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Critical performativity in practice: the chronicle as a vehicle for achieving social impact

Mats Alvesson

Department of Business Administration, Lund University, Lund, Sweden; University of Queensland Business School, Australia, and City, University of London

ABSTRACT

The concept of critical performativity – efforts to make critical research more relevant for groups outside academia and develop and communicate action-relevant critical insights with some potential effect – has received considerable interest. Much of this has focused on debates about the core concept and principles. This paper argues for the need to "do" – more than talk about – critical performativity and reports an intervention: a chronicle in a major newspaper about anxiety-driven, rule-bound public organizations and follow-up work in the form of a series of lectures to groups signalling responsiveness to the message. Some lessons and reflections are offered. Arguably critical studies can have a beneficial impact on the practices of managers and other employees, but this calls for researchers being more straightforward, deviating from academics' inclinations of being cautious, mainly addressing colleagues and remote from experiences and concerns of organizational practitioners. Developing and effectively communicating relevant key insights is here crucial.

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Introduction

Many researchers in management and organization studies hold the assumption that companies and other organizations are institutions working for "the common good" and that organizational arrangements contribute to making things better for customers, employees, owners and the general public. The idea of companies, hospitals and schools is not just to keep people occupied or satisfied at work but to produce goods and services for customers, patients and students. Organizational structures and practices are understood as functional for the accomplishment of organizational objectives, which then serve various stakeholders. Of course, most scholars acknowledge the shortcomings of such functionalism. Many look at organizations in a slightly more sceptical way. Organizational arrangements and objectives may then be viewed in the light of power and sectional interests (Cunha et al., 2013; Pfeffer, 1981), as characterized by ambiguities and messiness obstructing organizational order and rationality (Brunsson, 2006; March & Olsen, 1976) or as reflecting popular societal myths or standard recipes for how things should look like (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977).

Compared with such views promoting modest scepticism to managerial and economic ideas on organizations, some approaches to management and organization are more radically critical and inherently suspicious, often summarized under the label Critical Management Studies (CMS) (Alvesson & Willmott, 2012; Fournier and Grey, 2000). This draws upon various critical theories like the Frankfurt School, Marxism and Foucauldianism and more general critical sociology. This is as relevant for organizational psychologists as for management scholars.

CMS argues that (mainstream) knowledge about organizations and management does not necessarily contribute to people's needs through improving the production of goods and services but has many other implications on humans, nature and society. Such implications include the exercise of power, creating disciplinary effects on customers and subordinates but also on managers and professionals, i.e., shaping them in a specific way, based on a template for how to be and become. Often management and, to some extent, organization in its contemporary forms are viewed as repressive and exploitative, calling for a critical investigation. Commonly critical scholars examine dominant discourses and management practices that exert disciplinary power producing particular forms of subjectivity, e.g., how forms of knowledge normatively define a "normal" way of being as an individual, with the right mindset, motives and orientations.

CMS is a fairly large and heterogeneous stream (or set of streams, "branded" as CMS), although mainly within organization studies (Alvesson et al. 2009). It has had some success in attracting attention and producing a broad set of academic work. Yet it has also come under critique for having little relevance or significance outside (a minor substream of) academia comprising specialized journal articles and internal debates. As such, CMS – as most parts of social science – rarely reaches broader audiences or substantially influences organizational practices.

Recently, a more explicit interest in making critical work relevant outside its own community has emerged. This partly

CONTACT Mats Alvesson Mats.Alvesson@fek.lu.se

This article has been republished with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

reflects broader worries about the discipline(s) of management and organization studies being increasingly introvert and irrelevant and really having very little to say to managers, other practitioners and the educated public (Bartunek et al., 2006). CMS is often viewed as remote from organizational practice (Barros, 2010). In order to use critical work's potential to envision and suggest a more constructive engagement with managers and organizations, Spicer et al. (2009) have proposed the concept of "Critical Performativity (CP)" which has attained interest and sparked debates (e.g., Cabantous et al., 2015; Hartmann, 2014; Wickert & Schaefer, 2015), partly of a more heated nature (Spicer et al., 2016). These contributions have mainly become internal academic debates and, as such, have done little in terms of leading to efforts to say something that works in a critically performative way – for example, proposing how a well-argued message may trigger some critical insights of relevance for a more thoughtful and less repressive/constraining organizational practice. Exceptions to this trend include some collaborative work undertaken by (critical) academics jointly with practitioners (Knights & Scarbrough, 2010) and a case for how CP ideas could influence critical interventions in the field of leadership (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012).

