# Do we have something to say? From re-search to roi-search and back again

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Research and publication are of the greatest importance to many academics. Publishing is essential for a number of reasons including material rewards and promotion, self-esteem and status, getting and retaining a job at a good university and, perhaps in some cases, reducing teaching load. As a collective I think we tend to become increasingly career-conscious, anxious about performance and assessments and instrumental about work and outcome. Of course, this is most salient for young people, but increasingly also senior persons like myself may feel that one is only as good as one's latest journal article or book and increasingly aware of how much and in which journals we have published. This is certainly a drastic change from the past few decades.

In this context, it appears vital to raise the question 'do we have something to say?'. By 'we' I mean the parts of the OS community that have an 'intellectual' rather than a strong applied and managerial interest. (For 'managerialists', who wish to appeal to managers with technical knowledge, the situation is somewhat different from most OS people, who are more into 'reflection-stimulating' knowledge.) More broadly, the target is academics in management and organization, who are more inclined to look at journals such as *Organization* rather than *Harvard Business Review*.

Of course, within this 'we' there are various groups. Much of what I am saying here may be less relevant for those struggling to get their bread and butter, and whose overriding concern may be about their CV and publication record in order to secure a position—and identity and status as someone who is a 'real' academic. But I think that most people should be concerned with more than just landing and keeping a job or experiencing acceptance and membership in academia; and thus having something to say should be vital.

By 'say' I mean that there are knowledge contributions that an audience of people outside a specialized academic setting would be inclined to read and find interesting and relevant for their organizational life. This does not necessarily mean managers, but could be professionals, union representatives or general members of the public with some intellectual interest. To have something

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to say would then mean communicating something original and of interest to the working/organizational life of an audience outside that of the usual suspects, i.e. like-minded people in one's own sub-tribe. This communicating can be done in academic journals and books—these do not need to exclude people outside the sub-tribe—or through other channels, including more professional journals and magazines. Generally, journal articles could be written in a less formulaic and jargon-free way and be much more accessible to reflective practitioners and students. Organization studies is not, after all, rocket science.

This article aims to place the question 'do we have anything meaningful to say?', more strongly on the agenda when carrying out and assessing research. I start by pointing out that we, as a community, often have little to say to anyone outside a small group of like-minded academics. I discuss forces and motives other than socially relevant knowledge contributions which might be central to an increasing part of the work done in organization studies (OS). A case for 'do we have anything important to say'-reflexivity is made. I then briefly address some of the institutional conditions and driving forces behind this sad state of affairs and, in particular, emphasize our responsibility; as producers and evaluators of research, to rethink our norms. I end this somewhat gloomy text with a positive example and the conviction that our tribe can surely do better than this and that the conditions, in principle, are promising.

## The lack of relevance

There seems to be a strong feeling that OS, perhaps increasingly, lacks broader relevance. With specialization, most of the research may, at best, only be of interest within a subspecialty (e.g. organization discourse studies or CSR). One often hears and sometimes reads that people in the OS community find journal publications generally uninteresting and the primary motive for reading them is that one has to produce a literature review in order to get one's own work published. Academic text production may often be about writers writing for other writers in their sub-tribe.

This appears perhaps too negative and pessimistic, and we need to be aware of cynical game-playing—where people complain in order to demonstrate smartness and autonomy and legitimize opportunism. There is a lot of high-quality work being conducted and published. But not much seems to reach an audience outside a specific sub-tribe. So the question of wider relevance seems vital.

