

Seeking Societal Relevance in Management Studies

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Abstract

This paper contributes to the current debate on the societal relevance of social sciences in general and management studies in particular. Using a narrative framework, we critique what we view as an oversimplified discussion of Modes 1 or 2 knowledge production and provide a more complex depiction of various professional academic identities, along with their relation to certain institutional structures and discourses. We show how different narratives relate to – and produce – different forms of professional identities and societal relevance. Drawing on the work of Zygmunt Bauman, we explore three main narratives for defining and creating societal relevance in management studies, each with its specific scholarly identities and institutional prerequisites: a modernist narrative in which societal relevance is defined by powerful external stakeholders; an interpretive narrative tied to local concerns and interests; and a consumption-oriented narrative in which demand and the will to pay for academic services regulate what is considered relevant. We conclude that societal relevance presents itself to the social sciences in various shapes and forms. This leads to a multiplicity of narratives informing a variety of complementary professional academic identities.

Keywords

Relevance, management studies, Bauman, identity

Introduction

If demand for ice cream is surging, that is a good thing for the ice cream van. As logical as it may seem, people who think this way actually display a sad lack of understanding of the ice cream business. To sell, your ice cream must be the flavour of the month.

The renewed interest in, discussion of, and demand for, ‘societal relevance’ in the social sciences bears all the hallmarks of the ice cream problem, for at first glance, one might be

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tempted to ask: ‘How can the social sciences not be societally relevant? Does an ice cream van not sell ice cream?’ In order to be societally relevant, anything must be in a social context. Any polymer invented by chemistry students and any vaccine discovered by medical researchers needs to become part of a political and economic – and maybe also moral or religious – discourse before it can become societally relevant. From that perspective, the social sciences (and the humanities) are actually the only ones that produce societally relevant knowledge.

Why then all the insistent demands for the social sciences to – finally! – produce output of societal relevance? That is where the flavour of the month comes in. The people demanding societal relevance from the social sciences are like ice cream buyers with a sadly misguided, yet regrettably firm, belief that only vanilla ice cream is real ice cream.

In this paper, we will examine the flavour of the month in the societal relevance debate by asking how the concept of societal relevance is used to constitute and manage professional narratives about academic work and academic identities. To do this, we will scrutinize constellations of public discourses, institutional practices, and academic identities within and beyond vanilla. Furthermore, we will describe how an increased frequency and intensity of external demands has changed the concept of societal relevance itself. Thus, we will show that current discourses ignore or oversimplify the realities of professional academic work and thereby fail to see some important contributions that the social sciences actually make.

We have limited ourselves to narratives of management or business schools⁵ because the field of social science is too large to present a credible overview. However, we believe that the field is very well suited to this discussion as it has always had an intense relationship with external stakeholders, which is amply reflected in scholarly argument.

Our discussion draws on two central aspects of narratives. The first is that narratives compete with each other in a struggle over meaning (Bachtin, [1975] 1992). This implies that, at any given time, you have several narratives about the same problem, in our case societal relevance. Moreover, this also implies that what plays an important role are (institutional) power and the legitimacy of various narrators. Everybody may tell a narrative, but not everybody’s narrative is heard (Bourdieu, 1992). The second aspect is the performativity of narratives, namely their indissoluble involvement in ‘real’ institutional arrangements, work practices, and resources.

In what follows, we will begin with the narratives told by external stakeholders. We frame this discussion in the popular Mode 1 vs Mode 2 debate of academic knowledge production. To challenge these – in our view oversimplified – narratives of academic work, we will then introduce a typology of academic ‘pathways’ originally formulated by Zygmunt Bauman. Subsequently, we will enrich Bauman’s pathways with a discussion of various social identities found in a business school to arrive at our own typology of various narratives on scholarly identities-cum-institutions.

The Discourse: External Stakeholders and Their Demands

Despite an almost holy convention that professional academics are free and independent in their research, stakeholders of various types have for almost half a century been opinionated about the purpose, content and expected output of academic work. This has led to an increasingly

⁵ We use the terms interchangeably.

antagonistic relationship between academic professionals and their managers (van Schothorst-van Roekel et al., 2020). However, numerous external stakeholders with varying levels of power, legitimacy, and urgency have scrutinized the legitimacy of the university and academic work and brought it up for discussion (Hessels & van Lente, 2008; Kallio et al., 2016; Marginson & Considine, 2000; Nowotny et al., 2003). The external pressure is pushing '21st-century universities to be engines of economic recovery and growth' (Sugrue et al., 2019, p. 743).

