

Title:

Should we believe the experts? (Part I)

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Summary:

Why do we use experts? To predict the future. Should we believe these experts? History tells us that accurate predictions of the future are rare. Many examples exist where the brightest and most qualified individuals failed to see the future.

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Article Body:

Why do we use experts? To predict the future. Consider a patient who is asking a physician about the future effects of a certain drug, or the investor who is asking a stock analyst about the future prices of a certain stock, or the manager who is asking a human resource manager about the future performance of a certain candidate, or the brand manager who is asking a market researcher about the future sales of a certain new product. Should we believe these experts? History tells us that accurate predictions of the future are rare. Many examples exist where the brightest and most qualified individuals failed to see the future. This series of articles presents examples from the arts (see part I), business (see part II), and science (see part III).

Should we believe the experts in the arts?

D. W. Griffith is regarded by many as one of the greatest filmmakers of all time. More than anyone of the silent era, he recognized the potential of movies as an expressive medium. During that time, his achievements were momentous. In 1915 he finished the feature "Birth of a Nation," regarded as the first masterpiece of cinema. In 1919 he finished the movie "Intolerance" (1919), which marked a new standard in filmmaking. His next two movies, "Broken Blossoms" (1919) and "Way Down East" (1920), sealed his reputation as America's preeminent director. According to James Agee, "To watch his work is like being a witness to the beginning of melody, or the first conscious use of the lever or the wheel; the emergence, coordination, and first eloquence of language; the birth of an art: and to realize that this is all the work of one man." The

great silent movie actor Lillian Gish called him "the father of film" and Charlie Chaplin called him "the teacher of us all." During the same time, D. W. Griffith also exhibited superb business instincts by founding the United Artist production company together with Douglas Fairbanks, Charlie Chaplin, and Mary Pickford, the three greatest performers of the day.

However, from the mid to late 1920s things began to change. His intuitive powers started to wane. In 1924, at the age of 49, Griffith wrote in an article published by the Saturday Evening Post, "We do not want now and we shall never want the human voice with our films." Only three years later, in 1927 the first talking movie, "The Jazz Singer" with Al Jolson was released. The reaction of the public to the movie was astounding. The picture was a sellout, one of the big box office hits of all time. In October 1930, the Fortune magazine wrote, "The advent of American talking movies is beyond comparison the fastest and most amazing revolution the whole history of industrial revolutions." Griffith's failed prediction was only an early sign of his now chronic misguided intuition. From the late 1920s, Griffith's movies were slowly sinking into oblivion. In the glitter of the Jazz Age, his filmmaking was considered hopelessly old-fashioned. His last picture, "The Struggle," was made in 1931 and played in theaters for merely a week before being withdrawn. On July 23, 1948, Griffith died in a small Los Angeles hotel virtually forgotten by the industry he helped build.

What was the cause of Griffith's transition from great intuition to misguided intuition? One of the most common causes of misguided intuition, and therefore, the limited success of experts in predicting the future, is the "situation bias." Experts, like all humans, tend to imagine future technologies as an extension of current technologies. The bias grows stronger when the individual has a vested interest in the current technology and is concerned that the new technology will diminish the popularity of his or her prized, older technology. Griffith was a master of the silent movie. His skill in eliciting powerful reactions from the audience without resorting to spoken dialogue was legendary. This unique skill was the reason for his downfall. It distorted his intuition and prevented him from foreseeing the potential of the human voice in movies.

How is this example related to qualitative research? The situation bias is especially strong in manual interpretation of qualitative data. During such interpretation, the analyst shows a strong tendency to look for the familiar. Pat Bentley from Apple emphasizes this point: "When you analyze the respondents' answers manually you look for repeats, things that sound important either because you heard them before or you're looking for them yourself; therefore, they make sense to you."

Do you want to observe your own situational bias? Go to <http://www.com>

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 and follow the instructions.