Having something to say is here not primarily about whether there is a real contribution to an (exclusively) intra-academic debate, but whether one has something to say that makes a difference to our understanding of the phenomena targeted; something that would lead the intellectually-minded practitioner to think and act differently and thus somehow be supportive in improving the functioning of organizations and/or people's working life. Even for people hostile to capitalism and business, the idea of making the management, organization and everyday practice of hospitals, schools, social welfare institutions, universities or even large parts of business function better, seems worthy of support. Of course, such support can be through critique. This critique probably needs to be framed in ways that are understandable and helpful. Blanket rejections of 'managerialism', 'masculinity' or 'technocracy' are often not. Neither are discussions with some complicated great thinker with a vague or uncertain implication for OS squeezed in with the intention of making it sufficiently related to something 'organizational' in order to be published in an OS journal (one that 'counts'). Celebrations of resistance without much indication of what should be resisted—of everything (bureaucracy or post bureaucracy, leadership or management, old public management or new public management, etc.)—and what should come out of this appear less relevant. The resistance literature seems to work with the implicit meaning

of 'resistance' being somehow good as it weakens the grip of 'power'. This is not to deny that well-thought through and targeted studies on 'progressive' resistance can be part of having something to say, but that may not always be the case.

A problem with having something to say concerns novelty. Despite all the good work being produced, there is a broadly shared sense of a troubling shortage of novel ideas and really strong contributions within management studies (e.g. Clark and Wright, 2009; Grey, 2010; Suddaby et al., 2011). One could argue that as much has been said already, it is difficult to have something new to say. Much writing is specialized and incremental in terms of aims and contributions. Gap-spotting is the most common mode of formulating research questions (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2013). The same overall assumptions and ideas are more or less taken for granted and reproduced. People within the community are increasingly struggling to find something to write about that has not been addressed already. As a result, one finds an increasing amount of stuff on what may seem rather esoteric topics and/or adding to very specialized discussions or focusing on rather marginal groups. We find Special issues and articles on organizations and Christmas, science fiction, research on the small community of critical management studies (CMS) people and other topics that may not strike most practitioners, students, the educated public and other academics outside the specialized subfields as particularly interesting or important.

This is not to deny the value of these studies. Original topics can be interesting. Input to tribal self-reflection is important. The ideal is, of course, not that all OS should have some relevance for and appeal to people outside the tribe—there are a lot of important issues that are mainly or only of intra-tribe interest and that can facilitate the delivery of 'better', in the sense of socially relevant research contributions. My issue is not that all or most, but perhaps *some* and much more of the work we do should clearly bear in mind the relevance of groups outside the (sub-)tribe.

To have something to say—in the current context—means that there is a clear point, an idea, a concept, a message, an empirical account (thick description) that stands out as adding to (or against) earlier thinking and understanding, with some relevance for practice. This practice could be about organizational performances, workplace democracy, dealing with gender issues and/or more thoughtful and 'productive' forms of resistance (see Spicer et al., 2009 on critical performativity).

## Goal displacement: from writing for others to writing for myself (and my sub-tribe)

In an article that actually has something to say, but is largely overlooked by the OS community, Perrow (1978) discusses the significance of goals in human service organizations (HSOs).

According to Perrow (1978), a characteristic of HSOs in the public sector, including health care, prisons, social work, and to some extent, schools, is the limited significance of the goals for organizational practice. It is assumed that the official objectives are crucial and that most activities are designed to achieve them. Countless reforms and new methods of control and management have been tried with the aim of improving operations and achieving better results. But they have seldom succeeded, and Perrow considers that the attempts at improvement were ill-conceived from the start. The basic assumption of the key part played by objectives does not hold water. Perrow maintains that the official objectives have relatively little importance for operations. This is because it is hard to define such goals and they are hard to realize. In addition, it is difficult to determine whether or not they have been achieved, as attempts to measure them are often not in tune with the goals.

As a result, the fulfilment of overall, 'official' objectives may easily play a limited role. Other factors become important instead. Perrow distinguishes between external functions and internal motives. The former include regulating the labour market and establishing a sense of social order

by dealing with potentially problematic elements in the population, keeping young people occupied in schools and away from the street. The internal motivating forces involve maximizing resources, preserving peace and harmony within the organization and giving an impression of modernity and rationality to external audiences. The latter is achieved by adopting new ideas, organizational models and ways of working that are defined by the predominant elite groups as 'correct', and which look good in the media.

