

# The changing character of the management PhD and some reflections on how to arrest its descent to hollow virtuosity in producing meaningless texts

## *Unplugged* - Manifesto

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The Unplugged Manifesto subsection gives the opportunity to academics and non-academics to deliver a viewpoint about the transformation(s) of academic world, our institutions, research practices and methods. It aims to give voice to perspectives which take the opposing view to legitimated and or naturalized ideas about our transformation(s). Sometimes, the editors will edit a counterpoint to these manifestos in another issue.

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The PhD thesis has long been the defining landmark of every scholar's life. Like the fictional hero of John Williams's novel *Stoner*, many if not most academics of my generation, i.e. those who wrote their PhDs before the arrival of word-processors and computers, are known to keep a yellowing copy of their thesis, occasionally leafing nostalgically through their yellowing pages. Nostalgia is a ready lure for scholars reminiscing about their own PhDs but a bad guide in criticizing present practices. If, however, one resists the comforting temptations of nostalgia, reflecting on some developments in the meanings and practices of doctoral research can generate some useful insights. In this piece, I reflect on some of the major changes that PhDs in the social sciences have undergone in the past forty years or so, identify some of the challenges facing doctoral researchers today and consider some of the implications of these changes for academic research more generally.

At a social gathering to celebrate Greek Orthodox Easter, I met a young Cypriot man who had arrived three days earlier in the city of Bath to start his doctoral research in health policy. "I will do the research I love", were his exact words "I will discover something really important, and then find somewhere to publish it." His words, full of spontaneous enthusiasm, stayed with me. They are words that I might well have used myself at the outset of my doctoral research many decades ago. The immediate retort of his sympathetic interlocutor, a slightly older economics lecturer, however, is not one I would have heard until maybe five or ten years ago: "The only publications that count today are 3-star and 4-star. This is the name of the game!" The young scholar was perplexed: "What are these stars all

about?” he asked, prompting a long sermon by his older peer on the nature of the ‘publishing game’ today. “Welcome to reality of modern academia” was my own sad and silent thought.

The young man’s passion for discovery and knowledge is one that has fuelled the enthusiasm of many of those starting a doctoral research. Such enthusiasm inevitably gets tempered, but something of it remains for most of us, a kind of undying lust for the new idea, the new theory, the new application. Whatever layers of cynicism, conformism and careerism are subsequently superimposed on our work, it is reassuring to know that a desire for knowledge, sometimes dormant and unconscious, sometimes conscious and burning, drives academic researchers through the ages, from Dr Faustus and Dr Johnson to our young Cypriot today.

The purpose of doctoral research can generally be viewed as the channelling of this desire for knowledge into a disciplined quest through the mastery of various skills and practices that lie at the core of scientific inquiry. The amalgam of desire, discipline and skill is what Weber had in mind in his seminal essay “Science as a vocation”, the notion of vocation combining a quasi-religious calling, a passionate devotion, a steely discipline, a preparedness to make sacrifices, a faith in scientific method and a belief in progress, all of which distinguish the scientist from the dilettante.

The craft of the PhD researcher involves many different skills essential for scientific inquiry. Some of them, like reading, learning a new vocabulary of concepts and terms, constructing coherent arguments, recognizing patterns, analysing concrete situations and writing intelligently build on skills already cultivated in undergraduate and Masters level studies. Some of the skills, however, go well beyond these and include a command of a large area of literature from a discipline’s foundations to recent developments in a field, a mastery of various research methodologies, abstract and applied, and, maybe most importantly, an ability for critical and original thinking. Derek Pugh, the respected organizational theorist, was once asked, in my presence, by a doctoral student what was ‘original research’. “This is precisely what you have to find out for yourself as a doctoral student, dear boy” was his instant response. The ultimate criterion for a successful doctoral research has long been the ability to make an original, coherent and enduring contribution to knowledge, one that cannot be ignored by subsequent researchers.

An important aspect of PhD research has always been a highly-charged and personal relation between each young scholar and their supervisor, not dissimilar from that between apprentice and master, or even parent and offspring. This potentially rich and fulfilling relation casts the supervisor as the young scholar’s mentor, one who provides direction, insight and also criticism. It usually entails a thick tissue of positive and negative emotions, including love, excitement, adulation, envy, resentment, anxiety, fear, disappointment and hope, which make the doctoral journey a memorable one for most researchers. The ideal conclusion of this relation has long been one in which the young scholar gradually develops his or her independence from their supervisor, being able to conduct their own research and placing less reliance on their supervisor’s advice and guidance. The final product, the PhD dissertation, has traditionally been a uniquely personal accomplishment marking the eventual emancipation of a

doctoral student from his or her supervisor and confirming his or her readiness to assume an independent academic career.