In the field of business and management studies, external stakeholders demand that the management school produces knowledge according to what they claim to be useful, impactful, and relevant. This is especially true for key stakeholders who can influence the allocation of resources and rewards (Learmonth et al., 2012). Politicians and management practitioners (including consultants) have over the years made powerful claims about the role of business schools' and individual scholars' work (Grey, 2001; Gulati, 2007; Kieser & Leiner, 2012; Tranfield & Starkey, 1998). The political conception of excellence in higher education, which has evolved from the external demands, is linked to an 'increasingly instrumental conception of the role of HE in society/economy' (Antonowicz et al., 2017, p. 550). Furthermore, accreditation bodies (Noorda, 2011; Starkey et al., 2009) and funders (Irwin, 2019; Learmonth et al., 2012) articulate their preferred purposes of management studies in contemporary societies. To receive accreditation and successfully attract external research funds, business, and management schools are better off if they include these claims in their narratives.

The various claims made by external stakeholders on the purposes and the preferred outcomes of academic work pertain to the ongoing rigour vs relevance debate. A recurrent issue in the development of the modern business school has been whether business schools should be *for* or *about* business (Irwin, 2019). This question seems to depend on which research mode is prevalent: Mode 1 or Mode 2 (Hodgkinson & Rousseau, 2009; Huff, 2000; Nowotny et al., 2003). We perceive the Mode 1 vs Mode 2 discussion as a clash of narratives that legitimize and maintain two different scholarly identities and institutional arrangements.

Ideally, in the Mode 1 perspective, knowledge is sought, produced, and important for knowledge's sake (Gibbons et al., 1994; Kieser & Leiner, 2012; Tranfield & Starkey, 1998). Research is not subjected to claims from external stakeholders outside the academic context. Instead, researchers subject their research to validation and certification by peers (Huff, 2000). Hence, the academic community itself is the most powerful stakeholder group demanding ever-higher research quality following specific validation criteria.

From the Mode 2 research perspective, research changes to either a quest for bridging knowledge production and practical application or a complete shift towards subjugating all academic knowledge production to the demands of practical end-users of this knowledge (Grey, 2001; Gulati, 2007; Learmonth et al., 2012). This means that research seeks to adapt to demands made by society, business, and politics. In this perspective, the role of the university changes into that of a knowledge hub (Youtie & Shapira, 2008) that is supposed to respond to a whole range of emerging challenges in society (Garcia-Alvarez-Coque et al., 2019; McCauley-Smith et al., 2020; Moscardini et al., 2020). Thus, the Mode 2 knowledge production has an embedded focus on the broad concept of society as the rightful beneficiary of research (Gibbons et al., 1994; Thorpe et al., 2011), which makes it an important stakeholder. Being connected to society and serving its needs are considered success criteria for the university (Brewer, 2013; Noorda, 2011). On that note, Nowotny et al. (2003) envision a re-thinking of the social contract between science and society that entails a much closer, interactive relationship between society and science, for

which they coin the concept of ‘contextualized science’ to capture that ‘society now “speaks back” to science’ (p. 50) asking for innovation, new regulatory regimes, and more user-producer interfaces.

It is particularly policymakers and business practitioners who tend to disregard the legitimacy of the traditional Mode 1 of knowledge production as constituting the primary mode that management scholars should pursue. These stakeholders complain that academic knowledge has little effect on managerial practice but only serves academic interests in the ivory tower (Kallio et al., 2016; Mitev & Venters, 2009; Narasimhan, 2018). When compared to engineering and medicine, business schools seem to have attracted disproportionate criticism over the relevance of their research despite the ‘anecdotal evidence surrounding [its] practical usefulness’ (Fraser et al., 2020).

Pushing for relevance, external stakeholders seek to define academic agendas (Hodgkinson et al., 2001; Hodgkinson & Starkey, 2011; Learmonth et al., 2012). They claim that business and management schools should become more enterprising and commercial, and the research conducted at these institutions should contribute to economic competitiveness (Grey, 2001). They also demand that management studies should concentrate on a mode of knowledge production that creates relevant (i.e. instrumental) knowledge for non-academic domains in society, particularly management practice and business practice. In this sense, the academic institutions that conduct management research shall become ‘more openly accountable to the public that funds most research’ (Thorpe et al., 2011, p. 421).