The above functions and motives do not necessarily run counter to the official objectives, and sometimes they may even help to achieve these objectives. But often there is a discrepancy or conflict, leading to limited goal accomplishment.

Research and publication may be understood in a similar way to how Perrow thinks about HSOs. The objective of producing valuable knowledge may play a limited role compared to the ideal of a high level of productivity and publishing in highly ranked journals. The latter gives an impression of significant generation of new knowledge. But drivers and functions other than having something important to say may be vital for academics. These could include the following of fashion, adapting to a specific sub-tribe and making similar-minded colleagues happy with assumption-reproducing studies that do not upset one's comrades; these drivers may take the upper hand and outrank the ideal of saying something meaningful, of relevance for others apart from, at best, the sub-tribe. Of course, following fashion, adapting to a fixed set of norms and being a loyal tribe-member (making other norm-holders more inclined to accept a submission for publication), may increase the possibility of creating what is viewed as good knowledge, but these drivers may also guide or steer researchers away from the objective of having something to say.

An interesting question is thus to what extent meaningful research and socially important knowledge contributions play a (too) limited role in work. There are plenty of indications that the question may be worth raising. Colleagues often express opinions such as this one:

> In general I see very few people doing work they think important for anything but the tenure and promotion treadmill. This seems less a matter of personal or professional choice than the way our professionalization project clamped down on our sense of purpose. (JC Spender, personal correspondence)

In one recent workshop on 'publishing high impact research', in which I participated, 'high impact' was defined as publishing in US journals. Perhaps hardly surprising, today many people do not consider books as so important, despite most seminal works having been books. More interesting perhaps is that one presenter started by asking how can we be sure that we get 'a high Return On Investment' on our research projects. Such a strong payoff focus can be labelled roi-search (ROI-search), a bit different from curiosity-driven, uncertainty-acknowledging, re-search, where one is looking for something unexpected and challenging (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011a). Although an emphasis on instrumental outcomes has always been part of research and much more recent work seems more interesting than what was published when positivism ruled, one may see contemporary developments as a matter of *going from research to roisearch*. You hear many people referring to expectations and rewards for publishing so and so, authors eager to point at where they have published rather than what they have contributed with. All this reflects a general trend towards a reinforced focus on an appealing grandiose surface and an increased narcissism, where the ticking off and displaying of superficial signs of superiority become central. This is reflective of contemporary late capitalism and its economy of persuasion which is heavily associated with commercialism and branding (Alvesson, 2013). A key part here is careerism and narcissism being particular salient in occupations such as research, where one's subjectivity and signs of success are so fused and so strongly visible. (Where have you published? How many Google citations do

you have?) The threats to any deeper sense of meaningfulness or doing something that makes a social contribution are obvious.

Contemporary OS—like many other fields—is frequently accused of being narrow, incremental and irrelevant. Gap-spotting, formulaic, pedantic, boring are also frequently heard pejorative characterizations (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2013; Gabriel, 2010; Grey, 2010; Grey and Sinclair, 2006). Even journal editors complain about a shortage of anything other than incremental contributions (Clark and Wright, 2009) and even accuse their own reviewers of ditching innovative and interesting work (Ashkanasy, 2011). This is not restricted to the 'mainstream', but seems to be increasingly characterizing the so-called alternative paradigms.

In Alvesson and Sandberg (2013) we argue that incremental gap-spotting research is further encouraged by the increasing tendency for academics to pigeonhole themselves (and their subject matters) into a narrow and well-mastered area as a way to boost their productivity and thus be able to meet academic performance criteria: one knows the literature, goes to the right conferences, cultivates a network of people that matters, is familiar with the norms and rules of the editors and reviewers of the journals in the sub-area, and therefore capable of successfully publishing incremental contributions regularly but with a low likelihood of generating frame-bending and high-impact research. In particular, there is (a) often a strong expectation (amongst reviewers and editors) that people working within a specific sub-field, vacuum-clean and cite a significant part of all the work within it (see Hardy and Grant, 2012) and (b) often limited space and energy (even tolerance) for bringing in ideas and literature from outside the sub-field in question. There is a strong degree of intra-tribe orientation—academic tribalism. The tribe here, for most people, is typically a specialized group within the overall academic community.