This paper does not aim to continue these academic debates but wants to illustrate how critical knowledge can be developed and framed so that it is viewed as relevant and significant by practitioners. In other words, it aims to demonstrate how CP can be applied – and how its principles and ideas are thus put into practice. The paper presents an intervention in public debate and, more generally, organizational practices. It describes such an intervention by the author and the responses of several practising managers and other employees. It demonstrates the structure and elements of the intervention and points out lessons for academics interested in having something to say that is both critical and has the potential of improving organizational practices.

From CMS to CP

The CMS tradition has broadly been guided by ambitions to contribute to emancipation (Habermas, 1972) or, perhaps less ambitiously and pretentiously, to support resistance (Foucault, 1980). It has consistently investigated the dark side of management and organization, partly in order to counter the strong technocratic, managerialist interest in organizational control, also characterizing much organizational psychology. It is obvious that organizations contribute to stress, bad health, as well as subordination and exploitation. They may, for example, encourage people to conformism and compliance, prevent them from "free thinking" and free speech, erode moral standards, create or reinforce gender inequalities. People working in organizations are subjected to, and formed by, administrative demands for adaptability, cooperation, predictability and conformity. Contemporary forms of control are multidimensional and far reaching (Gabriel, 2005). We live in a thoroughly organized society, and this creates particular kinds of subjects in a variety of subtle ways.

> All areas of life – work, play, consumption, civil discourse, sex – are becoming more "organized", that is subject to the dictates of regimes of instrumental rationality, whether originating from government, management, or craft standards. It is a measure of the pervasiveness of this ideology that it is difficult to describe in public discourse how "becoming more organized" can be anything other than a good thing. (Batteau, 2001, p. 731)

One specific aspect here – to be addressed as a key theme in the author's CP project described later – is the extensive and expanding use of plans, rules and formal routines and the resulting over-regulated and, possibly, "over-organized" qualities of many public service organizations (and of course also many companies). Also, measures for protection against, e.g. stress and abuse, may include constraining and repressive elements. Strong emphasis on bureaucracy and managerialism encourages looking at organizations as psychic prisons, as iron cages and instruments for the exercise of dominance (Morgan, 1997). Alvesson and Willmott (2012) argued that management can then be viewed as a mesh of systematically distorted communication, the subordination of communication for instrumental reason, mystification, selective creation of needs and conceptions, cultural doping or the company as an agent of socialization. These overall ideas have inspired or guided critical interventions by a variety of scholars.

One way of defining CMS is to view it as being about:

> (1) The critical questioning of ideologies, institutions, interests and identities (the 4 Is) that are assessed to be (a) dominant, (b) harmful and (c) underchallenged …
> (2) … through negations, deconstructions, revoicing or defamiliarizations (i.e., considering the opposite of the apparent, showing that what appears to be consistent and robust to be ambiguous and fragmented, illuminate phenomena in alternative ways through non-conventional perspectives and vocabularies and turning the familiar and selfevident into something exotic and strange) …
> (3) … with the aim of inspiring social reform in the presumed interest of the majority and/or those non-privileged, as well as emancipation and/or resistance from ideologies, institutions and identities that tend to fix people into unreflectively arrived at and reproduced ideas, intentions and practices …
> (4) … with some degree of appreciation of the constraints of the work and life situations of people (including managers) in the contemporary organizational world, e.g., that a legitimate purpose for organizations is the production of services and goods. (Alvesson, 2008, p. 18)

This formulation combines critical content with a critical interest in the lived experiences and constraints of people in organizations. This line of thinking has been sharpened in recent attempts to develop critical studies into a more specific action and practice-relevant direction (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012; Spicer et al., 2009). Here, not only workers but also other organizational stakeholders – customers, students, patients, etc., – need to be considered, something that critical work celebrating emancipation and resistance (implicity being seen as "good") tend to sidestep.