In recent years, many factors have contributed to alter several aspects in the character and quality of doctoral research. Some of them have their origin several decades back when a "Publish or perish" mentality installed itself in elite universities in the US and subsequently elsewhere. It is worth noting that this mentality was far from hegemonic even fifty years ago, when many of my own professors in the Sociology department at Berkeley could pursue successful and meaningful academic careers, writing perhaps a single monograph or a couple of articles every five or ten years.

More recently, however, a whole mesh of inter-related factors have very substantially transformed the conduct of academic research and, along with it, the nature of doctoral education. The arrival of mass higher education which has seen unprecedented numbers of young people pursuing university education, the huge increase in specialization of academic fields and disciplines, the massive escalation of academic journals publications in every field, the overwhelming dominance of the English language in what has become a global Higher Education industry, these and other factors have all had an impact on the ways doctoral research is conducted and evaluated.

Technological factors have played a major part too. The transition from typewriters to word-processors and resulting facility in producing finished text, the easy accessibility of articles (or at least abstracts and keywords) on-line, the ever-presence of bibliographical and referencing software, the arrival of Manuscript Central and other manuscript-handling and editing software, and above all, the emergence of citation counts, rankings, impact factors and other 'metrics' have also contributed to how doctoral research is conducted and what its expected outcomes are.

At first sight, one is tempted to describe the fundamental change in the character of doctoral research as a transition from craft production with its idiosyncratic tools, skills and methods to a mass production of uniform processes and outputs. Instead of each researcher having to discover their own road to Rome, today's doctoral students are asked to follow the main highways, adhering strictly to the Highway Code and maintaining a constant speed. Unlike scholars of my generation who frequently chose their doctoral topic after one or even two false starts, most doctoral researchers today are permitted few delays and mishaps. The individual relation with their supervisor has been diluted as each supervisor may now supervise numerous students and as each student may be required to attend more and more standardised doctoral courses and workshops as part of their progression. These routinely include courses on methodology, research ethics, academic writing and publishing as well as on how to handle relations with their supervisors. The pastoral care of students is itself increasingly being regulated by a plethora of bureaucratic guidelines and procedures ostensibly aimed at protecting both students and their supervisors from charges of different forms of ethical and professional misconduct, including bullying, harassment, plagiarism and misappropriation.

If indeed the fundamental change in doctoral research has been one from craft to mass production the underlying logic could be described as

one of deskilling, the erosion of individual and idiosyncratic skills by impersonal and formulaic routines of conducting research in each discipline, and the replacement of individual judgement and knowhow by impersonal and often mechanical alternatives. Thus, instead of spending endless hours in a library sifting through paper copies of journals and painstakingly reading academic texts, today's doctoral student uses a variety of on-line resources to find relevant literature, to compile reference lists and even to identify 'gaps' in the literature that may guide their choice of a research question, a research methodology, a research protocol and a potential research journal in which to make their 'contribution'. The quality of the research itself, ever more specialized and detailed, can only be judged by a tiny group or a micro-tribe of experts who share its vocabulary, assumptions and preoccupations. Even more pertinently, doctoral students are now routinely socialized into a mindset where the quality of academic research depends on the star-rating of the journals where it is published and the citations that it earns.

Maybe the culmination of these developments has been the replacement of the time-honoured doctoral dissertation or monograph by a thesis that consists of several published or unpublished papers and conference presentations. This has been a dramatic change, at least in management doctoral research. As the instructor on the entry-level course "Approaches to Management Research" to all management doctoral students at Bath University, I made a point of asking students during my first session how many of them considered pursuing a "PhD by publication" as against "PhD by monograph". In the space of a mere three years, the responses I received changed from a small minority to every single one of the 25-odd recruits in 2017. I was truly astonished by this development and even more by how obvious this choice seemed to the new recruits.

For scholars of my generation, publishing was something that happened mostly after the completion of their PhD. Such an approach would be unsustainable for most doctoral students hoping to pursue an academic career today. Learning how to publish is instilled in them from the first semester of their studies. Presentations by editors of elite journals are now routinely the best attended of sessions of most scholarly conferences, attracting young researchers eager to learn the ropes of the publishing game and profit from it. Publishing has become a *sine qua non* of the PhD itself. Inevitably, this has generated new and acute sources of anxiety for doctoral students and has prompted the acquisition of a radically different set of skills. Networking with small numbers of scholars, especially the stars in each sub-specialization, has become a vital asset in playing the publishing game as has participation in conferences and learning how different journals operate. These skills were quite unknown to doctoral students of my generation as were the skills involved in sifting through hundreds of abstracts, identifying the big players in a field, mastering the buzzwords and avoiding various stigmatizing traps, double-guessing editors about prospective reviewers, ingratiating themselves to reviewers and editors and being prepared to survive numerous journal rejections and disappointments. For these reasons, the simple deskilling hypothesis I mentioned earlier must be qualified: undoubtedly doctoral students today learn many skills as part of their training, but are these skills conducive to pursuing meaningful and valuable research.