An important project for academics would be to go from instrumental, inward-looking 'adding to the literature' to thinking more broadly about 'having something meaningful to say' as a key concern.

## Instead of meaningfulness for others—meaningfulness for me

Let me point at some orientations that may limit the creation and communication of meaningful knowledge for academics. The points are probably of some general relevance, but are geared to be of particular significance for OS community-type readers and contributors to *Organization*.

1   "This is really important for me". *Self-actualizationism*. Here a genuine interest, investments in a body of knowledge and an identity project is the key element. Sometimes this is based on an interest in philosophy, art, literature or a specific technique or theory that the researcher may become (over)committed to so strongly that critical distance is lost, instead there is a strong urge to focus on, defend and demonstrate its superiority. With the expansion of business schools, a large number of people who are not particularly interested in the subject matter but who are unable to find a job (at least with the same pay and other benefits) in another discipline, continue with their original interest while only paying lip service to the field of OS (even broadly defined). I remember one conference where a young man was giving a highly committed presentation on a major thinker in philosophy and scorned the OS community for not using this fantastically good thinker. When questioned about how the great thinker could benefit the field, the presenter became confused, could not understand the question and could not come up with an answer.

2   "I am here to have fun". *Hedonism*. The idea here is to try to optimize the pleasure element in research and publication. This may be difficult—most of us experience more than a fair share of suffering and boredom—but there are sometimes possibilities in writing about

television series, science fiction, a particular author or media ('Batman and leadership' or 'Organization in the Simpsons' or 'Art and leadership development') where having fun is vital. Then the struggle is to get some connection to OS, which is sufficient to get a paper published in a journal that is open for 'non-mainstream'.

3  "I am a real researcher". *Habitus-ism*. This could also be referred to as scientistic ritualism or the competent craftsperson. This orientation is one of embracing scientific rationality or, more generally, of being capable of mastery of journal publishing, either in a quantitative or a qualitative mode. Demonstrating one's competence and value as a person who is able to write an academic article worthy of being published in an 'A journal' is here salient. Journal writing seems to be the key skill for many people to develop these days. Knowledge should be competently packaged in 8 000–10 000 words or text displaying all the skills needed to impress a specific journal's reviewers and editor. Habitus-ism is then proved by the right fault-finding when evaluating the work of others.

4  "I use the right vocabulary and therefore I am good". *Discursivism*. Jargon is important. Sometimes one has the feeling that the key marker for a lot of social science is the use of complicated and inaccessible language. Often this is vital for intellectual understanding and is theoretically valuable, but sometimes people fall in love with a specific vocabulary and its status, community and identity-boosting advantages. There is a 'pretentiousness of much writing in the field' (Grey and Sinclair, 2006: 447). Often one has the feeling that language is used to mark one's distinctiveness and mark boundaries to outsiders, who do not use or necessarily really understand the vocabulary. Signifiers like 'discourse', 'leadership', 'institution' or 'knowledge' are extremely popular, but often vaguely and confusingly used (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011b; Alvesson and Spicer, 2012; Schreyogg and Geiger, 2007).

5  "Me and my friends. Working within the box". *Boxism*. In addition to using the right vocabulary and associating oneself with the 'good' in the abstract—being a CMS person, a social constructionist, a strategy in practice researcher—it is important for many people to belong to and satisfy the right network. As someone said, the vice of business is greed, of academia it is vanity. Being popular and respected and—above all—well-cited has strong value in itself. Going to the appropriate conference, meeting people, cultivating networks and getting praise and respect from one's peers may mean more for most academics than having something important to say to broader groups. Status within one's tribe is key and consideration by/of other groups becomes secondary or even irrelevant.