However, the literature also discusses the problematic performativity of the Mode 2 narrative. When practitioners and politicians define the agenda of management research (Grey, 2001; Tranfield & Starkey, 1998; Whitley, 1984), management studies firstly become confined to a very narrow agenda. This agenda is not only narrow in terms of the topics it addresses and the problems it seeks to solve but also in terms of only serving the interests of powerful elites who are in a position to promote their agenda as the only relevant one and who claim to speak on behalf of what they call ‘the society’ (Gibbons et al., 1994; Learmonth et al., 2012; Weingart, 1997; Willmott, 2012). In business and management studies, politicians, practitioners, funders, and accreditation bodies act as intermediaries that make claims in the name of the public. However, if society is dependent upon powerful stakeholders to make claims on its behalf, it is left to the will of these stakeholders. Hence, it is only selected parts of the public whose claims are forwarded and legitimated. In that regard, Bresnen and Burrell (2013) suggest that the public does not include ‘the mob’ unless it appears in the form of a customer, meaning when it makes claims from the market sphere. What gets lost in management studies is ‘social usefulness’ (Huff & Huff, 2001), hence the interests of those who are powerless and marginalised (Jarzabkowski et al., 2010) yet repeatedly facing the problematic economic, social, and environmental consequences of business and management (Huff & Huff, 2001; Parker, 2018; Willmott, 2012).

Secondly, when the interests of powerful external stakeholders determine the research and educational agenda of management studies, business and management schools become susceptible to political priorities and managerial fads and fashions of apparently pressing concern (Grey, 2001; Hodgkinson et al., 2001; Tranfield & Starkey, 1998). There is a danger that academic journalism emerges as academics hop on and off topics that promise acknowledgment and resources. Consequently, academia falls prey to legitimizing itself through ‘hit-and-run’ and ‘quick-fixes’ research, which only touches the surface because there is no time (or understanding of the need) for theoretical depth (Weingart, 1997).

Repair the Boat, Don't Rock It

'I have heard all of this before,' the discerning customer of the ice cream van may think. And they may be right; the demand for vanilla is not exactly new. What is new is that the people who want vanilla now actually demand it with raised voices and sometimes even by grabbing the van and shaking it.

There is a new urgency to the demands. They also come faster and in an ever-quicker succession: resilience, ethics (right after the financial crisis), sustainability, SDGs, Covid-19, climate change... However, all the demands share some basic features. One is that whatever the flavour of the month is, it is always the only flavour at this given point in time. The second is that from a management school perspective, all flavours come down to the same vanilla, which is economic growth. This takes us to an interesting rhetorical sleight of hand and the boat metaphor.

Indeed, whether you read the calls for funding or listen to other external stakeholders, economic growth is the solution to all problems. Yes, the exploitative growth ideology of capitalism has significantly contributed to climate change; so what we need is more growth. Yes, we have entered the Anthropocene which is an ominous label referring to (the problems of) human intervention; so what we need is more intervention. It just has to be 'smarter,' 'greener,' or whatever the next tag may be. More than ever, society equals economy and economy equals growth.

With those equations in place, the role of the management school academic appears to be clearly defined, so clearly indeed that explicit demands are no longer necessary. Academics cannot stand by as society faces immense, never-before-seen challenges. It is their moral duty as well as their institutional duty to... create economic growth. Whether we help SMEs become greener or advise governmental bodies on SDGs, it all comes down to repairing the boat we are 'all' in.

We want to challenge this rhetorical link to economic growth by re-examining the concept of societal relevance for we believe that society can – and has – been served by the academic profession in other ways as well. These other ways are tied to other professional identities – identities not captured in the Mode 1 vs Mode 2 debate. Therefore, we look at how different narratives about academics' professional identities can relate to and produce different forms of societal relevance.

In order to do so, we turn towards Bauman's typology of academic pathways because it allows us to discuss how discourses, institutional arrangements, and academic identities are mutually related. The subsequent sections will first present a sketch of this typology before discussing a number of identities that do not fit the Mode 1 vs Mode 2 debate.

