

FROM ILIAD TO ODYSSEY

THE ODYSSEY OF OUR PROFESSION

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INTRODUCTION AND INITIAL METAPHOR

I must start with a plea for forgiveness – this talk is based on analogies and metaphors, and they are often mixed.

Julian Jaynes, in his controversial 1971 book, *The Origin and Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*, asserts that human consciousness began relatively recently, and at different times in different cultures. In the Western mind, consciousness emerged between the writing of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

Before that, there were really two “minds” located in the separate lobes of the brain, unaware of each other. The right side assessed new situations, and decided how to respond, then provided guidance and direction to the left brain, which acted on these instructions. To the left half, these messages were literally heard as voices, seemingly coming from the outside.

Jaynes builds his theory in part on the *Iliad*, in which, he asserts, nobody thinks. Achilles has a problem. A god appears in a dream, or in the guise of a friend, and tells him what to do. Achilles gets up and does it. The messages from the right brain are perceived, by the left, as dictates from the gods, commanding voices that must be obeyed.

The gods still pull many of the strings in the *Odyssey*, but the world has changed, with Odysseus the prototype of the new, fully conscious man. Ideas now flow from right to left without the need for a mythical messenger. The hero is often reported as pondering, and makes at least some decisions – and mistakes – on his own. His ability to deceive, to produce his own lies, serves as an example of this new mental agility, one much admired by his patron, Athena.

There are certain analogies between this theory – which I won't try to defend – and the evolution of the market researcher. Not that we ever didn't think. But for a long time, we were as dependent on the “voice of the consumer” as the Greeks at Troy were on the voices of their imagined deities. We strove hard to capture the most accurate voice – through sampling, questionnaire design, and other techniques – and worked even harder to understand what was being said – through analysis, multivariate techniques, and even semiotics.

But we worshiped the output of our studies, our ‘survey’ data. It was the touchstone of our credentials and the basis for our identity. We could say, with authority, what “the people” were saying, but were often limited in our understanding of what these data really meant for our clients, and reluctant to make forceful recommendations not surrounded by the frequent incantation “it depends.”

Our passive acceptance of our own output and general reluctance to “think” creatively about their implications parallels the passivity of the Iliad’s heroes.

Our Delphic preeminence, however, came to be challenged, as our clients thanked us politely for our work, then engaged a consultant to tell them what the studies really meant and what to do based on them. Our response over the past decade and a half has been to reclaim our prior role by claiming a “seat at the table,” often by reinventing ourselves as consultants or insights experts. In other words, to become like Odysseus, to make our own judgments beyond the narrow commands of the data we’ve produced. My sense is that success in that quest has been spotty, and we have become seriously distracted in the process.

This is not to negate the efforts of researchers in some companies that have genuinely shifted the paradigm. In one case history a researcher, using a *Lord of the Rings* metaphor, reported his CEO now considers him his “Gandalf.” Many internal professionals have been able to enhance their visibility, but overall the stated goal has not been achieved, in part because of a basic dilemma often overlooked.

It is the *internal* researcher who is seeking the place at his company’s table, but it is the *external* researcher who commands the magic tools that distill the voice of the consumer. The supplier rarely radiates the charisma of the management consultant, and his internal colleague often serves merely as a conduit between the supplier’s data and the client management.

But the path to the table has been hindered by other barriers over the past decade, some of our own making, some the results of rapid technological and social change.

THE SECOND METAPHOR – OUR MEANDERING VOYAGE

This leads me to shift the metaphor, to liken our evolution from passive reporter of the public will to trusted counselor to an “odyssey”. Where are we on that journey? Lost at sea, or marooned on an island, perhaps, certainly not safely back home on Ithaca. Actually, I think we are closer to home than we think, but have scrupulously failed to grasp our true situation.

In perusing this metaphor, it is important to recall that Odysseus’ wild journey of island hopping among witches, monsters, and other imaginary creatures, what we refer to as an “odyssey,” comprises a relatively small portion of the saga. Most of the book takes place on Ithaca among real people, before and after his return. The theme is not just getting back home, but reestablishing his position there.

Moreover, his “imaginary” journey is marked by a beginning and an end. He leaves Troy triumphant with his army, happily sacking a few other towns as he embarks, only to reemerge in the real world again alone and naked, with only his wits (and their analog, Athena) to guide him.

Let's start by remembering where we came from – a stable world in which pollsters and market researchers enjoyed a certain level of credibility and influence that in large part rested on our grounding in the scientific method, and on what we borrowed from sociology, psychology, and statistics. We created artificial mini-universes from which we could project, with reasonable accuracy, the real world. In these pseudo-laboratory conditions, the basic unit was often “the household,” with its singular decision-maker, who could be randomly selected by door-to-door or telephone methods.