Of course, all these motives are to a considerable degree both legitimate and unavoidable. They may, to a degree, coexist with the having 'something to say' motive. But they may also not. A self-actualization project, hedonistic inclinations, methodological or academic text crafting 'excellence', using the right jargon, placing oneself on the right side of the fence from less good groups ('positivists', 'managerialists') and complying with and impressing one's friends may be important drivers of their own. But they may make the ideal of saying something relevant to others appear less important. It may get lost in the process.

The aforementioned aspects concern a possible displacement from meaningfulness for others to meaningfulness for oneself and perhaps one's sub-tribe. There is, however, also a possible displacement *from meaning to motivation* in the field. Sievers (1986) suggests that contemporary working life has lost a clear sense of meaning and that motivation has entered the picture instead. With increasing focus on the instrumental aspects of research—focus on journal publication output, wage differentiation, rapid promotion possibilities, general career consciousness—and journal publication regimes increasing the formulaic ingredients in research, meaning may be lost or

reduced and motivation (ROI, making the 4 x 4 formula, i.e. publish four articles in four-star journals within a certain period) may be upgraded.

So in terms of personal drivers for carrying out relevant research, the societal and broadly legitimate objective of developing knowledge about organizations improving the functioning of organizations (social movements, health care, firms, unions, etc.) may play a limited role in relation to 'narcissistic' meaning (i.e. important for me) as well as in relation to motivation (rewards).

It should be added here, that meaningful for others is not necessarily, as in the exemplary case of Perrow (1978), a straightforward, simple or even good thing. A management group, government, profession or union may welcome knowledge that technically or ideologically supports their interests, possibly at the expense of others. The issue of having something to say, as proposed in this article, is thus to try to move beyond supporting sectional interests, and orient oneself towards knowledge, insights or understandings that are assessed to serve some common good (leaving the issue of what this exactly means aside). Being more receptive to the interests of those outside one's tribe does not mean that one should take the former for granted, but perhaps challenge them in a thoughtful and non-egocentric way (Spicer et al., 2009).

## The journals are to be blamed—we, the writers are good, reviewers are bad?

Broad dissatisfaction with accomplishment in general and journal publications in particular, means that we enter blame-time. Everybody is at fault. Editors blame reviewers. As one associate editor of a major journal said: 'We get a very large number of really boring submissions, when there for once is an interesting piece it often suffers from lack of rigour and reviewers reject it' (conversation). Another editor wrote that the reviewers of his journal always reject novel and frame-breaking submissions (Ashkanasy, 2011). Reviewers blame authors and reject papers for various reasons, often of substantive nature (nothing new here), increasingly often for 'failing to add to the literature' (often understood as incrementally adding to a narrowly defined sub-field) or because of other shortcomings in complying with the formulaic requests for a proper academic article. Authors blame the others, including deans and institutions emphasizing productivity … some flak has been directed to institutions behind lists ranking journals, leading to what is referred to as 'journal fetishism' (Willmott, 2011). It is popular to engage in 'we are victims of the evil system' reasoning. It is implied that all the interesting, relevant and important work that researchers do—or could do, if not prevented by journals and university policies—is  not published or even written and that the pressure to publish (much) in the (right) journals with their conservative or narrow-minded, mainstreaming reviewers and editors are preventing the good work from materializing. The journal format and those pressing the otherwise creative, original and interesting authors into it are to be blamed. This is a standard story. According to some critics, US journals (and European journals that imitate them in their efforts to climb in rankings) are particularly responsible for the ill-doings (Grey, 2010). And there is little doubt that journal publication is seen by many as frustrating and sometimes counter-productive:

> Publishing is now a long process, involving numerous revisions, citing authors one does not care for, engaging with arguments one is not interested in and seeking to satisfy different harsh masters, often with conflicting or incompatible demands, while staying within a strict word limit. Most authors will go through these tribulations and the drudgery of copious revisions, accepting virtually any criticism and any recommendation with scarcely any complaint, all in the interest of getting published. (Gabriel, 2010: 764)