For a long time, there have been widely voiced worries about the social significance and relevance of social science

and organization studies, including critical work. The latter has often been cast as an esoteric field where scholars produce papers for their own careers, to meet production quotas and to impress their colleagues and confirm that they are "real academics" (in the light of doubt of capacity and self-worth) (Clarke & Knights, 2015). Much critical work targets the "usual suspects": there is a predictable focus on "bad things" like masculinity, capitalism, managerialism, New Public Management, elitism, consumerism, technocracy, etc., often targeted for blanket rejection or resistance. The commitments, style and ambitions of many critical researchers tend to make them inward-oriented, authors writing for other, like-minded authors, all too familiar with jargon, style and key references, with limited prospects or serious interest in reaching outside the subcommunity. Grey and Sinclair (2006) have argued that the exclusionary language and esoteric concerns of large swathes of CMS make it utterly ineffectual in engaging even the students and colleagues of critical researchers, let alone a broader public.

The idea of CP, as a research orientation, is here to consider what may have a practical effect, but the major task is to offer a strong knowledge input, not necessarily doing much practical work like working with practitioners on specific problems of a more technical nature. Many management and organizational issues are of broad societal interest, and then, what is relevant and potentially influential knowledge may be a concern of not only managers or groups of employees (or unions) but also general and more specific groups "outside" academia, influencing organizations. Communicating critical messages to broad groups does not prevent but may well support more direct interventions together with managers and/or groups of employees or other interest groups based on critical/emancipatory ambitions (Edwards, 2015; Wickert & Schaefer, 2015).

Having something important to say to a broader group calls for radical rethinking of dominant critical inclinations, going beyond writing mainly for fellow academics in the micro-tribe. In this context, Spicer et al. (2009) suggest that *critical performativity* is a more "constructive" direction for CMS and other non-technocratic and "neutral" orientations, wanting to move outside intra-academic concerns and communications. The idea is that

> critical performativity involves active and subversive intervention into managerial discourses and practices. This is achieved through affirmation, care, pragmatism, engagement with potentialities, and a normative orientation. Engaging with theories of management provides a way for CMS to create social change through productive engagement with specific theories of management. Critical performativity also moves beyond the cynicism that pervades CMS. It does so by recognizing that critique must involve an affirmative movement along-side the negative movement that seem to predominate in CMS today. (p 538)

Critical work needs to appreciate the contexts and constraints of organizational practitioners, including management, being affirmative about the need to make organizations work. This includes acknowledging problems with bad performances, inertia, disrespect for clients, customers, patients, students and others supposed to benefit from companies and/or public institutions. It needs to take seriously the lifeworlds and struggles of those engaged with organizational practice, including those responsible such as managers. This approach offers some degree of respect and care, including that people in organizations seldom can afford to be "anti-performative" (reject knowledge that is performative, i.e., aiming to accomplish outcomes through the instrumental use of knowledge). On the other hand, critical work should of course also open up a space for critique and challenge by not taking existing ideas, objectives and practices as given or simply following the wants of organizational participants. *Caring* means being prepared to engage in critical dialogue and a wish to encourage reflection, even on one's own (including one's gurus) certainties. Critical interventions – critiques, concepts, thick descriptions – then are *pragmatic* and do consider what seems to work reasonably effectively. Doing so involves asking questions about what is feasible, and what those we address perceive as relevant. But critical pragmatism also seeks to stretch the consciousness, vocabularies and practices that bear the imprints of social domination. Critical *engagement* makes a serious effort to be sympathetic to the situation and viewpoints of others, including the usual suspects (managers, consultants, etc.), but in a questioning way. The social engineering of dominant objectives and practices are at least balanced with a strong sense of a better world. Finally, the characteristics of these ideals need to be grounded in a clear *normative* philosophy (Spicer et al., p 545).

Becoming *more* performative would require attempts to question, challenge and radically re-imagine management, organization and work through practical and direct interventions into particular debates about management. Performativity is not bad in itself. "The problem is to carefully decide what kind of performativity we want" (p. 554).

Important here is to find a relevant issue, framing this in a critical, yet practically relevant way, and communicate a knowledge intervention so that it triggers a provocative effect, is likely to be seen as relevant and helpful and is likely to stick. This calls for balancing the wealth of insights and results of critical social science with careful consideration of the situation at hand – based on input from those concerned – and then produce and follow up a knowledge intervention.

Spicer et al.'s paper has inspired a number of texts, mainly debating the meaning of performativity and addressing theoretical and methodological concerns (e.g., Cabantous et al., 2015; Wickert & Schaefer, 2015). Whether it is so productive to focus on what is meant by performativity is not of interest for this paper. Spicer et al. (2016) argue for the urgency of actually trying to deliver in line with CP, for example, produce critically informed knowledge interventions that aim at having practical relevance and impact. This is what we turn to next.

