



Anne S Tsui suggests how business school scholars can overcome the growing criticism of irrelevant and self-serving research

Reconnecting with the business world

SOCIALLY RESPONSIBLE SCHOLARSHIP

For the past 25 years, business school research has been criticised for its serious disconnection from the world of business practice and for being an insulated and self-serving activity on the part of both school leadership and individual scholars.

These criticisms seem severe but collectively we, professors and doctoral students of business schools worldwide, are spending a lot of our time writing papers with unclear value for practice or perhaps even for knowledge. It seems that we have forgotten both the scientific and social mission of scholarship.

Some deans of business schools refer to research as the "paper production function". (A scholar used the term "machine shops" and another "Taylorising business school research".) In such scenarios, the faculty is the workforce in the paper production factories.

Then, there are the journals, which publish the papers written by the workers in these paper factories. Journal editors (who are usually esteemed senior "workers") use "workers" in different factories to judge the papers submitted to them in terms of theoretical and methodological rigour.

A third group, such as the *Financial Times*, *US News and World Report* or Thomson Reuters, which publishes the *Science Citation Index* and *Social Science Citation Index*, ranks the journals and the schools.

Research factories, journals and ranking publishers thus form the three legs of the research enterprise operating today.

Interestingly, practising managers, ostensibly the consumers of the "knowledge" supposedly produced, play no part unless they are needed as "research subjects". Researchers look to the papers published in the "top" journals for ideas to study. Their primary goal or motivation is not to help practising managers solve their problems but to garner approval from the editors and reviewers of the journals.

Journals and school rankings are important to business schools. Highly ranked schools attract the best students, outstanding scholars, research grants and endowments. Schools value the highly ranked journals because only these are counted in school rankings. Journals are ranked not by the topics they study or the practical relevance of the research but by the frequency of citations by other academic journals. The relevance of the content for management practice is largely inconsequential in the ranking formula.

However, evidence is mounting that publication in top academic journals is no guarantee that these articles are of high quality or relevance.

A 2012 study in the *Academy of Management Perspective* substantiates the research–practice gap. The study found that the names or ideas of 384 of the most cited, hence most respected, scholars rarely appear on Google.com websites or webpages that the general public, including managers, read. The authors conclude: "The science–practice gap does not seem to be narrowing".

Is it socially responsible to produce scholarship that provides no value for practice, especially scholarship in practice-oriented disciplines such as business and management? Is it socially responsible to apply valuable intellectual and financial resources to the paper production function for the sole purpose of improving school rankings?

The pressure to publish fuels questionable research practices in all scientific fields. A 2005 *Nature* article, "Scientists behaving badly," discusses the problem in the natural sciences. A 2010 article, "Management science on the credibility bubble: Cardinal sins and various misdemeanors," showed serious violations of research ethics such as withholding methodology details, selective reporting of results, using others' ideas without credit, dropping observations to improve statistical results and even fabricating results.

A *Science* article, "China's publication bazaar," reports that top journal publications are the tickets to financial rewards, promotion and occupational prestige, giving rise to an industry of "fake" authorships.

The *Science* editors investigated 27 agencies in China that advertised papers and authorship for sale, with the value of an authorship ranging from \$1,600 to \$26,000.

Even without direct monetary involvement, the "Management science credibility" study reported researchers join "article publication communes" to increase the number of papers. Eight in 10 respondents in this study had witnessed faculty inappropriately accepting or assigning authorship credit. Is it socially responsible scholarship to engage in these questionable research practices?

384

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This production culture and a narrow journal list carry a third unintended consequence: the worldwide convergence of research paradigms. New ideas and new discoveries are lacking in a "homogenisation of scholarship".

Most scholars and schools in Asia, Europe and South America, with Africa coming along, are following the dominant research paradigm because of the focus on a common set of "top" journals. International scholars adapt their research approach to meet the expectations and preferences of the "A-journal" editors and reviewers.

By choosing the most popular topics and using the most prevalent theories and methods, papers are looking more and more alike with fewer and fewer new ideas.

Is it socially responsible scholarship to write papers solely to get them published without regard to their intellectual and social value? It is no overstatement to say that our research enterprise is at risk. By disconnecting from the world of practical management, engaging in questionable research practices, focusing on career needs and pursuing high rankings, scholarship is largely socially *irresponsible*. It is failing to meet the goal of science: to discover truth and improve the human condition.

How long will taxpayers, private and public funding agencies, and society at large tolerate these self-serving, inward-looking, "castle in the sky" research practices?

The good news is that these criticisms and discontent are beginning to motivate actions.

Scholars are recognising that we should reconsider how we evaluate research quality and impact. Many admit that citations in academic journals do not necessarily indicate practical, social and perhaps even intellectual impact.