Many academics (we) appear to be turning themselves (ourselves) into incremental gap-spotters eager to 'add to the literature', i.e. to a narrowly defined sub-field. The impression from the studies and comments above is that gap-spotting researchers—at least those who make it into highly ranked journals and therefore 'count'—are not just intelligent, rigorous, diligent and methodologically and theoretically well-trained, but also cautious, instrumental, disciplined, career-minded and strongly specialized. This gap-spotting identity is, to a degree, difficult to avoid and not entirely negative.[1] But against this, one could put forward more genuine scholarly values and qualities such as being intellectually broad-minded, independent, imaginative, willing to take risks, enthusiastic about intellectual adventures and, sometimes, provocative. This would imply giving priority to discretion and integrity and doing intrinsically and meaningful work rather than tenure at a top university, rapid promotion and publishing in the most prestigious journals.

It is important not to exaggerate the contradiction here. Publications in the right journals are not necessarily contradictory to broader scholarship and a strong intellectual interest, including curiosity, openness and a willingness to take some risk. Interesting things can be expressed in journal format. One has not necessarily got to try to get into the most conservative journals and nobody is preventing anyone from writing book chapters, books or essays for the broader public.

In Alvesson and Sandberg (2013) we blame 'everybody' for the lack of good ideas and strong theoretical contributions during recent times, but land with the academics doing the writing and reviewing. Yes, there are bad systems, institutional pressures, etc., but reality is not only a social construction in academic texts but also in the lives of academics and the construction possibilities for academics in research are good. Researchers ('we', not 'them') deserve the whip. Journals can only publish what people write, but there is no surplus of good submissions with interesting ideas or rich empirical material. Reviewers and editors are writers, peers, the very same people. To blame 'reviewers' for 'writers' not being able to publish good research is too simplistic. The idea that one has to publish in top US journals because of institutional pressure is another peculiar idea. Very few academics (outside the USA) do so but still manage to get and retain jobs and even be quickly promoted without US journal publications. It is obviously untrue that one 'has to' publish in these journals. Even if it is understandable that career hungry academics seek ROI, and do roisearch (rather than research), it would be more understandable if they had followed Maslow and emphasized self-actualization motives instead—and perhaps avoided narcissistic forms of self-actualization and tried to take the possible value of knowledge relevant for other groups seriously.

Journals are not best seen as a fixed, objective obstacle preventing good and relevant OS. To the extent they are unhelpful—and dominating norms enacted by the majority of contemporary academics often embrace pedantic, formulaic and incremental, intra-academic work—they are an outcome of the production, enactment and compliance of academics, as authors and reviewers, perhaps with increasingly negative consequences.

## On the problem of too much research

With the expansion of business schools/management education and the increased emphasis on research/publications there is an explosion of research efforts and article production. This may be good for academics, but another question—perhaps seen as odd from the research community point of view—is whether all this is good for society, i.e. for broader groups interested in well-functioning companies and public sector organizations and the development of knowledge directly or indirectly relevant for this. Perhaps we are writing and publishing too much (Grey and Sinclair, 2006)? Do we, as a society, need or benefit from all this research? Benefits may often be uncertain or questionable. I think there are three problems:

1    Devoting a lot of resources to academic research means a risk that schools, health care, social welfare, developmental aid, and so on receive less resources. The funding of the research time for a lecturer or professor may mean one less nurse in health care or one teacher less in grammar school.

2    In education, many institutions (in particular in the UK, Australia and other countries where higher education (HE) is big business) rankings that are partly based on research output are vital and this means that ranking climbing is important to institutions, partly because it makes it easy to attract high fee paying students. Students then are attracted to institutions which use fees to pay for top scholars and others who pump out articles and may contribute little or narrowly to the education. The teaching is partly taken care of by non-researching part-time faculty or PhD students. Research excellence then may be at the expense of or disconnected from the quality of education. It should be noted here that contemporary HE shows strong signs that many students learn very little (Alvesson, 2013; Arum and Roksa, 2011).