A CP intervention: anxiety-driven public organizations

The "delivery" from the author of this paper was in the form of an article published in a major national newspaper expressing a strong critical message and thus inspiring to illustrate the idea of CP. The content is summarized below. The input to the article came from long-standing concerns about increased bureaucratization, conformism and emphasis on surface indicators of

looking good and acceptable in the Swedish public sector. These concerns are shared by many, but the appreciation of the magnitude and depth of the problems and the willingness to mobilize strong anti-forces to these partly emerge from CMS thinking, building on a large body of critical social science, inspired by and applying this on management and organizational topics. CMS means a fundamental inclination to not just accept things more or less as they are or assume a rationale behind them but to investigate and show instances of irrationality and oppression (including self-oppression) behind what appears to be good or acceptable. This should be opposed, not been taken as given or unavoidable.

Despite the popularity of the "post-bureaucratic organization", most careful studies indicate the opposite trend – increasing bureaucratization rather than the smashing up of bureaucracy in today's organizations (Alvesson & Thompson, 2005; McSweeny, 2006). Partly overlapping, this is the observation and critique of what Power (2003) has called the "audit society" where scrutiny is focused less on good performance (often difficult to assess) and more on systems and procedures and doing things formally correct. The general critical theory emphasizes the conscious-restricting and oppressive effects of too much management and organization (as indicated by the citation of Batteau, 2001, earlier). The institutional theory makes strong points about isomorphism and legitimizing structures (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Some careful studies challenge the decoupling or hypocrisy thesis and argue that legitimizing structures actually have often harmful effects on organizational priorities and practice (Hallett, 2010; Sauder & Espeland, 2009). There is an obsession with image in contemporary organizations, looking good through window-dressing arrangements, creating illusionary effects and contributing to a culture of "grandiosity", where organizations concentrate on the appealing surface and optimizing an image, at the expense of "substance" (Alvesson, 2013). Observations and experiences from seminars and talks with practitioners from the public sector gave a strong sense of a sector suffering from a pressure to have to work with too many plans and routines – taking much time and energy and reducing autonomy and meaningful work. There is also a very strong interest in espoused organizational values, characterized by positive-sounding, vague and ambiguous language, e.g., about professionalism, quality, commitment or sustainability. This easily leads to window-dressing and hypocrisy – impressive and uplifting talk inconsistent with organizational practice. Managers and others often mystify the reality of organizations through efforts to gold-plate them (Sennett, 2006). It is tempting for employees to buy into these idealized notions of work and organization.

This fuelled my ambition to condensate, conceptualize, frame and – in the limited space of a chronicle in a leading Swedish newspaper – formulate a strong message communicating the ideas above. The aim was to encourage re-thinking of people involved in this, either as producers (policymakers, senior managers and organizational improvement professionals) or as implementers of policies and rules. The ambition was also to raise the general awareness of the public on this matter, in various ways interact with and influence organizations. The resulting text was accepted for publication in a leading Swedish national newspaper with a large readership (Svenska Dagbladet 2014). The text (my translation) is as follows:

> *"Fear of doing wrong should not take over"*
>
> "Formally speaking we have done everything right. We are looking over our routines. We are working with our values". These are three safe formulas for an organization's management, in particular in the public sector. The driving force behind them is to avoid wrongdoing, which however causes timidity and weakness.
>
> Modern organizations, particularly in the public sector, are exposed to many demands to make everything right, formally, and to maximize everything that looks good, superficially speaking. Politicians and management are tireless in their efforts to come up with laws, policies, strategies and rules that all units within the government, county councils and municipalities must work with. Goal setting, visions, values, educational training, regulatory documents and routines exist and must be followed. Certain groups have rights that must be met.
>
> Some part of this is sensible. On the other hand, the knowledge base behind this regulatory apparatus is often doubtful, and many organizations suffer from an excess of standards and formal regulations. This may be driven by a tendency to do as everyone else does, the anxiety of acting differently from other organizations being widespread. The fear of inspection authorities and special-interest groups, who closely consider their issues of interest and strike down on deviations, also plays a big part. The media are happy to follow the same lines when there is coverage of breaking a rule. And a great number of lawyers monitor that everything is done "correctly".
>
> The disadvantages of all this are obvious. It contributes to inertia, caution and weak results. The public sector becomes plan fetishistic and error minimizing. Education, health care, police and so forth devote a lot of their time to documentation to cover their backs. It is tempting to check out of greater responsibility for the substantial practice and result of the organization. One does things, which should be seen or realized as being silly, but they are approved. It is preferable to have an anti-bullying plan and "follow routines" rather than – which is normally required to get results – to think and act independently and vigorously, and this often requires that one does not follow routines. To a school board, it might be enough to document that one has routines and follows them – if this neglects to solve problems, it is not seen as a big issue.
>
> We get an inefficient public sector that to an increasing extent seems incapable of using enormous resources well but is excellent at meeting the demands for doing everything right formally speaking and looking good, the so-called storefront activities.
>
> Here, obedient organizational managements, that are often disinclined to establish good practices, are trained. The driving force is then to avoid errors rather than produce good results. The former often takes over the latter. Courage, decisiveness, creativity and a feeling for essentials as well as providing good results become less important and might be risky to prioritize.
>
> For the good and uniqueness of the organization insensitive – or uninterested – politicians, media and inspection authorities are constantly fuelling more demands that counteract a good organization.
>
> The thing is, we have for a long time been living in a society (i.e., Sweden) where all groups and interests have demands on being seen and acknowledged and where all risks have to be worked against – through policies, plans and routines. We also live in a time with a violent explosion of doubtful expertise – on leadership, employeeship, branding, violations, diversity, working environment, coaching, mentoring, equality, LGBT issues and quality … – which is heavily

marketing disputable knowledge, and where uncritical conman victims are easily persuaded by management gurus and consultants that this is what one should be doing – otherwise it can look bad if one is not doing it. In the scrutiny society, media, institutions and interest groups are carefully monitoring that all organizations are living up to the norm and can check off that everything is done "correctly". However, the more plans, routines and documents, the less probable it is that one can work with all this (or other, perhaps more essential issues) and it all ends with paperwork.

We get what I call the Triumph of Emptiness – nice looking display windows while substance, practice and results become less important and are left behind.

A probably typical example of this is a social welfare director whose municipality got 25-ish remarks during an annual inspection by the Social Board. The following year's inspection received no remarks. When asked if they had changed their way of working, the answer was "No, but we have written down 25 new routines".

Schools, colleges, national defence forces, policing authorities and many other workplaces are not functioning well. The education system's big flaws are well known, the police cannot manage to solve any more crimes despite an increase in resources. Other parts of the public sector are also characterized by inefficiency.

Management boards and others are judged to a very low extent on how good they work in terms of actual achievements benefitting the citizens. The safest option is not to worry too much about that, and invest huge efforts into making sure that one does not do wrong in the formal sense, or say or do something controversial. Good advice for an organization's management is to learn three safe proof formulas to survive: "We have done everything right formally speaking", " we are overlooking our routines" and "we are working with our values". The normal assumption here is to believe that not much of value is done, but that media, responsible politicians and inspection authorities are satisfied.

Responses

The article triggered a very positive response from readers, many expressions of appreciation and recommendations on the Internet as well as a number of appreciative emails to the author. Here are a few examples:

Thank you so much for your article! It was spot on. The deeply rooted fear of doing wrong, getting notified, standing in the pillory or outermost losing one's legitimacy within the health business has gone too far.

…

I have shown the article to my executive committee, group management and my union representatives. It creates good discussion regarding how we can work through this and move on.

XX, County Council Director

I just want to write and thank you for a really good article in today's SvD. What you so accurately describe is something I often talk about, that we have an elderly care that is so characterized by the fear of doing wrong, which we know is devastating for any sector that wants to develop. …. There are valiant efforts taking place to highlight "good examples" and in other ways focus on the positive, but the shape of the formal demands with associated regulatory makes "wrong searching" and fear dominant.

What we focus on the most now is trying to find wise ways of meeting all the surprisingly detailed demands that are set – and we realise it makes it difficult/impossible to find new ways of accomplishing elderly care. Performance management, without too detailed demands, would be preferable. However, neither politicians nor institutions dare – the possibility for them to say they have everything in control would be obstructed. Which of course is an impossibility in itself. Trust is not what characterizes the public sector …

Thank you once more, I do what I can to spread the article!