On December 16, 2012, 155 editors and publishers of scholarly journals in a variety of disciplines representing 82 organisations worldwide gathered in San Francisco to sign a declaration along with specific suggestions for a new framework for assessing research contribution.

They declared: Do not use journal-based metrics, such as Journal Impact Factors, as a surrogate measure of the quality of individual research articles to assess an individual scientist's contributions or in hiring, promotion or funding decisions.

An article in the Sept/Oct 2014 issue of *BizEd* discussed the topic of "Measuring faculty impact", advocating a broadened metric that includes books, chapters, professional services, media coverage and expert witness appearances. In 2013

82

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20%

Analyses of articles in leading management journals reveal that 80% of published research focuses on economic outcomes. Much less research, only 20%, focuses on social outcomes such as stress, health, satisfaction, justice, social responsibility and environmental stewardship



80%

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AACSB revised its standards for accreditation to include sustainability and impact. All business schools will be assessed using the new standards by 2016.

EFMD's EQUIS accreditation system considers contribution to world sustainability as a criterion in assessing teaching and research quality. The Research Excellence Framework in UK revised its assessment of institutional research quality by putting a 25% weighting on social or practical impact. Similar efforts are being introduced in Australia, the Netherlands and France. Those are important steps toward socially responsible scholarship.

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We spend much of our time and funds helping firms gain profits without concern about possible harmful consequences to other stakeholders and the world at large.

Socially responsible scholarship should aim to understand how firms could be people-friendly and planet-friendly. An example of an important people-friendly topic is work stress.

Workplace stress in the US causes major human havoc: studies have shown that between 40% and 80% of employees experience stress at work and about 50% have symptoms of burnout. Stress-related expenses such as accidents, absenteeism, and mental or physical health problems cost the US about \$300 billion in 2012, not including intangible costs to employees in terms of lost mental wellbeing, happiness and longevity.

Socially responsible research should identify the major work stressors and test management policies and practices that can reduce stress.

Studies can compare planet-friendly and unfriendly practices in organisations. It can study how firms can be profitable without depleting the earth's natural resources and without damaging our environment. It can strive to develop a new model of business that holds firms accountable for the natural resources used and damaged, and for the damage done to the environment during production processes. Changing the focus of research from benefiting the firm or shareholders primarily to a balanced focus on benefiting all stakeholders is another important step toward socially responsible scholarship.



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Why should managers and employees support business school research that is irrelevant to them? Why should they participate in studies that are undertaken to produce papers that meet researchers' or schools' needs but not theirs?

Why should granting agencies support research that gives researchers promotions and employment security but makes no contribution to society through important discoveries or inventions? What entitles researchers to use public goods for their private gains? Considering these value proposition questions is an important part of socially responsible scholarship.

Who should take responsibility for ensuring that business school research fulfils the social mission of contributing valid and useful knowledge?

In my conversations with faculty and school leadership, everyone passes the buck. Faculty researchers point to the school leadership or deans. Deans point to the university administration or the senior faculty on tenure and promotion committees. University administrators point to the government research grant and assessment bodies.

However, as Gandhi said: "be the change you want to see in the world". We should all take responsibility to solve this problem and save our research enterprise.

Randy Schekman, recipient of the 2013 Nobel Prize in physiology and medicine, is one who has taken a personal initiative. Recognising that journals encourage researchers to pursue fashionable topics, distort the scientific process and encourage short-cuts, he declared the day before he received the Nobel Prize that he will no longer submit papers to *Nature*, *Cell* and *Science*, the three top science journals.

Researchers can collectively change journal policies and practices. As some editors have said, "journals can only publish papers submitted." Scholars and journal editors (who themselves are important scholars) can bring about a shift from writing journal-focused papers to knowledge-generation and practice-improvement scholarship. They can change research from controlled paper production to a sacred journey of scientific inquiry. That is the spirit of socially responsible scholarship.

The most important beneficiaries of research – business leaders – are also the most distant from and dispassionate about business school research. Although they have been largely passive recipients, they could have tremendous power if they become active consumers demanding relevant research.

Academic-practitioner collaboration could be a win-win proposition. Business leaders could influence research by providing funding and offering their companies as research laboratories. Practitioners' interests, understandably, are aligned more with the traditional emphasis on economic than the much-needed social outcomes. To ensure balanced attention to social outcomes, funding agencies should devote more of their research dollars to addressing social outcomes affected by organisational policies and practices.

All parties in the research enterprise – scholars, school leaders, grant agencies, policymakers, business leaders and journal editors – can contribute to the pursuit of socially responsible scholarship by remembering the goal of science: the discovery and application of true knowledge to improve the human condition.



FURTHER INFORMATION

References to original work mentioned in this article are available from the author – anne.tsui@asu.edu

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