Legislators and Interpreters

We draw on Zygmunt Bauman's typology of intellectual pathways, as discussed in his book *Legislators and Interpreters*. We understand these pathways primarily as coherent narratives about how academia should work and what it should aspire to from the narrator's viewpoint. As such, the narratives serve a legitimizing and identity-constituting functions. Each narrative calls for, enables, and maintains particular institutional arrangements while questioning other arrangements. It is important to note that rather than criticize or de-select, we seek to describe these narratives. Since our main interest lies in portraying the complexity of the relevance discourse, we will also give voice to narratives that we personally reject.

In Bauman's book, written in 1987 as postmodernism made itself felt in sociology and organization studies, he discusses the role of the intellectual in the project of modernity. To Bauman, this project, with its normative conceptions of progress and emancipation, required intellectuals to serve as legislators or arbiters of truth, value, and beauty. They were, in fact, the main group promoting modernity, and the ideals towards which modernity oriented itself were modelled after their own lifestyles and preferences. However, over the course of the twentieth century, faith in the promises of modernity waned, not least because the actual political arrangements it conceived turned out to be dysfunctional. With this political failure came doubts regarding the overall ideology that postmodern authors portrayed as just another power game.

According to Bauman, in this situation intellectuals faced five ideal type choices. The first was to continue with and improve the project of modernity. The impetus behind this was that the project's ultimate aims were still worth pursuing, still in demand, and still largely unfulfilled.

The second was to continue with the modernist project on a theoretical level but sever all ties to societal practice and implementation. Bauman referred to this as a strategy of despair. To the extent that rationality itself had been turned into an instrument of oppression, the intellectual had nothing more to say to this world and became a voice in the wilderness, to whom it would not matter whether their critique was heard by anyone.

The third was to withdraw even further from societal relevance and confine intellectual legislation to the arts and sciences to become arbiters only in their own professional realms, hopefully undisturbed by any non-professional outsiders. The discussion of foundations and justifications – not infrequently under the label of 'rigour' – was limited to the intellectual activity itself. Self-reflection no longer was a necessary corrective but an end in itself for a profession whose other-reflections nobody wanted to hear anymore.

The fourth and postmodern one was to accept that the project of modernity had failed, and that legislation was no longer needed. Instead, intellectuals would now serve as interpreters between language games of equal worth, of texts produced by authorities outside of the intellectual field. If anything, they would remain arbiters of the rules of good discourse or intratextual consistency but not text-producing authorities in their own right.

The fifth also proclaimed the death of the legislator but installed the market as the ultimate arbiter of relevance. In the absence of any academic or state authority deciding what is worth pursuing academically, the demand generated by customers (users, clients, patients, etc.) acted in its stead. Knowledge became a commodity, and authority went to the 'supreme court where profits and effective demand sat as judges' (Bauman, 1987, p. 160). Academics found themselves promoting a culture of effortlessness dominated by trends and fashions.

Today, over thirty years later, the book has lost little of its conceptual appeal. However, the quintessential question of academic/societal relevance continues to be contested, as the new and urgent demands of stakeholders show. Therefore, we want to re-examine Bauman's suggestions as possible contemporary narratives for management scholars and see which ones speak to contemporary discourses and practices.

The first pathway rests on the assumption that the project of modernity is not dead but, on the contrary, needs a lot of input to be taken forward. Removing poverty or inequality, among other things, are still goals worth working for, and management scholars are ideally placed to contribute to this goal as they study the dominant societal mechanism (capitalism, consumption) and the dominant actors (organizations). However, before running off to consult the next business, one should pause to consider that the modernist project in intellectual terms has

largely been one of critique of existing societal and economic arrangements. So let us re-phrase: management scholars are ideally placed to *criticize* the dominant societal mechanism (capitalism, consumption) and the dominant actors (organizations) for *failing* to achieve the goals of modernity. We have good arguments for why finance capitalism, globalization, and consumerism – if unchecked – are ‘bad’ developments. The words ‘good’ and ‘bad,’ though often used in a qualified and differentiated manner, play a pivotal role in the academic involvement in the modernity project; that is why Bauman refers to intellectuals of this kind as legislators. Therefore, this stance requires a commitment to certain values, and it requires subjecting others to these values too. The public intellectual who is the role model of this position is explicit about his or her own values and ‘attacks’ others who do not share them. Postmodern self-doubts about truth and pure motives are not helpful in a public discussion. That said, the public intellectual is part of democratic discourse, not an expert who solves problems. It is a fine line to tread.

