# The Ultimate Success for Design Research is to Disappear

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The Royal Society is the oldest scientific institution in the world. The Society’s motto, *Nullius in verba*, which roughly translates as ‘take nobody’s word for it’, expresses a determination for the Society’s Fellows to “withstand the domination of authority and to verify all statements by an appeal to facts determined by experiment”[[1]](#footnote-1). If we break this reading of the motto into two parts, then we might say that the first half is an ideology: an endorsement of curiosity; it’s a call for exploration; a manifesto to reject the status quo and, ergo, it gives licence to wonder *what if?* The second half, contrastingly, articulates a methodological and epistemic position; it asserts that any quandary, hypothesis, or musing should be verified with experiment-derived facts.

The motivation behind the Royal Society’s motto is virtuous and is clearly in support of exploration, knowledge production, and learning. However, it is also representative of the scientism (the idea that science is the best way of showing that ideas have value) which pervades our society. Moreover, scientism is infused with a generally positivist outlook (where positivism asserts that any idea you cannot test is meaningless). This scientistic and positivist point of view is the dominant paradigm of our societal structures and organisations, and whilst they are not inherently problematic, they can lead to incomplete or misleading perceptions.

Examples of this are manifest in many mundane aspects of everyday life. For example, professional trade bodies (e.g., the Solicitors Regulation Authority) utilise standardised and ‘verifiable’ measures to ensure the services their members provide are adequate. Regulators (e.g., Oftsted) produce ‘objective’ accounts of how well schools are performing. And, during the recent Covid-19 pandemic the UK Government frequently stated it would ‘follow the science’ when determining what policies to implement. However, if we take a closer look at these examples, it’s entirely possible for a regulated solicitor to be ‘verified’ as providing an adequate service and yet be bad at their job. It is possible for an ‘objective’ account of a school to show it as underperforming, and even though the reality is that the school is excelling in a challenging environment. And, whilst the UK Government attested to ‘follow the science’ throughout much of the Covid-19 pandemic, policy decisions are never divorced from ministers’ own values, judgements, and political priorities.

Most organisations—governments, societies, regulators, and companies—have this tacit alignment to a worldview informed by positivism and scientism. This is in stark contrast to the much more pragmatic, synthetic, and flexible epistemological foundation employed by Design Researchers. When involved in partnerships and collaborations with other organisations Design Researchers tend to agitate the status quo by layering design-inspired thinking on top of the positivist foundations. And, we should remember, Design Researchers have been very successful at this[[2]](#footnote-2). Of course Design Research’s success isn’t due to a dogmatic rejection of scientism and positivism, but rather the pragmatic realisation that those perspectives become even stronger when tempered, combined, and balanced with a plurality of alternative views resulting from applications of Design Research methodologies.

This balancing act, in fact, is reflective of most Design processes (as in normal Design, outside of research contexts). Design is a kind of ‘applied art’. It leverages ineffable creative sparks to produce new concepts. But, in contrast to Art which is to be displayed, performed, or mused at, most Designers strive to produce something more functional, utilitarian and to be ‘used’. To achieve this, necessarily, Designers must understand the science and engineering constraints which apply to the specific design they are working on, but they must, with equal commitment, be prepared to imagine ‘What if?’ and allow their creativity to flourish and lead them toward novel or unique solutions.

So, when we consider this in terms of the knowledge production business that we might call ‘science’ or ‘research’, the positivist approaches strive for facts, testability and falsifiability; these are hypotheses which can be repeatably tested and the same result obtained each time. In contrast a *Design*-led Researcher would hope, and expect, that each time they ran an ‘experiment’ a different answer would be obtained. That is not to say Design Research is unscientific, nor that it is devoid of evidence, rather than it is a different kind of knowing (it’s also worth remembering that much published science is ultimately proved to be incorrect anyway—but that’s a somewhat different rhetorical rabbit hole to go down[[3]](#footnote-3)).

The dominant pattern in academic Design Research is to collaborate with some other organisation and, as part of that collaboration, offer them access to the ‘special sauce’ proffered by the Design perspective. ‘Design Thinking’ is a good example of this, a neatly packaged, easy-to-implement, set of activities and methods that anyone can deliver. This package will—if successful—result in a disruption of the status quo, and from that disruption new insights on a particular problem or issue will emerge. Working like this has been hugely successful, it has attracted significant investment into Design Research centres and many examples of tangible impact[[4]](#footnote-4). With the establishment of the UK Government’s Policy Lab, and the Office of the Chief Designer in the Scottish Government, we see that organisations are beginning to take note of the virtues of Design Research. These notable cases notwithstanding, the impact Design Research has had on collaborating organisations, remains, for the most part, incremental. Even when our collaborators appreciate the insights resulting from the dalliance with Design, they usually remain tied to their scientistic and positivist outlooks—and why wouldn’t they?

But there *is* another way.

Consider Design Research as a prophylactic rather than a therapeutic treatment. Rather than parachuting in doses of Design Research to help address specific problems, what if the Design Research became our default way of looking and superseded the dominance of scientism? This is a big idea; in fact, it would constitute a knowledge revolution. But given that Design is a synthetic discipline which connects points of view and amalgamates insights to produce holistic and inclusive perspectives, then it needn’t disregard or disrespect the virtues of positivism and scientism. Instead, it could galvanise them, strengthen them, and arrive at something new which is more than the sum of its parts. As we live through the pervasive and pernicious challenges of the 21st century—e.g., the far-reaching impact of AI, the post-truth era, and the climate crisis—then, arguably, this knowledge revolution is precisely the tonic our society needs to help remedy the emergent tumult at this delicately balanced point in history.

If such a revolution were to pass, then Design Research would cease to be an ‘other’ practice that is called upon as a novel contrasts to the status quo. In fact, the need to even specify or articulate that any given inquiry employs ‘Design Research’ would go away after this revolution. Hence, the contention of this argument, and the provocation I leave you with is this: as part of a knowledge revolution the ultimate measure of success for Design Research would be to disappear completely, blend into the background, and become a integral and pivotal part of a new normal.

1. https://royalsociety.org/about-us/history/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Rodgers, P. A. and Yee, J. S. R. (2016) ‘Design Research is Alive and Kicking’, in *Design Research Society Conference*. doi: 10.21606/drs.2016.23. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ioannidis, J. P. A. (2005) ‘Why Most Published Research Findings Are False’, *PLoS Medicine*, 2(8), p. e124. doi: 10.1371/journal.pmed.0020124. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Cooper, R. *et al.* (2018) ‘ImaginationLancaster: Open-Ended, Anti-Disciplinary, Diverse’, *She Ji: The Journal of Design, Economics, and Innovation*, 4(4), pp. 307–341. doi: 10.1016/j.sheji.2018.11.001. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)