3    A strong research focus means that academics tend to be highly specialized. Rather than a broader, scholarly orientation, one is narrowly focused and reads little outside one's core area. One also mainly reads stuff that is useful for publication and the broader qualifications vital for HE are neglected. Perhaps HE would benefit from more lecturers reading more, and reading more variedly and broadly, rather than reading less (and more narrowly) and writing so much.

One could argue that the major benefit of universities in areas like management and OS is not primarily research. The idea of 'everybody' doing it and publishing may lead to the weakening of HE. It sounds elitist to suggest that it may be better if many of those struggling hard to publish without success (or publishing in journals with no or few readers) were liberated from the demands of carrying out research and instead had time (and some pressure) to read instead. We may need less writers and more readers in contemporary academia. Perhaps more emphasis on education and less on article production would benefit society as a whole?

## High impact research? Klein rather than big

There is, of course, no recipe for how to conduct research and write something with a clear message that is potentially viewed as interesting, important and valuable outside a small OS sub-tribe.

There are some good examples in OS, including Jackall (1988), Kunda (1992), Perrow (1978) and Watson (1994). Another excellent, perhaps even more inspirational book, is Klein's (2000) book *No Logo*. This is a very well-written, intelligent, creative and revealing study that shows how the brand is increasingly colonizing social life and the mechanisms and ugly face behind this. It is not pure OS, but reasonably close. It exhibits the logic of contemporary firms and production processes and the striking discrepancy between the grandiose, orchestrated surface and the social and organizational processes backstage. One may actually bemoan the limited accomplishment and effects of the entire Critical Management Studies trend compared to this book written by a single young journalist. My own contributions seem modest by comparison. I think some self-critique within OS is motivated here. What are our priorities? What do we actually accomplish? Beyond publishing in the right journals?

Rather than looking at the Big US journals for models of how it can and should be done and/or looking at the rankings vital for Business schools big business (on the intertwined status and student markets) we should look at Klein. The success formula is then the opposite of what seems to drive us in academia:

- Focus on an extremely important, broad topic of economic, social and individual concern
- Well written, personal, engaging
- Strong moral and critical commitment
- Well researched and covering a broad terrain with a large number of rich illustrations
- Insightful, creative interpretations

By comparison, the average academic product deals with a comparatively minor phenomenon, follows the predictable, formulaic journal style, tries to give the impression of being neutral, impersonal and is not of much interest either for the researcher or the audience (if there is one). It is narrowly focused, with empirical material that is convincing rather than engaging and is often presented with a long method section showing how data has been 'collected', processed, sorted and then analysed, and uses an established framework to which the author adds incrementally.

My simple proposal for change in academia would be: read and re-read Klein and similar texts (Sennett, Fromm, some parts of Marcuse, Horkheimer and Adorno) and skip some not all— of the journal articles. Empirical work is typically also vital as a source of inspiration for having something to say. Rather than following the conventional method book, something much more creative is typically needed. Work more with securing the right (in-depth) access, keeping eyes open for interesting phenomena—don't just interview people belonging to the workforce in formal interviews, but approach ex-employees, interview people on the train or at the pub, perhaps after a pint or two, learn from earlier interviews and go deeper, shadow people, work with a set of ideas and assumptions, problematize these, work against the convictions and conventions of your own tribe, cultivate writer skills through consulting good texts, get feedback from people outside the sub-tribe, etc. If ethics committees prevent imaginative and non-predictable studies, then one may consider bypassing them or moving to a less bureaucratic and constraining place. Of course, academic writing is different from journalism and our primary task is not to directly reach the man on the street or the woman at the airport looking for something to kill time during a flight. But one could work with the objective of at least sometimes writing something that is not only of intra-tribal interest but can be put in the hands of your (ambitious) students and intellectual practitioners without making them feel that they are wasting their time after ten minutes. One could institutionalize this: after a person has published a few academic journal articles, further work in this genre should not 'count' unless accompanied by something that reaches a broader audience—a popular book or textbook, articles for practitioner journals or the general mass media.