NN, Vice president

First, a big thank you for your refreshing views! Totally without euphemisms and wrapping.

I am a former teacher, principal and currently CEO and owner of Z Schools.

I have around 150 employees and my work consists mainly of trying to instill some courage in these downhearted souls. The fear of doing wrong is so widespread that all thinking has stopped.

The article also led to invitations from several organizations and associations that had been criticized in the article – authorities and associations of professionals overseeing and auditing health care, social work and other sectors – to give lectures and talks at conferences. The lectures were carefully prepared and delivered in order to create a strong effect. The idea was to be sufficiently nuanced and precise to be taken seriously, but also to express the key points with moral commitment and drive them home quite strongly. To create some moral and emotional response – to convey a feeling that the portrayed situation is absurd – was intended. The use of the concept "functional stupidity" – pointing at the dangers of narrow, tunnel-visioned rationality and thinking within the box – did seem to help.

In the lectures, the message was repeated and elaborated and supplemented with similar points of view. Email texts such as the ones just quoted were presented as illustrations of the problems and a fundamentally flawed logic governing public sector organizations. This is where an affluence of rules and regulations intended to solve problems actually created these. All these systems and practices may appear to follow sound management principles but, it is sharply argued, lead to waste and frustrations. CMS here builds upon and joins forces with insights from classical sociology addressing dysfunctions of bureaucracy but aims to sharpen the message through engaged anti-managerialism.

Even though the article, as well as the lectures, delivered hard critique to the audience – the various organizations and associations addressed – were presented as contributing to the anxiety-driven, counter-productive development in the public sector. I tried to avoid talking down to people and appear as elitist and arrogant, although this is difficult to entirely avoid in critical work. Explaining the overall societal logic and pointing that we all tend to be involved in this – and also suffer from the paradoxical effects of good intentions and aimed solution often leading to the opposite effects. I also tried to work with humour and self-irony. I referred to plan fetishism as a dangerous perversion. People being mesmerized by making and fine-tuning plans may be harmful.

CMS messages can easily be too harsh to invite a productive response. Critique is often seen as non-constructive or threatening and an audience may shut off. In my own case, I have received feedback on my early efforts indicating that critique

has been delivered too strongly, too insensitively and some of the audience resisted my message. With maturity and experience and over time adding more and more humorous examples and the use of self-irony, it has become easier to present critical ideas in ways that make people listen and take it seriously. But it is a hard balance to express a critical message targeting an audience and maintain their positive interest. Sometimes people respond negatively.

However, the responses were – according to personal feedback and evaluation questionnaires – generally very positive. Many expressed sympathy for the message and indicated that the work they were doing was partly frustrating and problematic. A few people were provoked and negative.

With these talks, this CP "project" ended, for the time being – apart from some ongoing work as an advisor to the national coordinator for social welfare for children and adolescents. The coordinator had read the article and asked me to help with advice. During her many seminars with people in the social welfare sector, she consistently referred to our concept functional stupidity (Alvesson & Spicer, 2016). I do not know about the possible practical consequences of the text and subsequent talks and indirect influence through people taking this seriously. My task – and the one of CP more generally – is not necessarily to work practically with specific people or organizations producing changes. Research is not primarily about consultancy or activism . The idea of CP is to develop critical, practically relevant ideas, concepts and offer empirical material that can influence people's understandings and offer frameworks and vocabularies that allow for critical communication and inspire change at the workplace level. The use of a negation or counter-narrative to established vocabulary and reference points is here key. One cannot control the reception and consumption of an intellectual idea. This does, of course, not circumvent good reasons to engage in more specific practical work, work as a (critical) dialogue partner to managers and others.

There is seldom any one-to-one effect between a knowledge intervention and a specific altering of either consciousness, communication or new material practices. Knowledge interventions intersect with a wealth of other forces and elements. A possible distinct effect is probably very much like a garbage can decision process – decision being a random outcome of problems, solutions, people and decision occasions coalescing. CP can be one element, together with other knowledge interventions (possible going in opposite directions), interfering with people, decision opportunities, problems and solutions (March & Olsen, 1976). Sometimes the "effect" of CP can be to increase the resistance to the incorporation of new policy "solutions" or other nice-sounding structures or practices that may increase some problems, and in this case, the effect is the counter-acting of something else and the preservation of the status quo or just slowing down the race to the bottom, which may be a good thing.