That world, of course, no longer exists, with many households displaying multiple phone lines, or no landlines at all, and sprouting other barriers to survey participation. This threatened our ability to generate one of our most cherished institutions, the random sample. These developments coincided with rising field costs, shrinking budgets, corporate impatience with the pace of our work, and the rising tidal wave of the Internet. Under these conditions it was hard to resist the siren call of the Internet panel. And this, I believe, represented not a return to dry land but one of several delusions leading us further out to sea.

We've all heard about quality issues relating to panels. I believe many of these concerns are justified and our reliance on this method may become a Trojan horse that we have gleefully brought to our clients as the solution to all our problems that ultimately may damage our credibility beyond repair.

However, panels are not the only self-inflicted challenge we've encountered. The continued consolidation on the supplier side has also hurt the industry immensely. Often rationalized as providing synergies and cost savings to clients with an increasingly global scope, M&As have delivered on none of these promises. Instead, large megafirms have destroyed much of the creative spirit and client service that characterized the firms they absorbed – much like the slaying of the sun god's sacred cattle by Odysseus' men, an act that dooms all but their leader.

These firms tend to be built on a financial model that prevents senior, experienced researchers from doing much more than selling, and delegates day-to-day project management responsibilities as far down as possible, often to neophytes I have characterized elsewhere as the “cheerfully incompetent.” The global contribution is often limited to a field network, and clients often find they are paying for overhead and debt service, not added value.

And while some megafirms do nurture R&D efforts, the bulk of innovation and creativity has shifted to the small and medium-sized firms.

There are two things to keep in mind here. As noted earlier, the seat at the table is being sought by the *in-house* researcher, who needs the magic of the agency researcher to deliver the required wisdom. But as project quality and added value diminish, the table slips further away. The proprietary tools and models often do, of course, deliver more accurate snapshots and forecasts than ever before. But clients often don't realize that, and when used mechanically as if model output were enough, they can underwhelm.

Other developments have kept us at sea as well. We started out illuminating three things:

- *The What* – cataloguing the world – what consumers owned, bought, did, or thought; how satisfied they were with the hotel, and whom they expected to vote for if the election were held today;

- *The Why* – the motivations that explained the What – why consumers do what they do; choose one product or candidate over another, and what drives preference;
- *The What If* – forecasts of future behavior in statistical clothing; the likelihood of a new product being bought if offered at a certain price, the probable response to a new campaign.

Here, too, the world has shifted beneath our feet. There are many more accurate tools to determine the What than relying on people's memories of what they bought and how much they spent. Scanning data, payment card transaction data, and the riches of marketing data far surpass what consumers can recall in a survey. When it comes to the What, data mining has eaten our lunch. The single exception is measuring the prevalence of attitudes, which are really a gateway to the Why.

Explaining motivation is still an area where we enjoy preeminence, if not a monopoly. Our competitors often substitute anecdotal or small sample findings to meet this need, or simply provide convincing explanations without any foundation. We have much better tools to tease out the Why, and it is probably the arena in which we should devote the most energy to strengthening these tools.

Forecasting likely future events, of course, has a long history, with roots in divination and astrology. Ultimately, this is what clients really want and why they keep us around. The predictive tools we've developed are good for specific types of products sold through traditional channels backed by specific types of media. These models must be continuously updated to keep up with the rapidly changing world, and at some point entirely new models developed.

It is somewhat irksome, however, to think that our ancient antecedents, basing their forecasts on reading the entrails of goats, enjoyed greater credibility and status with their clients than we, for all our fancy statistical models, do with ours.

The past decade, of course, has seen the emergence of many innovative techniques to answer the basic 'W' questions, often tapping into technological or social developments already underway. These can be broadly classified as:

- *Interactivity.* We have created on-going dialogues with customers and prospects through websites and other media in which the relationship between interviewer and respondent has completely changed. Other examples include engaging consumers to record brand experiences as they occur – a mobile extension of the diary panel – and instantly shifting survey respondents into a qualitative context to probe the reasons for their answers.
- *Spontaneous generation.* This covers the mass movement of listening in to social media, chat rooms, client websites, and other venues in which people offer opinions and bare their souls without our prompting, not unlike wiretapping a confessional.
- *Brain scans.* Brain scans seemingly tell us what aspects of a commercial get us excited, providing a whole new approach to identifying motivation.
- *Observational/ethnographic techniques.* While not new, these fields have grown rapidly with enhanced technologies.

