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## Fast Food Research in the Era of Unplanned Obsolescence

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### TRAGEDY, FARCE AND FAST FOOD (RESEARCH)

Karl Marx once complained how those intellectual skunks, as he liked to call academics, only studied for the sole 'purpose of finding new dead ends in every corner of the world'. The real point of any intellectual endeavour, for Marx, is not to interpret the world in various ways, but to change it.

For today's 'academic skunks', it proves hard enough getting their various interpretations of the world read, let alone actually changing anything. But this tragic truth is also farcical. Academics don't mind being ignored so long as their interpretations about their dead-end corners of the world get published in some respectable (dead-end) journal. As a professional academic myself, I am no different.

And I am no different because the professionally regulated market for scholastic knowledge, where I operate, expects research which is seen but not read. The professional conventions of academic life, and the institutional arrangements that support academic research, promote constant productivity which necessitates and requires merciless standardisation. As a *cultural dope* of the contemporary university, I like many of my peers follow these conventional arrangements without question. The results: vast amounts of commodified but disposable knowledge. You could say that what we are producing is fast food research.

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## THE SLOW PROFESSOR VS. THE SUSTAINABLE SCHOLAR

Fast food research does not exist amongst a plurality of approaches and ideas about research in higher education. Fast food research is how things get done – it has a hegemonic status. There is a possible alternative to fast food research, and the vast standardised production of disposable, here today and gone tomorrow, scholarship. And two English literature scholars – Maggie Berg and Barbara Seeber (2016) – have come up with such an alternative in their manifesto-like diatribe against the corporatized university: *The Slow Professor*.

Drawing inspiration from the politics of the slow food movement, Berg and Seeber make a compelling scholarly and political case for the value of slow scholarship against the corrosive psychological effects of speedy scholarship. But what about the intellectual benefits of being a slow professor?

The real intellectual differences between the slow professor and the fast food professor are somewhat elusive, although we are reassured by Berg and Seeber that ‘good work takes time’. The authors do not explain what they mean by ‘good work’. Producing slow research cannot necessarily be equated with, or lead to, better scholarship. And probably for this reason, Berg and Seeber’s claims about the intellectual and scholastic benefits of slow research are more imagined than real. The challenge of going against the conventional grain of fast food research needs a concrete idea as to what is meant by good research and whether slow research will lead us there. In a sense, we need a complete re-imagining of academic research time – one that involves more than simply relying on slowing down the scholastic clock. Enter the sustainable scholar.

## SUSTAINABLE SCHOLARSHIP – HORIZONTAL VS. VERTICAL TIME

It’s not inevitable that we should have to produce fast food research for there is an alternative. But to subvert this orthodoxy, we need to rethink what constitutes valuable or good research. What counts as ‘good research’ is elusive and ambiguous. One answer is the use of citation indexes as quality measures, over the quantity of publications or the status of a journal. The industry standard, the h-index, tends to favour senior academics who have been around longer and have published in greater bulk. Impact measures are the academic equivalent, as one journalist observed, of the stag’s antlers. And what’s more they will do nothing to stem the hegemony of fast food.

The true answer to this conundrum about what counts as good research may be simply down to a matter of time but not necessarily the idealised notion of slow time. If that was the case, producing a masterpiece would be straightforward – just a matter of ponderous and patient progress. The defining feature of any great work is not so much how long it took to produce but how long it continues to be used. And you don’t necessarily need an h-index for that. You simply look at the academic profession.

One of the defining qualities of contemporary academic research concerns its built-in obsolescence. Lokman Meho’s (2007) article for *Physics World* shows us the extent of this unplanned obsolescence. He claims, using citation analysis, that 90 per cent of published academic papers are never cited and estimates that perhaps 50 per cent of published articles are not even read following publication. Dahlia Remler (2014) in her LSE

impact blog questions the supporting evidence for these headline statistics, but she does not question the plain fact that many academic papers go unnoticed. Remler concedes that around a third of articles in the social sciences are left uncited.

Such disposable scholarship, if it has value, is for the here and now – especially in meeting professional demands. Longevity is a defining feature of quality for any intellectual or cultural endeavour. It's what separates a masterpiece from a merely competent piece of work; it's what distinguishes literary fiction from pulp fiction; it's what differentiates classics from the contemporaneously fashionable. Scholarship must also be judged by this ability to speak to both current and future generations. Academic time is not just about the present. We should look outside of these narrow temporal confines. Let me put it another way. Discussions about academic time, such as Berg and Seeber's *The Slow Professor*, tend to be of this narrow variety, or what I would call *vertical time*. Our experience of time either goes up (meaning fast) or ideally should go down (meaning slow). But there is another form of academic time – *horizontal time* – which reaches back and stretches forward to meet at the present day.

That is why I prefer the figure of the sustainable scholar over the slow professor. The sustainable alternative to fast food research must be framed in terms of horizontal time: in how we skilfully cope, not with speed, but with how to manage conflicting priorities, not only those of the present day, the here and now, but also future priorities. And there are three key horizontal priorities that preserve sustainable scholarship, that must take precedence over other my immediate professional priorities. These priorities are not pre-requisites for sustainable scholarship – they are not concerned with firm outcomes. Rather they are intentions that help us identify with, and demonstrate a commitment to, sustainable scholarship as opposed to fast food research.