The second is a position to which many critical management studies scholars retreat, although the perspective is not limited to them (for a discussion, see Bristow & Robinson, 2018; Delbridge, 2014; Parker, 2018; Spicer et al., 2009). The motive is as sound as it is honourable, and it reads along the lines of: ‘I, as an individual scholar, do not have the power to implement change; I can only say what I consider to be right.’ Or: ‘It is not my job to implement change; I can only say what needs to be changed.’ In a world that becomes increasingly dismissive of scholarly values and rich knowledge, the answer is to withdraw to retain one’s integrity. Maybe there is also a hope that history has not come to an end after all, that the pendulum will one day swing back from capitalism/consumerism and that, therefore, the embers need to be guarded to light a new fire when the time has come.

The third stance of withdrawal to one’s field of management studies saw a surge of meta-theories and typologies in the 1990s and early 2000s (e.g. Deetz, 1996; van de Ven & Poole, 1995, 2005), but today – with the fervour for postmodern critique gone – few publications seem to discuss foundations and basic assumptions of management studies anymore.

In comparison to the above three, the fourth, ‘postmodern’ position looks more hopeful, especially for those management scholars who eschew normative statements and advice to others. Studying and understanding what goes on in businesses, the economy, and society is a big undertaking and one where prolonged professional training comes in handy. The idea here is not to invent solutions to grand and not-so-grand challenges, nor judge whose problems need attending to and whose not, but to be able to explain, compare, and translate complex situations, structures, or arrangements to non-academic decision-makers. As straightforward as this may sound – especially to scholars with postmodern sensitivities – we believe this position, too, is under threat from the urgent demands for universities to justify their existence by providing solutions. Therefore, it also requires some political statement by academic bodies and departments that this is what they understand their role to be.

‘In more recent years it has become increasingly clear that the absorption of culture by market forces has reached the point of no return,’ writes Bauman (p. 163), and indeed, we find the fifth pathway to be the prevalent mode of scholarship in business studies. This mode is characterized by marketization and consumerism. It is visible in the managerialization of universities, market competition for grants, and the output-oriented performance measurement in teaching and research. Setting individual universities, departments, and researchers against each other, the fifth pathway is directed against any collective or collegial forms of government and professional formation. Knowledge generation and legislation are distributed among all

members of society that own a webcam (see YouTube for a lengthy catalogue of ‘experts’), and in order to participate in it, universities need to ‘open up,’ namely dissolve their institutional and professional boundaries. The logical conclusion of this development is that every academic becomes a self-employed entrepreneur selling teaching and research whose value is decided by the consumers. Proponents of the Mode 2 research model would argue that they are just reading the signs of the times and adjusting to the inevitable. Indeed, the writing has been on the wall ever since Lyotard published his report on knowledge suggesting that the economic performativity criterion would replace the truth criterion in the not-so-far future (Lyotard, [1979] 1984).

Identity Narratives of the Management School

Not every ice cream seller selling vanilla, however, is fond of vanilla herself. Nor may she be proud of selling only vanilla. She might actually dream of selling the full range of flavours, the ones with colourful chocolate buttons or experimental tastes included. And she may think that being an expert, certified ice cream seller when you can only sell vanilla is actually not worth the candle. Therefore, we will ask in this section how the identity construction of business scholars relates to the narratives we discussed above. After this, we will return to and revise the typology.

However, we will discontinue the discussion of the second and third stances. From our own experience, and despite the fact that we are sympathetic to both, they are fast losing ground. Based on the right to discuss any idea as long as it is done with academic rigour, they are increasingly met with the charge of ‘irrelevance.’ The fast track to promotion through 4* publications is becoming a cliff walk as panels start looking for grant income and impact – both of which adherents to the second and third position cannot provide. The senior ones among them can hope for institutional inertia to take them to retirement but we would not recommend this strategy to any younger scholars.