Two of the consequences of these changes, i.e. the pressure to publish for doctoral researchers and the replacement of the doctoral

monograph by a sequence of papers, have been, first, the co-authoring of doctoral work by the candidate and several other scholars (including the supervisor) and the shrinking size of the doctoral thesis. These were clearly in evidence in ten management dissertations I read recently. As a member of the jury for the prestigious Grigor McLelland doctoral dissertation award ([www.socadms.org.uk/the-grigor-mccllelland-doctoral-dissertation-award/](http://www.socadms.org.uk/the-grigor-mccllelland-doctoral-dissertation-award/)) I was sent the ten dissertations shortlisted from a long list of submissions. Accordingly, the overall standard of these ten dissertations was much superior to that of the average management dissertation today and at least three of them were quite outstanding. They came from seven countries in four continents and remarkably, seven of the ten were substantially based on ethnographic research conducted by the candidate, which maybe says something about the shortlisting process. Only one of the shortlisted dissertation had statistics. What I found especially revealing, however, was that seven of the ten were collections of papers, bookended by an introduction and a conclusion and six of them included papers co-authored with other scholars including the student's supervisor. In spite of the prevalence of ethnographies, the average length was a mere 65,500 words of which more than 10% were the references. By way of contrast, few of the sixty odd dissertations I have supervised and examined in the past were less than 100,000 words long.

Clearly this sample of ten shortlisted dissertations is atypical but it supports the view that learning to work as a member of a team and to play the publishing game are now vital features of doctoral research, especially when it comes to winning prizes. It seems to me that these changes have negatively affected the overall quality of doctoral scholarship or at least have diluted the vocation of the scholar. Like any game, the publishing game, creates winners and losers, and arguably fewer of the former and more of the latter. To be sure, like any game, the publishing game calls for diverse talents and skills, but winning, i.e. making the 'publishing hit', takes precedence over everything else. Winning calls for opportunism, cunning and a short-term orientation; it calls for knowing how to approach influential players, how to subtly influence referees, how to bend rules in your favour. It calls for choosing your associates and your contests carefully, knowing when to persevere against the odds and when to give up losing battles. It calls for identifying carefully fashionable areas and trends and making yourself known to the leading players in the field. Winning in the publishing game encourages highly instrumental and opportunistic attitudes and discourages scholarship, including careful and critical reading of a discipline's foundational texts. Above all it discourages any prolonged or profound questioning the meaning and value of the research itself.

The damaging effect of the publishing game on the meaning and value of social research has been noted repeatedly, not least by editors and senior scholars, funding and accreditation bodies as well as governments, and is beginning to assume the character of a moral panic. As my colleague and co-author Mats Alvesson said during a conference presentation to lively applause "never before in the history of mankind have so many written so much with so little effect or benefit to so few". Under the rule of 'publish or perish', academic publishing has become an unstoppable machine for the production of texts, a machine that many criticize but nobody is willing or able to control. It is estimated that there are currently more than 50 million 'scientific' articles in circulation and that their number is increasing by more than two million each year, a figure that is itself growing as 200-300 new scientific journals appear every year.

One of the adverse effects of the relentless publishing game has been on the mental health and wellbeing of researchers, especially the younger ones. At a 2018 workshop of the European Association of Work and Organizational Psychology in Breda, burnout emerged as the paramount concern of young researchers and the cause of much soul-searching and anxiety among all participants. Chief among the causes of burnout were the unremitting competition in the publishing game and the increasing meaningless of the research itself which constantly sabotaged young scholars' attempts to forge meaningful research identities. Once academic research provided the firm of identity anchor to scholars. By contrast, today's academic researchers are more likely to see themselves as sailing in turbulent seas often without a compass, surrounded by others who seem to have a much better idea of where they are going.

While competition among researchers has always been a feature of academic life, today, competition in the social sciences is providing all kinds of perverse incentives for meaningless research. As research in the social sciences has changed from a vocation to a publishing game it also becomes a spectator sport by proxy (the spectators being deans, promotion panels, ranking agencies, students and potential students and, of course, other researchers), a sport of hits and misses which mesmerizes both participants and audiences and arouses acute passions without actually creating much of lasting value or meaning. Even the winners of this game cannot rest on their laurels as the fruits of success are contingent on a constant stream of fresh publications.