All of these approaches represent departures from the traditional approach of attempting to establish laboratory conditions to control and isolate variables. All provide new windows into *individual* consumer's minds. They are great for learning what these individuals think, and shed some valuable light on their motivation. They help identify trends and illuminate the emotional content these individuals associate with brands. Ultimately, they serve as valuable tools to generate insights and hypotheses.

But individually and collectively, they are inherently limited. Almost all these techniques are qualitative in nature, regardless of the number of voices heard. Social media function in many ways like a huge, unruly focus group during the time the moderator leaves the room. The key problem is that no one can say that the individuals chatting, tweeting, or sounding off on a company's web site are truly representative of a market, however defined, and we often know little or nothing else about these non-respondents.

Even if we *were* to accept the prevalence of behavior and opinions of this online gaggle as typical, what can they tell us about motivation? The reasons provided in almost all cases would fall under the rubric of "stated importance."

While exciting and fruitful, these innovative approaches have generated a false sense of security, the illusion that by immersing ourselves in a sea of chatter we no longer need the rigor that underpinned our profession from its beginnings.

Indeed, we are still on Calypso's Isle, continuously seduced by a series of bewitching possibilities that, while insightful, distract us from what we must do to return to terra firma and claim the position to which we aspire. To make that return, we, like Odysseus, will have to shed, not our clothes but our illusions, and rely on our wits in an entirely different way.

THE NEED TO GIVE UP IN ORDER TO MOVE FORWARD

What must we give up? The chimera of the "easy fix," the killer app that will allow us to distill the voice of the consumer without the cumbersome burden of achieving projectability. Some say the random sample is dead, and in fact, sampling is an exercise practiced only by dinosaurs.

This is nonsense, and dangerous nonsense. Our whole *raison d'être* rests on a claim that we can speak accurately of a real universe, what it is, why it is, how it works, and most importantly, what it may become. To cut the anchor that moors us to that universe, however tenuously, is to set us adrift.

If you think this is simply alarmist, you haven't been paying attention to the debate swirling around the distortions created by internet panels. We are "lucky," if that's the right word, that most buyers of research have not been paying much attention – which is not to say that plunging response rates haven't done a job on phone work, either. But chasing after solutions that have no solid basis in random selection is a form of total denial.

What else must we shed to prosper? Our *reliance* on "survey" data in its broadest sense as all we need to know. Or to put it another way, giving up the notion that distilling the voice of the consumer is enough to

justify our existence. This understanding is a *sine qua non*, but not sufficient to gain, or deserve, a seat at the table.

We may also have to give up some of the security hedged by the term, “it depends,” and risk making concrete recommendations in cases where we don’t have all the information – which accounts for almost all decision-making situations.

So, arriving finally, naked on dry land, having shed the baggage that has weighed us down, what must be do to become what we aspire? And what wisdom have we accumulated on our odyssey that can help us achieve this goal?

A NEW PARADIGM

Let’s return to the original metaphor, our evolving from devoted interpreters of the people’s will – akin to the Greeks of the *Iliad* mechanically responding to the words of the gods – to fully engaged protagonists like Odysseus, conscious of his world and able to make his own decisions. This evolution is not just one of activity or of role – of becoming more a consultant or advisor. It is a dramatic shift in *purpose* from purveyor of information or insight to trusted guardian of the client’s future.

Of course our ability to take on this awesome responsibility rests on our ability to generate and interpret information *better than anyone else*. Our basic research credentials not only remain critical, they take on even greater importance. Related skills, such as the ability to conceptualize, reshape how problems are posed, and offer solutions, envision alternative futures and use logic to select among alternatives, will also increase in importance.

We must also be ready, willing, and able to say what all these disparate data mean, and boldly set forth recommendations with the full weight of responsibility this implies. This can apply to all our efforts, from the most tactical inquiry to the most long-term strategic initiative.

While our objectivity remains essential, our neutrality may have to shift. In other words, we may really have to care about the outcome of our recommendations – or else, why should anyone entrust their future in our hands?

So how to we assume this mantle of guardianship? (We can hardly expect it to be handed to us.) First and foremost, we must re-establish our professional grounding in rigor generally, and specifically in our claim to understand and speak for *the market as a whole*. To do this, we must find ways to replicate the universe in our samples, however drawn, in order to accurately relate what the market looks like, and distill what the people want.

This is the greatest challenge facing us, and I don’t pretend the solution is easy or even at hand. But to pretend it isn’t a problem will rip away whatever fig leaf we use to hide the weakness of our current data gathering methods.