Identity is a powerful construct and one of the most studied in social sciences (Brubaker, 2000). Fundamentally, identity pertains to the explicit and implicit response to the question ‘Who are you?’ (Schwartz et al., 2011). Ideally, identity is described in a coherent narrative (Giddens, 1991), but its descriptions have also adopted more fragmented genres over the last two or three decades (Rosa, 2019; Wetherell, 2010).

The answer to the question ‘Who are scholars?’ is necessarily complex, diverse, and dynamic, but it is most likely to include an inclination towards the pursuit, creation, and communication of knowledge, a vocational commitment to knowledge for its own sake, and participation in a professional community (Clarke et al., 2012).

Two centuries ago, Samuel Taylor Coleridge was one of the first English writers to use the terms ‘applied science’ and ‘pure science’ in his *Treatise on Method*, drawing upon Kant’s distinction between pure and empirical cognition. The tension between pure and applied, arts and sciences, performative and humanist, rigour and relevance, along with consultancy and scholarly detachment is particularly visible in the academic business school (Vermeulen, 2005), occupying as it does the ‘no man’s land’ between theory and practice. The tension resulted mostly in hybrid identities between the two extremes of the academic who studies business in a disinterested manner and the professorial owner of a consultancy firm using their academic credentials to promote their business (Kieser, 1998).

As universities became more dependent on external funding, new roles entered the equation as people were able to communicate with lay audiences through easy-to-understand, journalist-style pieces that became sought after. At the same time, academic networkers became adept at putting together teams for big grant applications. The managerialization of the university called for leaders and managers with an academic background. The financial crises of 2003 and 2009 put business scholars in contact with activists, and in the aftermath of these crises, some academics felt the need to become activists themselves (Parker, 2018).

Therefore, contemporary business academics' identities can include those of a scholar, consultant, advisor, entrepreneur, writer, journalist, commentator, critic, influencer, activist, dissenter, radical, guru, hermit, and celebrity, to name but a few.

As Bauman himself remarks: 'One thinks of identity whenever one is not sure where one belongs' (1996, p. 19). The business school academic might be expected to suffer recurring identity crises in attempting to reconcile professional standards with local practice (Parker, 2018). The negotiated plurality of identity is neither a fully free choice nor a fully institutionally determined one (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016; Brown, 2015). It presents the opportunity for the individual scholar to perform each of the roles posited by Bauman, navigating between modernist legislation and postmodernist interpretation while avoiding the dualist straitjacket.

Societal Relevance Beyond Vanilla: Three Narratives of Professional Academic Identities

Having discussed the various self-descriptions of business scholars and discourses of non-academic stakeholders regarding societal relevance, we follow Irwin to say that 'the contemporary business school emerges as an overloaded assemblage: responsible to multiple audiences and for multiple purposes' (2019, p. 203). Therefore, we deem it not useful to discuss the creation of societal relevance by management scholars in terms of a single definition or a simple dualism, like 'Mode 1 vs Mode 2.'

Instead, we want to keep the many identity facets: scholar, consultant, journalist, activist, intermediary, politician... and see them as complementary protagonists in academic narratives. We discuss them subsequently as elements in identity-institution-discourse constellations.

The reason we do this is that we do not believe that academics, as authors, choose their narratives freely, in the sense of 'lifestyle choices' (Giddens, 1991). While we hold that there is some freedom in making professional choices, we also believe that institutional practices and structures enable or constrain these choices. This is especially true when we are not looking at individual stories but larger narratives.

The term 'constellation' implies a multi-causal framework in which discourses, institutional practices, and identities co-constitute each other, as proposed by poststructuralist authors like Foucault (esp. Foucault, 1988, 1998). In what follows, we discuss how selected identities relate to selected public discourses of societal relevance as seen through the lens of Bauman's typology. Moreover, we outline some of the institutional prerequisites and consequences of each identity narrative. We will limit ourselves to the three types we see as the most robust: the modernist, the postmodernist, and the consumption-oriented narrative.

The *modernist narrative*, as discussed above, shows the academic pursuit of societal relevance in the guise of the ‘grand’ societal and global challenges: poverty, inequality, war, etc. It does so on a societal level – i.e. no consultancy for individual businesses – and it does so in a critical manner, which includes problematizing the quest for eternal growth or the naïve trust in innovation that will square the circle of growth without cost. Given that the ‘grand’ challenges are incredibly complex problems, it will also require a lot of time to even understand them, let alone solve. Quick solutions are not to be expected, and answers tend to point to systemic change rather than boat repair.