### **The Sustainable Scholar Prioritises Being Read over Being Published**

The 'Nobel decorated' economist James Buchanan had a real awareness of *horizontal time*. When sitting on job interview panels for academic positions, he would famously ask candidates this question: 'What are you writing that will be read 10 years from now? What about 100 years from now?'. Buchanan's question does capture the real spirit of the sustainable scholar: trying to get published is not enough, you also need to produce scholarship that is read and used both now and in the future.

This question raises an important issue: how to practically go about developing sustainable research. Nothing is guaranteed but these are some of my suggestions for future proofing our research: you have a better chance of producing sustainable research if, from the very beginning of an academic career, you publish books (ideally NOT for academic publishing houses), eschew academic theoretical fashions and, most importantly, write in a clear and accessible style. To write in this way means going against the grain of standard academic practice. In this standard, so evident in peer journals, there is what Stanislaw Andreski (1972) calls 'an abundance of pompous bluff'. The problem is that such pompous bluff generates substandard research, littered with big abstract concepts that fail to do justice to social life and human experience. But such pompous bluff is, effectively, the house style of fast food research.

This fast food style found in academic journals is a literary genre in its own right. This is an important observation as it immediately opens up the possibility of there being other genres of writing available to academics. Sustainability depends on being open to different approaches and styles of writing. I prefer to see academic writing as a form of factual literature which has more in common with ‘essayism’, immersive journalism, or even documentary film-making. In other words, the fixed conventions and highly rigid rules of the academic fast food genre can be subverted and redefined. An example of how this might be possible is provided by the unanticipated bestseller of 2016 – Thomas Piketty’s (2014) *Capital*. Piketty is an academic economist but the book itself had more in common with literary non-fiction than an orthodox academic text. You could say this book is an example of analytical non-fiction.

Of course, switching between literary genres is far from straightforward. And there are some notable examples of academics that employ alternative genres. But the ability to write readable analytical non-fiction is not an easily assimilated skill in academia, given our socialisation into the academic literary genre. As Michael Billig in *Learn to Write Badly* points out, doctoral students are carefully nurtured in this literary style, with their subsequent careers reliant on mastering the fast food genre.

So, if writing for sustainable scholarship is to be a reality then doctoral training and supervision needs to be rethought. The changes I have in mind are not especially radical. Doctoral students in management are exposed to different social science methods and different theoretical traditions and yet the genre of writing they are expected to work in remains absolutely fixed: that of the quasi-scientific convention of writing for peer review journals. Doctoral students with supervisory assistance can be introduced to different genres for the writing of research. As the prominent American sociologist Howard Becker (2007) has found, there are different ways of telling about society – not only the professional academic way.

### **The Sustainable Scholar Prioritises Thinking over Productivity**

The sustainable scholar must prioritise thinking over constant productivity. The ‘meditative thinking space’ needed to cultivate a distinctive theoretical voice and creative style in the academic firmament, requires a psychological and philosophical reorientation rather than the gift of regular sabbaticals. There is no short-cut or simple formulae for accomplishing a creative sense for what Carl Jung calls individuation. We should not be afraid to periodically and regularly stop what we are doing, to cease the frenetic productivity drive, and to just think.

A striking instance of meditative thinking is that of the 18th century German philosopher Immanuel Kant. At 46, an age when most professional academics are hitting their peak, Kant opted for an interregnum from active research which lasted ten-years between 1771–81 – a period biographers refer to as Kant’s silent decade. He continued his university duties – teaching, administration, walking to and from the University of Königsberg. But as far as his academic output was concerned: nothing. Not until 1871 when he published *Kritik der Reinen Vernunft*, better known as the *Critique of Pure Reason*. This study was responsible for transforming not only the study of philosophy and ethics

but also helped create the moral climate that promoted human rights and the progressive transformation of legal procedures in courts.

Whilst Kant ceased being a productive researcher during this silent decade, he was still very much an active thinker. And a meditative thinker at that. We know such intimate details about the Kantian lifestyle, because of the later biographical account given by Martin Lupe, his servant at the time. Lupe reported on Kant's quotidian daily routines: up at 5 am, followed by a weak tea, and then pipe smoking. The time he spent smoking was devoted to meditation – and whilst Kant claimed he would allow himself one smoke of his pipe, his biographer Manfred Kuehn (2001) noted that the bowls of his pipes grew in size, quite considerably, over time.

Did slow meditation help Kant make his brilliant philosophical breakthroughs? Or is this mere speculation? Hard scientific evidence, specifically in the field of neuroscience, suggests that meditative thinking may be the quiet, overlooked, muse which unlocks creativity. One notable instance of this research is Biswal *et al.*'s (1995) pioneering neurological studies in the early 90s, which discovered the presence of complex brain activity during resting states. A subsequent generation of researchers found how the default neural patterns in the brain, when subjects are in repose mode, prove to be those of high level cognitive processes, networked functioning and organisation. Or what is termed 'resting state connectivity'.