## Final words

A relevant question to ask is whether we need all the research that is now produced in OS (and many other fields) and which people try to publish. We may need it for tribe-egoistic reasons, but if 'we' is defined more broadly and we consider that tax payers may be concerned about state budget deficits, health care, social welfare, pensions, schools etc., one may be reflexive about what we are doing and ask what the purpose of contemporary research is in addition to the popular 'narcissistic reflexivity' about the presence of the author in text and the researcher/knowledge link, we could engage in 'have we anything to say'-reflexivity. What are we, in a societal context, doing and why? From a citizen's point of view, I think the question 'What in hell do these people think they are up to?' often seems relevant.

We may not have that much to say to our colleagues and even less to other people. High rejection rates of journal submissions, many non-cited published papers and a general doubt about lack of publications and results that stand out; all these provide food for thought. Questions of meaningfulness are always difficult and some degree of pluralism, but not uncriticality, is important. My impression when reviewing papers, looking at many published articles and talking with people is that it is

common to struggle with the question of whether one has anything to say. 'Playing the game' is a frequent expression indicating an instrumental, cynical, even corrupt attitude. Sometimes this 'nothing to say' may be said in the right way and tick off the various criteria for having done things right (literature review ok, method section, fine, a lot of data, ok, some discussions, call for more research tick, tick,). This may by some be seen as sufficient. I don't share this view, even though we also need to provide some space for serious efforts that do not fully make it a strong contribution.

As so much has been said about organizations and management it is very difficult to say something new, meaning that existing theory is relabelled (discourse and identity instead of culture; leadership instead of management, for example) and more and more esoteric or peripheral topics are addressed. According to Oswick et al. (2011) the major theories—including principle insights—used today were already developed in the 1970s. Perhaps we are saying more or less the same thing all the time, changing labels and pretending that there is progress.

There is a risk that contemporary academia is a hothouse for "functional stupidity"—people take the dominant framework for doing research seriously and for granted, don't ask questions of the broader purpose or find out what the alternatives may be. They refrain from thinking, for themselves, outside the box set by one's sub-tribe (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012). Instead, many follow the journal publication template, engage in cynical consciousness (talk smartly and in a liberation-minded way, while acting in a mainstreamed, compliant mode, Fleming and Spicer, 2003). An indicator of a degree of hypocrisy is that we move between asserting that journal publication is just a game and reacting as if it is a real injustice if we are rejected.

This sounds gloomy indeed, but on the other hand, there has been over time, an accumulation of many good examples of interesting and rich texts—offering both academic theoretical value and knowledge that is useful for non-tribe members. With the availability of all sources of inspiration—good texts, a wealth of theoretical perspectives, research philosophies, conferences, networks, etc.—the chances of doing really interesting work are still, in principle, excellent. Compared to the times before the paradigm debates and the celebration of pluralism, we are clearly better equipped today, with a broad display of acknowledged intellectual possibilities. Despite institutional mechanisms that prevent us from doing the creative, rich and insightful work that we like to think we are capable of, the evil system can be handled. In a sense we can do what we want. A delayed promotion or a job at a place ranked 18 rather than 12 in UK will not be like a death sentence. Much of the problem is over-compliance, narcissistic indulgence and loss of sight of the social purpose of research: which is to say something meaningful and relevant to others. Universities are supposed to do research, not roisearch. If we can individually, collectively and institutionally, counteract narcissistic meaning (self-actualization, hedonism, rationalism, discursivism, boxism) and instrumental motivation (rewards) then a balance between these drivers and socially relevant and meaningful work can be attained. There are plenty of methodological, paradigmatic and textual inspirations around and no reason why we should not have a lot to say, both to fellow academics and to other groups. Given the shortage of deliveries of good knowledge contributions for some time, now the space is open and the options are endless.

## Notes

1   It is, of course, necessary to have a reasonable knowledge of the area one is working within and to do some positioning at least in relation to significant existing studies.

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