Experiences from the Covid-19 pandemic have shown that this slow and systematic weighing of all factors does not fare well in the public sphere. Virologists have come across as stupid and indecisive when they had perfectly reasonable academic discussions about methods and the interpretation of results. Indeed, any sign of dissensus was immediately interpreted as weakness by the public. This is all the more noteworthy as natural scientists normally are attributed expert status more readily than social scientists, and for all its lethal power, the SARS-CoV-2 virus posed a far lesser challenge for academic knowledge than the eradication of poverty.

This points to the need for a de-coupling of academic and public discourse in the modernist pathway. Academic discourse should be protected by the relative intransparency of universities and other research institutions (Noordegraaf, 2020). We conclude this since the alternative – which is bringing a large proportion of the population up to university standards to understand and master academic discourse – seems to have failed. The adage often repeated in debates about societal relevance is that academics write in a language inaccessible to non-academics. This is remarkable given that more than 40 % of the 30–34-year-olds in the EU had completed tertiary education in 2019 (EU Statistics, 2020) and should therefore be trained to understand academic discourse.

Moreover, upholding the ‘legislator’ status requires clear boundaries between the aforementioned identities. Scholars have different competences to journalists or consultants and their competence suffers if they transgress the boundaries of their profession. Furthermore, scholarly competence rests on decades of knowledge accumulation and peaks late in life. The investment in such a long process can only bear fruit if the legislator model provides a real gain in status and authority.

The institutional prerequisites for a modernist narrative rest on a co-operation between states and universities, in which the state gains legitimacy in exchange for resources. In such a model, the freedom of universities and individual academics to choose ‘their’ societally relevant topic or ignore societal relevance altogether must be limited to maintain legitimacy. As Bauman (1987, p. 159f) indicates, much of the academic freedom experienced in the social sciences and humanities was bought by accepting scholars’ irrelevance to the political system in the last decades. Therefore, a reversal of this ‘freedom through irrelevance’ would in all likelihood require closer adherence to state policy.

Adhering to state policy in Europe would imply that business school academics deliver free knowledge and education for commercial purposes and justify the capitalist agenda of the day. Thus, business school academics would function as experts divulging their knowledge to the privileged groups of society, in particular company owners and managers.

The *interpreter narrative*, in contrast, dispenses with the legislator and academic expert to find contributions to societal relevance equally valid wherever they may come from. In this

model, academic knowledge is not valid per se but serves to enable the academic to become a mediator and facilitator aiming at solving predominantly local problems in local communities. With knowledge equally distributed among all actors, the academic's value lies in asking the right questions rather than providing the right answers.

While this may sound unambitious compared to the modernist narrative, we should not forget that it builds on a more non-authoritarian and democratic ideal. It is non-authoritarian because the interpreter severs ties with the powerful political and economic actors that dominate the societal relevance agenda and, instead, listens to local concerns. There is trust in the problem-solving capacity of lay people as well as a deeply democratic understanding of the power of discussion and negotiation. The interpreter dissolves the role of the scholar into the more communicative roles of, for example, the activist or the mediator, drawing more legitimacy from them than from his or her scholarly expertise. In such a view, the management problems occurring in companies are not 'riddles' to be solved through expert knowledge but communicative breakdowns creating anxiety and resistance. Profits, structures, and competences are not functional givens but outcomes of power struggles within and outside of the organization, which are always open to (re)negotiation.

Such a narrative of societal relevance needs different institutional structures to the previous one, structures that are more open and co-operative than those provided by traditional universities. From local communities to small and medium enterprises, universities in this model serve to a large extent as regional incubators with a premium on collaboration with business owners and managers, but also with employees and customers.

Finally, in the *consumption-oriented narrative* societal relevance is portrayed as serving the customer in the quickest, most convenient, and most efficient manner or – in a more negative phrasing – of serving quick fixes to fashionable problems while externalizing costs.

In this manner, academics become competitive intrapreneurs competing with other professions for certain niches: consultants in consultancy, publishers in the production of textbooks, or with actors in the production of educational videos. In their institutional environment, the university can only be useful to them to the extent that it transforms into a corporate actor (Krücken & Meier, 2006), thereby maintaining its legitimacy and capacity to obtain resources. At the same time, this transformation eradicates the professional peer structures characterizing the traditional 'guild-like' university (Stichweh, 2005).