I once met some people from a social welfare agency in a large municipality who told me that after my lecture some years earlier they had introduced the term "window-dressing" activity in the organizational vocabulary and tried to more seriously consider whether new arrangements really had a positive practical effect or if it was just tempting to introduce the idea because it sounded really good and could have a positive impression management effect. Of course, there is always a risk that ideas and concepts may be used in the wrong way – perhaps to resist motivated changes – but this is probably not a major problem, given all the signs of surplus efforts to add rules and regulations and increase demands for administration (Forsell & Ivarsson Westerberg, 2014).

My point is not to argue for this intervention having an exceptional practical impact or being exemplary. As I said, organizational practices are determined by a wealth of different factors. But there seems to be a good support to show that at least some people experienced the article and subsequent talks as a relevant and positive critical knowledge intervention and that this at least on the margin influenced organizational practice. This could, of course, be a good, although a complicated topic for research.

Elements in the text

The critical reader may, of course, have all sorts of objections to the newspaper text. What about ideals such as strong reliance on evidence, nuances, caution? What is research based and what is more opinion and political activism? There are many related phenomena or aspects not addressed in the article. And what is the potential harmful effect of such an intervention? And perhaps there are conservative or even reactionary elements in the text? Plans, rules, routines and value statements are intended to guarantee the rights of those under-privileged, including supporting equality opportunity and LGBT rights, perhaps we need more plans, rules, routines, etc., to support unprivileged groups and interests. Bureaucracy is partly about fairness and protection from arbitrary decisions and poor judgement. Even so, adding plans and routines may not lead to what is intended and/or crowd out the use of judgement and discretion. This can be debated. (The reader should bear in mind that Sweden is a welfare society, with a strong emphasis on formal rights.) My point is not to address these complex issues here. What many academic researchers tend to ignore is that to reach a non-academic audience calls for getting access to a platform, get attention and having a *fairly clear and powerful message*, expressed in (the case of article form for larger newspapers) about 1000 words or less. To say something vital and powerful calls for the CP academic to overcome parts of the conventions, we are caught up in and some (temporary) re-doing of one's identity and habitus – often based on ideals and habits such as caution, following the gurus in the field, the use of abstractions and complicated language.

The newspaper text broadly tries to live up to Spicer et al.'s (2009) five elements of a performative approach to CMS: an affirmative stance, an ethic of care, a pragmatic orientation, attending to potentialities and a normative orientation. It is grounded in expressed frustrations of many practitioners, and it aims to improve public sector organizations through more emphasis on, and assessment of, core practices. I tried to contribute to a reduction of anxiety and fault-minimization as driving force and thus to encourage the use of good judgement and the thinking through of what is important and what leads to good results. This may improve the moral compass (from the force of excessive risk– and blame-avoidance) and encourage cultural orientations trying to assess and do what one considers

to be meaningful and important, not be so scared of not sticking to formal rules.

Elements in the intervention that probably increased the positive response to the newspaper text include:

(1) Describing an urgent and recognized problem – or something that one can credibly be presented as a significant, but not fully addressed. Often critical work is able to not just address a well-known problem but do creative problem construction, identifying a serious issue that calls for attention. The conceptualization is here important, as is a connection to something that is newsworthy.
(2) Offering a broad picture, where the combination of various systems, structures, agencies and concrete activities is considered, and system effects and flawed agency are mutually constitutive, e.g., through the encouragement of plan fetishism.
(3) Covering a spectrum of experiences and aspects of feelings, sentiments and judgement are invoked in order to trigger some personal response: social forces, cognitive and emotions are being considered, where inclinations to conformism, disinclination to think through issues and anxiety-driven behaviour, while recognizable and understandable, are clearly unsatisfactory.
(4) Pointing at the absurdity of the dominant rationality. Here the text tries to hit a balance between familiarization and de-familiarization. A specific logic, democratic institutions and top management deciding about policies, plans and routines and the setting up of auditing institutions to guarantee positive results for citizens lead to a preoccupation with time and energy-consuming formal arrangements at the expense of core activity. "This is how we do things", but it may be strange, even absurd.
(5) The presentation of some concepts that have a triggering effect. *Plan fetishism* and *window-dressing* arrangement are presented with the ambition of these concepts sticking and increasing the chance of CP really being performative, e.g., intervening in organizational discourses and making a difference. Somebody thinking and raising the question "is this a case of window-dressing" may create an effect.
(6) Writing the text with some dramatic effect, emphasizing punchlines in the beginning and end and incorporating some nuances in between.
(7) Considering the audience. It must find the message relevant and interesting. It is good to test drafts not only on fellow academics but also on representatives of the educated public you try to reach.
(8) Realize that competition for space in mass media is tough, and one may need to try several outlets before success can be reached.

