggravating misery for profit</i>	Very few articles take this tone

Table 2

<b>Themes in 2000</b>	<b>Examples</b>	<b>Discussion</b>
Alchemy and magic	<i>Conjuring, like a magician; modern form of alchemy</i>	Not about illusion, emphasis on a special form of ability
Gentle giants and on line kings	<i>Sleeping giant; Goliath; titans of the internet</i>	Continues the regal theme but enlarges the scope
Fall of the hero	<i>Facilitating a renaissance</i>	Not the hero of 1989, much less dramatic
Literary, theatrical theme	<i>Embroided in drama</i>	Change from fairy stories to drama
Myth	<i>Iconic legend; Aztec chieftain;</i>	Larger than life
Holy myth	<i>Answer prayers; evangelist</i>	From the merely blessed of 1989 to holy guru
Polite rebels	<i>Mercurial; polite rebel</i>	Different, but with less idolatry
Dodgy geezers	<i>Wolfish entrepreneur; shadowy networks</i>	A major shift from likable, to rogue
Cash as king	<i>Growing fat; asset stripping</i>	Emphasis on darker side of wealth
Revolution again	<i>Rejuvenating; liberating</i>	Similar to 1989
Experience and tenacity	<i>Wannabe entrepreneurs</i>	A shift from “well educated”
Luck	<i>Sheer fluke</i>	This was the only article to mention luck!
Risk	<i>Judges risk; gambles</i>	Risk taking is the business
Also a devoted mother	<i>Also has time to bring up a teenage son on her own</i>	More articles (12) but emphasis is on relationships, and gosh, she is a woman too!
Business as a mistress	<i>First love; romancing; seduction</i>	Business as substitute
Knackered entrepreneurs	<i>Pictures of failure; misfortune, overwhelmed, too little sleep</i>	Major shift to the exhausted entrepreneur
Gleeful shoulder shrugging	<i>Bankruptcies; root of problem</i>	Pleasure in the fall from grace
Crazy Bob is losing touch	<i>The great pullovered one; not gurus; furry face of capitalism</i>	Scorn and ridicule, also related to the dotcom bust

**Table 3****YEAR 1989 AND 2000 COMPARISON MAP**

<b>The Entrepreneur in 1989 is...</b>	<b>The Entrepreneur in 2000 is...</b>
A protagonist in battle, fighting a broad range of opponents (such as bureaucracy, corruption, family and friends) using psychological warfare and instrumental in class war. Entrepreneur frequently referred to in relation to boxing matches and heavily criticised if ducking battle.	An increasingly aggressive protagonist in battle, 'nuking' and 'culling' rival businesses or governments, using psychological warfare. No reference to boxing, class warfare or weakness.
A magician or royalty	A magician or royalty but accompanied with substantial increase in the entrepreneur as wizard, iconic legend, master of universe, giant tree, bearded shadow
Larger than life sitting on top of companies with large hand and boots	Explicitly referred to as a giant or titan, gobbling up companies, reaching up into of outer space
A hero conquering disability or economics, at the end of the political evolutionary scale	Rarely portrayed as a hero. Affected by human fallibility and tiredness.
Saviour of floundering economies, prosperity, companies and blushing women	Rarely portrayed as saviour as the objects of entrepreneurial action take a more active role
An integral part of a 'rags to riches' story	On stage or referred to with literary images
Blessed with opportunities and resources, offers answers to prayer and advice as guru. Sometimes treated with cynicism.	Not just blessed with resources but entrepreneur is God himself
Seductively charming dripping with enthusiasm and glamour. Rude but gets away with it	A charming maniac, still glamorous but more dynamic.
Either loveable rogue or immoral con man	Evil and wolfish, rather than loveable rogue with emphasis on organised crime, corruption, cheating, embezzlement, fraud and exploiting gullible jerks
Greedy for a fast buck but admired by onlookers.	Object of anger or pity rather than admiration.
A revolutionary	A revolutionary
Successful with the right idea, training and hard work	Successful with the right idea, experience and tenacity. Training not as necessary
Luck necessary	Luck not mentioned
Risk-taker with courage, caution and fire in belly. Never victim of mis-judged risk	Takes risks with courage, caution and fire in belly. Never victim of mis-judged risk
Always an outsider	Always an eccentric outsider
One woman intimidating men with her erotic art collection	Twelve women, all defined through their relationships or sexual prowess
Seducer, aggressor, pursuer not object of affection	Seducer, aggressor, pursuer not object of affection
Bending geographical boundaries and time, over-arching reality, creating 'new order of things'	Bridging worlds, bending time with an 'unquantifiable, limitless' impact, creating a 'brave new world'
A problem solvers with power, agency and frequent success	A problem creator causing political problems, misfortune, disruption and embarrassment Not always successful but 'that's just life'
Causes human wreckage and is ridiculed mildly	Serious threat gone but entrepreneur is a term of derision, embarrassment and explicit ridicule