The business schools' home market – until further notice⁶ – is the selling⁷ of degrees to enable business careers and (increasingly less) rise in social status. The second source of income is the selling of research findings. For business schools, this mostly happens under the guise of consultancy. In both markets, addressing topics of societal relevance (such as economic growth) serves to enhance the university's legitimacy on a political plane as well as make its products more desirable in the eyes of customers. As is the case for most transactions in status markets (Aspers, 2008; Beckert, 2011), claiming to be societally relevant and being perceived as societally

⁶ In the UK, publishing houses keep trying to get degree awarding powers. Pearson succeeded in 2010 to open its own college. Coughlan, S. (2012, 2012-08-12). Publisher Pearson launches UK degree course. *BBC online*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/education-19245788>. In Germany, a number of big corporations have established their own universities.

⁷ Using the word 'selling' we do not want to imply that the degrees are illegally sold in exchange for payment but want to characterize the activity as the standard market transaction conducted by a supplier.

relevant is indistinguishable from actually being societally relevant. Worse, anything not perceived as commensurable or operational will immediately disappear (cf. Lyotard, [1979] 1984).

As status is often an expensive good, we should also, by and large, only expect to see privileged customers. For instance, breaking social reproduction patterns through teaching is something this narrative will not achieve. Since academic research is expensive, too, it is likely that we revert to a system of academic patronage as experienced from the sixteenth to eighteenth century. Bresnen and Burrell (2013) are not joking when they characterize this development as 'Mode 0' knowledge production. In this mode, every industry sponsors the type of research that promotes its interests, either to save money on its R&D or to wave the results in the face of its critics.

From this perspective, spending decades on accumulating knowledge that may or may not eventually be in demand is a relatively inefficient strategy for the individual academic. Instead, they may opt for specialist research niches (risky but quick and with potentially high gains), for controlling supply as academic managers or networkers, or for controlling demand as influencers, trendsetters, or celebrities. The boundaries between the different identities outlined above become fluid to the point of dissolution.

On the other hand, business schools would be able to respond to their clientele in a faster, more efficient, and more flexible manner than they currently do. Unconstrained by state regulation or ministerial fiat, business schools and individual academics in them could develop academic career paths that focus on other skills than the ones needed for traditional research. For the same reason, the latter may find it much easier to change employers across a variety of industries instead of having to throw in their lot with academia for a lifetime. Teaching offers to customers would change quickly but would have to be much closer to what customers want and understand.

Conclusion

We have discussed (business) scholarly narratives in the light of the need to be 'societally relevant.' Using Bauman's typology as an analytic framework, we have shown how different narratives constitute and legitimize different academic identities and institutional arrangements.

Our main objective was to show these arrangements' complexity and argue that they cannot – and should not – be discussed in terms of single definitions or simple oppositions. Instead, our narrative framework allows us to talk in a more complexified yet, we believe, more adequate manner about societal relevance. It enables us to ask: Relevance for whom? Relevance produced how? Relevance by whom? Moreover, it allows us to see more than one way for business scholars to contribute to societal relevance.

By presenting the three narratives above, we do not suggest that academic identity constructions should be limited to these three. Instead, we have aimed to structure the discussion along these rather prominent narratives to demonstrate the interconnectedness of public discourse, institutional structures, and identities. At the same time, we have shown how this discourse has been changed and homogenized in recent years, leading to the intensification we experience today.

As stressed earlier, our argument was about complexity, about the interwovenness of narratives, relevance, and institutional arrangements, but also about the breadth of the spectrum of

narratives that interact and conflict with each other. While it may have been tempting at times to criticize the ones to which we personally do not subscribe, this would have run counter to the intention behind this article.

Further research is needed to explore the discussed narratives in more depth, but also to examine other – perhaps more marginalized – narratives. This is important not just for our academic self-understanding but also to make policymakers, business practitioners, and other stakeholders understand the diversity of academic work and the variety of contributions to societal relevance. Yes, the ice cream van should continue selling vanilla. It may even be the flavour most in demand. But an ice cream van selling just vanilla is a sad thing. Owning it would not be something youngsters aspire to do when they grow up. And it might just disappear from the street without anybody missing it.

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