The science of resting state connectivity, if taken seriously, has clear implications for professional scholastic cultures. The productivity mania that is characteristic of any research-focused management school proves, ultimately, to be intellectually self-defeating: we only add to some imaginary literary landfill rather than adding to the body of knowledge.

### **The Sustainable Scholar Prioritises Broad Reading over Narrow Reading**

Italo Calvino's (1998) novel *If on a Winters Night* manages to pinpoint a growing trend in academic reading habits. The novel's central protagonist is a writer (essentially Calvino himself) who laments, at one point, that whilst readers are more numerous 'it would seem that those who use books to produce other books are increasing more than those who just like to read books and nothing else'. Another Calvino broadside against a non-reading culture is one that can be echoed by any business school academic: 'Since I have become a slave labourer of writing, the pleasure of reading has finished for me'.

The reality in the academy may be imitating art – or Calvino's fictional imagination, at least. Heather Menzies and Janice Newson (2008) in a 2008 study of how Canadian academics experience work time found that an overwhelming majority of their respondents (around 65 per cent) reported that they were not reading in sufficient detail and depth – certainly not as much as they were during earlier phases of their careers, as doctoral students, for example. Academic reading habits have narrowed – no doubt the product of the fast food research culture. This is not a profession where you can kick back and read *In Search of Lost Time* – for life is short and Proust is long. In other words, reading for the professional academic has become narrower, highly specialised, more an instrumental than an intellectually immersive pleasure.

Not having the time to read thoughtfully and deliberately means that the quality of research produced by professional academics may suffer. The academic ecologist Robert Cabin (2010), in a piece with the challenging title of ‘Skim this Article (or Just Skip It)’, claims that ‘we shouldn’t be surprised that... many of us no longer have the time to think, read deeply, and at least attempt to write well...’. Adding to Cabin’s personal anecdotal concerns, I would make a tentative claim about a possible correlation between instrumental or non-reading and the quality of research. The sustainable researcher is not necessarily standing on, but rather looking over the shoulders of giants to read what they are writing.

## **CONCLUDING THOUGHTS: DEPROGRAMMING THE FAST FOOD DONKEY...**

To practically reject fast food research in favour of sustainable scholarship, by taking on board these priorities, requires a form of deprogramming. By this, I mean a brand of deprogramming that indoctrinated fanatics are required to go through before re-joining mainstream society. For the apologetic fast-food academic, a period of deprogramming is necessary before they can become sustainable scholars. This is because during graduate school through to early career appointments our fast food academic has been indoctrinated in the practice of specialisation. I remember, not long after I was appointed to my first lectureship, many of my conversations with senior academics revolved around one overwhelming question: what is your field of academic specialty? In such moments, I wanted to quote Max Weber’s terse reply when asked to describe his own specialism: ‘I don’t have a field, because I’m not a donkey’.

Why this fixation with specialisation? Well, academic specialisation really does keep fast food careers ticking over. Academic promotion and career progress rely on being able to publish in bulk, and regularly over time – these are deemed the performance indicators of an academic’s intellectual contribution. And this consistent production of fast food research without disciplinary specialisation would be like mass production without an assembly line – impossible.

Sustainable scholarship rejects the rules of academic specialisation. It relies on academics becoming generalists that dabble in all sorts of literature, ideas, and ways of writing. This means going outside the safe confines of the professional academic bubble. Which poses critical questions about the institutional arrangements found in universities. The institutional Balkanisation of the modern university into discrete departments helped create and maintain academic specialisation. Sustainable scholarship has suffered at the hands of these specialised empires. Intellectual history shows us how thinkers whose ideas and writings endured for decades wrote not for a select group of academic peers but for all their peers. The likes of Descartes and Locke were, to quote Michael Billig (2013), ‘writing small words for big circles’. Adam Smith (1982) wrote *The Wealth of Nations* prior to proliferation of modern departmental dominions. Which meant his opus was not written for academic economists but for any educated reader with a curiosity for radically fresh ideas.

Today, the fast food infrastructure is so entrenched that anyone wishing to emulate Adam Smith’s (1982) example is deluded. Still, we do have *some* choices, for as Jean-



Paul Sartre (1966) once wrote ‘we are condemned to be free’. It doesn’t mean we are left to shrug our shoulders out of impotent despair at this state of affairs. There are subtle and dastardly ways of subverting fast food research and the systems that nurture it. What I’m offering is not so much a cause for cautious optimism but more a cause for restrained pessimism; for pessimism alone inevitably leads us into endless cul-de-sacs of futility. We can openly question fast food research whilst patiently anticipating that the fast food infrastructure will implode – an unlikely but not altogether impossible scenario given the deep-seated contradictions within the system. Such restrained pessimism is nicely captured by these paraphrased words of Kafka’s: ‘There is an infinite amount of hope in the university . . . but not for us’.

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