Is this game sustainable? Hardly. Scarce resources allocated to the publishing game, including money, academic time and administrative support, come at the expense of other social needs. They come at the expense of teaching itself. The time may not be too far when entire universities and departments begin to fold, unable to stay in an expensive game that rewards the few and drains the life resources of the rest. Others will inevitably substantially downsize, continuing to reward the few star researchers and exploit the many.

There is now evidence that funding and professional bodies as well as university leadership and even policy-makers are beginning to worry. Accreditation bodies are showing some impatience with resources going to pointless research at the expense of teaching. The expense of the UK research evaluation exercise (REF) certainly preoccupied the Stern Review. In the UK, the introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework is a belated if scarcely effective response to the recognition that teaching should be at the core of higher education policy. Student applications are showing signs of decline as parents and potential students are deterred by the high cost of studies and the limited prospects offered by university degrees.

All of this calls for a sober rethinking of the ways social research is funded, conducted and rewarded. This crucially involves a rethinking of doctoral studies, one that firmly detaches them from the publishing game and emphasizes a serious re-engagement with the roots of each discipline as well as the burning social issues of our times. A number of concrete proposals could be made on how to achieve this, starting with a discouragement and devaluation of doctorates by paper, a rigorous tightening of the rules on co-authorship and on what 'papers' may count

towards a PhD and a general re-privileging of teaching against mundane, formulaic and meaningless publishing.

Instead of detailing these proposals, I will conclude this essay with a thought experiment (prompted by a discussion with Alvesson) that may cast some light on how doctoral research could be reconfigured. Imagine that 80% of all research outputs in the social sciences produced in the last five years was destroyed without trace. Would the world in any meaningful way be a worse place? Before probing this question a little closer, let me acknowledge that I am a great believer in the social sciences and humanities which make an enormous contribution to civilized life. They do so both in the technical sense and in the wider cultural, moral and spiritual senses. Not only have these disciplines contributed to more effective provisions for specific areas of social life (health care, social policy, food policy, housing, criminal justice, family life, disability, poverty, foreign aid etc.) but they have contributed to more enlightened attitudes with regards to equality, social inclusion, anti-discrimination and social welfare. In these ways, the social sciences and humanities have contributed to some amelioration of social attitudes and social policies for the better or at least have prevented them from getting worse. The social sciences and humanities have also raised and continue to raise many important and valid questions about technology (all the way to the challenges posed by artificial intelligence today), about distribution of resources, about the hidden costs of different social practices (including new ones, such as immersion in the social media) and about hidden or concealed forms of oppression and exploitation. I would go still further and broadly agree with the view that the social sciences and humanities contribute to keeping the world as a more humane place than it would be without them.

All the same, I will persist with my question. Would the world be a substantially worse if 80% of all the published research in the social sciences were to disappear without trace? If, for example, 80% of the 880,000 (!) papers on innovation listed by Google Scholar between 2015 and 2019 were to disappear? Or 945,000 articles on identity published in the same period? Or the 21,000 articles on "institutional theory"? Or the 31,500 articles with the word 'gender' in the title? Or the 33,000 articles with 'entrepreneur' or 'entrepreneurship' in the title? Would anybody care if all the thousands of research gaps that these articles claim to fill remained empty forever? I could go on with examples but it seems to me that it would take a perverse spirit to claim that the loss of these articles would represent a great loss for humanity. I believe that, in spite of strong disagreements on how the 80% may be selected, which areas should be culled and so forth, an overwhelming number of citizens including scholars themselves would agree that a loss of 80% of academic papers would be a lesser evil than, say, the loss of 80% of the work done by primary school teachers' work, or 80% of the work done by social workers, garbage collectors or bus drivers. In fact, I would submit that many academics would welcome the disappearance of 80% of all 'research papers' including in their own field, as being essentially meaningless clutter, beyond propping up academic careers and feeding various misleading and dysfunctional rankings.

Curbing the exponential growth of pointless academic papers would not be extremely difficult. Academics are adept at gaming any particular system and adjusting their behaviour to the rewards on offer. If a plethora of publications on a cv ceased to be viewed as evidence of academic excellence, if a surfeit of citations and artificially inflated impact factors

were a matter of indifference to appointment, tenure and promotion panels, academics would adjust their behaviour accordingly. If, reversing the current absurdity where teaching is viewed as a hindrance to publishing excellence (i.e. writing more formulaic, mostly mediocre and virtually meaningless papers), it were once again viewed as a core part of the academic vocation, if only the most exceptional contributions were to actually see the light of day, I suspect that the behaviour of academics would not take long to change. The PhD would retain its value as the necessary qualification for an academic career and cease to signal a hollow virtuosity in the creation of meaningless texts, always counted and rarely read.