

For meaningful management research

Can we do better?

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STATE OF THE MISERY

- More and more research and publications
- ... that contribute less and less
- Massification of HE, espec. in business and management

- Credentials, ranking, career
- Demonstrating employ- and promotability: GETTING PUBLISHED!
- Research publ. from means to an end

- Researchers less of scholars, more of journal producing technicians
- Formulaic, incremental, tribe-oriented studies
- Contemporary academia: A hothouse of functional stupidity
- 'Success' recipe for individual researchers and departments lead to irrelevant research

Research need to be interesting to be read (and remembered)

- Delphi study after two rounds of survey are three: (1) Current research does not produce knowledge relevant for business practices. (2) A strong orientation toward A-ranked journals distorts incentives towards a narrow focus and excludes many important papers that are published in lesser-ranked journals. (3) An overemphasis on theory (which ironically discourages the development of new theories)

The Kingdom of the boring

- The social researcher who wants to be certain that he (sic) will produce an *interesting* theory about his subject must first familiarize himself with what his audience already assumes to be true about his subject, before he can even begin to generate a proposition which, in denying their assumption, will attract their attention.' (Davis, 1971: 337, italics in original).
- Interesting research: identify, articulate and challenge implicit, dominant assumptions
- Avoid gap-spotting, challenge assumptions

Interesting and relevant for who?

- Oneself (career & narcissism)
- Research sub-subtribe
- Broader research community
- Including (better) students & a few practitioners
- Educated public (incl managers)

- ‘Technical’ relevance for a group/inst or
broader (but indirect) relevance for a general audience

Needed?

- An idea, having something to say
- Interesting empirical material – bold, imaginative, ‘non-comfortable’ studies
- Methodology: Wallraff, ‘Finnish interviews’ (anti research ethics)
- Good writing
- Publication forms that are accessible

Identity and institutional context

- Conformism
- Careerism
- Counting (4 x 4 issue)
- How do we see ourselves?
- How do regulate others?
- How do we organize our work and institutions?
- Can we do something different?

WHAT TO DO?

- Studies with an idea, rich data and that are well written
- Policy, organization, identity implications
- **Policy**
- Massification is a problem: we need fewer researchers (and more readers/better teachers) and fewer publications
- Institutions assessed on (a few) 'real contributions'? (By accreditation bodies, governments)
- Selection and qualitative assessment of say 5-10 key contributions from each school 'having something to say' (based on academic and social criteria), comparison w other schools/departments – intellectual (not technical) impact

Organizations (schools, departments)

- Means: writing (not for journal publ) WS
- Promotion/employment: strong signs on reaching a broader audience
- Reading groups
- Seminar culture of 'so what'?

Individuals

- Socialisation/identity regulation.
- Do you have anything to say? Is this worth a nurse or social worker less?

Journals

- Emphasize the good idea
- Refrain from encouraging formulaic studies
- Use non-expert reviewers
- Ask: what is the point? So what?

Journal ranking

Let some practitioners/educated public folks read abstract of journal articles and rank journals based on interestingness

Mats Alvesson works at Lund University, Sweden and also at the University of Queensland, Brisbane, and City University London. He is interested in critical theory, qualitative method, and organization studies. He has published about thirty books, including *The Superior/Peacock Profile*, with A. Spicer; *Managerial Lives* (Cambridge University Press, with S. Sveringsson); *Reflexive Leadership* (Sage, with M. Blom and S. Sveringsson); *Authentic Methodology* (Sage, with J. Skoldberg); and *The Triumph of Empiricism* (Zedart University Press).

Yiannis Gabriel is Professor of Organizational Theory at Bath University. Yiannis is known for his work into organizational storytelling and narratives, leadership, management learning, and the culture and the politics of contemporary consumption. He is senior editor of *Organization Studies* and the author of nine books. His enduring fascination as a researcher lies in what he describes as the unmanageable qualities of life in and out of organizations.

Roland Paulsen is Assistant Professor at the Department of Business Administration, Lund University. He is the author of three books including *Empty Labor: Idleness and Workplace Resistance* (Cambridge University Press), where he addresses the mystery of why some employees can be very idle at work whereas others suffer from stress and work identification. He has also studied and written about the Swedish workless system.

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The Triumph of Empiricism
Consumption, Higher Education,
and Work Organization
Mats Alvesson

Organizing Words
A Critical Thesaurus for Social
and Organization Studies
Yiannis Gabriel

The authors of this outstanding book are aimed at academics across the globe to do research that has 'value and meaning to society'. Too much of social science has little impact and meaning to the lives of ordinary people and society. *Return to Meaning* is an excellent remedy and a must read for all social scientists.

Dr Gary L Cooper, Professor of Organizational Psychology & Health, Macomber Business School

All social scientists should take note of this hard-hitting, well-written critique of their trade. Mats Alvesson and his co-authors do more than complain about today's dreadful decline and fall of academic values; they also offer sensible suggestions to restore meaning to the social sciences.

Michael Kelly, Professor of Social Sciences, Loughborough University

In a world where there appears an increasing demand for simplification and numeric representation by government and policy makers—ratios, indicators, rankings and the like—a re-articulation of the importance of narrative and meaning in understanding social life has never been more important. Policy making needs to return to a more contextualized and nuanced framing of proposals and solutions and social scientists have a key role in assisting such processes. This book represents an excellent step forward in replotting meaning and understanding as central concerns in decision making and the formulation of policy.

Professor Roger King, Fisher Price Classics, University of Leeds

This is a very timely, truly original and wonderfully provocative book. The authors challenge some of the most salient and important problems in how the social sciences and the humanities operate in today's universities. Their mission is very laudable — to change universities from factories for the production career-related academic credentials and make them into places that matters for real world social problems. The critique of the increase of esoteric language and technically elegant but obscure models that are detached from reality is well-taken. This book is a must read for anyone who cares about the future of the social sciences.

Dr Nicholas, Professor of Government and Public Policy at the Osgoode School of Government, University of Oxford

A devastating critique of the largely institutionalized publication norms of what passes for current scholarship in the social sciences. *Return to Meaning* provides an insightful analysis of just where contemporary social sciences has lost its way. This is a smart and eminently readable treatment of the 'flat, sterile, derivative and unimaginative writings that fill up our insupportable scientific journals today and what might be done to counter such a dismal state of affairs.

John Van Marrewijk, Eindhoven School Professor of Organization Studies, M.C.T.

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ALVESSON, GABRIEL, & PAULSEN

RETURN TO MEANING



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RETURN TO MEANING

a social science with something to say



MATS ALVESSON, YIANNIS GABRIEL, & ROLAND PAULSEN

This book argues that we are currently witnessing not merely a decline in the quality of social science research, but the proliferation of meaningless research of no value to society, and of modest value to its authors—apart from securing employment and promotion.

The explosion of published outputs, at least in social science, creates a noisy, cluttered environment that makes meaningful research difficult, as different voices compete to capture the limelight however briefly. Often, more significant contributions are easily neglected, as the premium is to write and publish, not to read and learn. The result is a widespread cynicism among academics on the value of academic research, sometimes including their own. Publishing comes to be seen as a game of hits and misses, devoid of intrinsic meaning and value, and of no wider social use whatsoever. Academics do research in order to get published, not to say something socially meaningful. This is what we view as the rise of nonsense in academic research, which represents a serious social problem. It undermines the very point of social science.

This problem is far from 'academic'. It affects many areas of social and political life, entailing extensive waste of resources and inflated student fees as well as costs to taxpayers. The book's second part offers a range of proposals aimed at restoring meaning at the heart of social science research, enabling it to address the major problems and issues that face our societies.

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