The comfortable world of door-to-door pollsters and WATS lines may be gone, probably for ever, and there are currently no truly reliable substitutes. That does not mean we should not be actively seeking alternatives. Personally, I see internet panels, tapping into social networks, and mobile solutions, in their

current manifestations, as transitory, much as these technologies themselves are. I believe we are headed to a new convergence of technologies that will, hopefully, establish a new status quo. This should provide a more stable and orderly system than the chaos we've experienced for some time, with some of the basic facets associated with an orderly world, such as a rational way of reaching potential respondents.

I don't know what this new world order will entail or when it will emerge, but I suspect it will be based on the individual rather than the household, which ultimately will be a great boon to us. After all, while consumption may be a household matter, motivation is essentially individual, and most of the new tools we've developed, such as brain scans, don't work at a household level. We as a profession must be ready to tap into this new world, and should be actively striving to bring it about, or at least assure that it manifest favorable conditions for our industry. This is not at all a necessary outcome; in fact, we can easily be shut out by accident if not design.

While we can't predict the nature of the do-not-call, spam-control, or other barriers that will be erected in this brave new world, we can be pretty sure that privacy concerns will expand over the coming years, and these can seriously impact us no matter what the data collection form that ultimately emerges.

Let's be honest about privacy. There is an inherent conflict between customization, with the ultimate goal of marketing to a market of one, and maintaining individual privacy. Powerful forces are pushing against the privacy walls, including marketers, data mining and other firms that serve them, technology, the pervasiveness of personal computers and other devices, not to mention government and others with non-marketing agendas wanting to keep tabs on what their citizens say or think.

There is also a global trend toward self-exposure, with large numbers of people, especially but not exclusively the young, happy to share their most intimate secrets with just about anyone. Whether this is simply the exuberance of a naïve generation or a tectonic shift in the perceived value of maintaining and/or controlling one's privacy is too early to tell. But this gleeful openness certainly has certainly enabled the assault on privacy and made it much harder for those genuinely concerned with privacy.

We all know that many governments are striving to address the privacy issue, but are often finding themselves behind the technological curve. We researchers continue running the risk of being clobbered by overly-broad regulation – we are easy targets. So I think we must become vocal, highly visible champions of privacy in general, in order that our credibility in protecting personal data will be unquestioned both by regulators and our respondents, and they can count on us as *allies* in the battle to protect privacy.

We must also become far more conversant with the client's business in the largest sense, way beyond the issues inherent in the projects we undertake. In some cases, suppliers will be able to evolve from occasional vendors to true strategic partners conducting multiple projects or continuous research. This of course flies in the face of current corporate trends toward treating research as a commodity to be purchased on price.

But even where this ideal does not emerge, it is incumbent on us to learn as much as we can about a client's business, and push the buyers to share as much as they are willing about their companies. Internal researchers must also grow beyond their marketing, advertising, or communications perspective to achieve a broader understanding of their own businesses.

In addition, we must know much more than the survey data we ourselves provide. We must become experts in synthesizing all available information into a high-level point-of-view. This means extending our own skill set into the realms of competitive intelligence, data analytics, and secondary data, at least to the extent that we can understand it. We will still need to rely on the experts in these fields to provide and explain these data. But I believe that among this group of professionals, we are naturally the best equipped to synthesize multiple streams of information into a coherent whole.

Finally, we must learn to recast our message from, 'what have we learned' to 'what you should do.' Of course this counsel is based on what we've learned, but that's the substantiation of the message, not the key message itself. Nor is this just a matter of telling, but of convincing.

Which means *how* we deliver our messages must also be transformed from the dry, logical flow inherited from the scientific method to a more compelling story that engages the audience as well as convinces. In no way am I advocating abandoning the rigor of our investigations or synthesis of information – we must be convinced ourselves of the solid foundation of the conclusions and implications we draw, and recommendations we make. But we'll never make it to the table if we cannot see the bigger picture, make the creative leaps that separate true insights from data, and learn to communicate our own convictions in a way that excites our audience.

At that point we will have evolved from bicameral Achilles, reacting passively to the voices of his imagined gods, to fully conscious Odysseus, actively evaluating his world and formulating his own behavior – in our terms, moving from reporting what the people say to what the client should do. And in so doing, to complete the second metaphor, we will find ourselves once more on solid ground, having shed our illusions and false dependencies, ready to retake our rightful place in the business arena, throwing out the consultants and other suitors who have striven to displace us, and finally come to the table as the true guardians of the corporate future.

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