The reader may speculate about this case being one of a lucky strike. I try to publish 3–5 chronicles per year and normally I am successful with major Swedish newspapers. Most influential are of course texts in the outlets with most distributions, and competition about space is often intense but there are newspapers and magazines which are less difficult to access and with still a respectable readership size and potential for more impact than the academic journal article. There are many influential academics finding their way into mass media, in the UK for example, critical management scholars Martin Parker and André Spicer. In Sweden, there are also junior academics like Roland Paulsen who are quite successful. For the average academic, it is a struggle to temporarily leave the "safe" little box of academic journal writing and learn to develop a message and write in a quite different way than how we are trained, but a good academic can and should master more than one way of writing.

Conclusion

This paper does not aim for theoretical novelty and sophistication or to prove something. Nor is the idea to add to debates on the nature of critical studies and CP. Instead, it is important to move beyond debates about principles and meanings and "do" – not just write about – CP. My modest purpose is to support academics using critical social science knowledge to try to make a difference also outside the academic setting and action research typically addressing minor problems being recognized and being targeted for change, seldom based on or involving more basic issues that critical studies highlight. Having something to communicate to colleagues and work within academic boxes (with conventions for writing and reference, a specific jargon, aiming for small sub-set of like-minded people through adding to the literature) is fine, at least up to a point, but impact outside this small group is urgent.

Of course, this can be done in a variety of ways. Critical teaching, social activism, collaboration between academics and practitioners through exchange of views and mutual learning, active participation in university administration, engagement in politics and progressive consulting work are also options. This paper does not address the wider spectrum of possibilities but emphasizes that a natural and possible influential way for researchers – whose speciality is writing, rather than process consulting or debating in political settings – is through producing texts for a broader audience. Books are good, and a well-written book for an educated public or a community of practitioners is to be supported, but this paper focuses on reaching a much larger audience through mass media. This is not unproblematic – space is restricted, competition for acceptance is fierce and the audience is broad and responses are difficult to predict. The one-way communication – diffusion of results, of research and critical analysis – may by some be viewed as inferior to more dialogic work (Knights & Scarbrough, 2010). The latter is most likely more influential, but is work intensive and reaches only a small group. Few would, however, deny the value of publishing in media with a potentially large readership and possible a likelihood of influencing at least some. Of course, an interplay between mass communication CP and more local and focused, process interventions is possible. The former can be a way of finding specific sites to work with, as people interested in doing something may respond to the author of a published text. The text can also be a resource as it explains the issue, has some authority and can be distributed broadly.

The key here is to find a good fit between selected critical academic knowledge, important concerns of practitioners not

sufficiently clarified and articulated and something in the social and economic situation that facilitates a potential broader interest.

In work with publications aimed for a broader audience, the message must be viewed as clear, urgent, of broad interest and novel. These concerns overlap the five points made by Spicer et al. and referred to above. A good exercise and possibly an ideal is to try to say something in 1000 words. Not everything can be said within such a limited space, but a concentrated message may express most of what is really important (if there is anything important to say) in an academic article or some partial results from a research project. A more specific challenge here is to balance between the hard-hitting and the nuanced, recognizing complexity and triggering mobility. Rather than – or at least as a supplement to – more workshops on journal publication, seminars on how to say something to a broader audience of practitioners and the educated public may be badly needed.

Many contemporary academics appear to be strongly career- and reward-focused, very adaptive and compliant with reward regimes. Meanings seem to have been replaced by (extrinsic) motivation (Sievers, 1986). I often hear people saying that "it does not pay" to write something other than journal articles (for the highly ranked journals). I think this very strong "payment" focus is morally wrong but also misleading for people wanting a satisfying working life and a positive sense of self. Conformism and reward-instrumentalism is here often inferior to autonomy and trying to do something meaningful and socially valuable on a broader scale. Refraining from or minimizing concerns about doing something that at least a number of people outside the academic sub-tribe view as meaningful and potentially making a difference is bordering on the absurd.

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