

Professor Mats Alvesson

Returning to Meaning: For a social science with something to say

Professor Yiannis Gabriel

Social Science Research: From quest of universal knowledge to quest of personal meaning

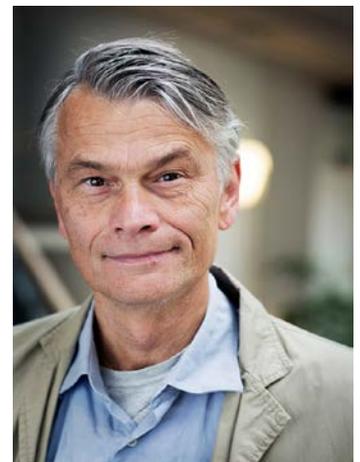
Friday 10th November The Edge Management Suite 14.30-16.00
University of Bath, Claverton Down, Bath BA2 7AY

Professor Mats Alvesson

Professor of Business Administration at Lund University

ABSTRACT

With the expansion of higher education and social research and the competition for rankings we find that much research is becoming more a matter of an instrument for rankings and careers. Metrics outscore meaning. Publications become the end, not the means for quality improvement and dissemination of knowledge results. There is an explosion of journals and publications that seem to say less and less. We have moved from research to roi-search (Return on Investment Search). The talk describes the situation, offers strong critiques, points at some of the causes for the problems and illuminates consequences. It discusses ways out of the contemporary situation at the level of policy, organization and the individual. The focus is on how to make social science relevant and meaningful. The talk is based on Alvesson, Gabriel & Paulsen (2017) *Return to Meaning*. Oxford University Press.



BIOGRAPHY

Professor Mats Alvesson holds a chair in the Business Administration Department at Lund University in Sweden and is also part-time professor at the University of Queensland Business School as well as City University London. He is Visiting Professor in the School of Management's International Centre for Higher Education Management at the University of Bath. He has undertaken extensive research and published widely in the areas of qualitative and reflexive methodology, critical theory, organizational culture, knowledge work, identity in organizations, gender, organizational change and management consultancy. Mats has published more than 30 books with leading publishers and hundreds of articles, including in the *Academy of Management Review*, *Human Relations* and *Journal of Management Studies*, many of which are widely cited and used in higher levels in university education. He is a frequent keynote speaker at academic and practitioner conferences.

Professor Yiannis Gabriel

Chair in Organisation Studies, University of Bath



ABSTRACT

Social Science Research: From quest of universal knowledge to quest of personal meaning

As we have argued (Alvesson, Gabriel and Paulsen 2017), we are currently witnessing not merely a decline in the quality of social science research, but a proliferation of meaningless research publications of no value to society and modest value to its authors.

The explosion of published outputs, at least in social science, creates a noisy, cluttered environment which makes meaningful research difficult, as different voices compete to capture the limelight even briefly. Publishing comes to be seen as a game of hits and misses, devoid of intrinsic value and of no wider social uses whatsoever. Scientific research turns from a vocation aimed at improving the lot of humanity to a careerist game dominated by publishing hits in starred journals.

I will develop the argument that the transmutation of vocation into game changes the nature of scientific research from quest of universal knowledge to quest of personal meaning. Research thus becomes one of the many pathways along which individuals pursue the chimera of meaning at a times when belief in absolutes has declined or disappeared altogether, especially among social scientists. In the absence of such absolutes, the quest for meaning turns into a quest for intense emotional experiences, experiences which a game, any game including the publishing game can provide in trumps. In this connection, I will discuss joy, pride, guilt, shame, anxiety, contempt, envy, nostalgia, anger, fear and disgust not as by-products but as core outputs of the publishing game. With the help of Campbell (1989), and against Henry Kissinger's "Academic Politics Are So Vicious Because the Stakes Are So Small", I will argue that far from small, the emotional stakes of academic politics are very high indeed.

BIOGRAPHY

Yiannis Gabriel is Professor of Organizational Theory at the School of Management of Bath University. Earlier, he held chairs at Imperial College and Royal Holloway, University of London. Yiannis is known for his work into leadership, management learning, organizational storytelling and narratives, psychoanalytic studies of work, and the culture and politics of contemporary consumption. He is the author of ten books, numerous articles and maintains an active blog in which he discusses music, storytelling, books, cooking, pedagogy, and research outside the constraints of academic publishing (<http://www.yiannisgabriel.com/>). He is currently Senior Editor of *Organization Studies*. His enduring fascination as a researcher and educator lies in what he describes as the unmanaged and unmanageable qualities of organizational life.

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