**EDITORIAL:**

**Some announcements, reaffirming the critical ethos of *Leadership*,**

**and what we look for in submissions**

**Dennis Tourish**

This editorial begins with a number of announcements, and then considers how the journal and the community of scholars who edit it, write for it, review for it and read it can continue to collectively move it forward. I hope this gives contributors a clearer idea of the journal’s orientation, and in doing so offers some useful insights into how authors might improve their chances of a paper being published in *Leadership.*

We start with news of an editorial transition. Brad Jackson, my co-editor for over the past year, has decided to step down from this role. Brad has been Head of the School of Government at Victoria University since the beginning of 2014. He has concluded that it is impossible for him to do so while continuing to support *Leadership* in the way that he would like. I want to acknowledge Brad’s huge contribution to the journal, thank him for his work and wish him well in his current role. Brad will continue to serve the journal as an Associate Editor.

Now for some better news. I am delighted to announce that Professor Jackie Ford from Bradford University School of Management has agreed to join us as an Associate Editor. Jackie has published frequently in our journal, and provided consistently high quality reviews over the years. She joins our excellent team of Michelle Bligh, Richard Bolden, Brigid Carroll, Donna Ladkin and now Brad Jackson. Each of our associate editors will be more directly involved in handling submissions, with responsibility for making final decisions on many of our papers. In welcoming Jackie to the team I want to thank all of our AEs for their support over the past year. Without them, this journal would not be as remotely well placed as it now is.

A reflection of our progress is that we are receiving a growing volume of papers to review. In 2014, submissions increased by 31% on the previous year. Our acceptance rate is 14%. Clearly, many authors have come to see *Leadership* as a high quality outlet where they are delighted to publish their work. The journal is also attracting more and more readers. Downloads from our website last year topped 100,000, up 23% on 2013. If you publish in *Leadership* your work will be widely read, and therefore has an increased opportunity to be cited. In line with this, we now have an Impact Factor of 1 and are ranked 99 out of 173 management journals in the Journal Citation Reports produced by Thomson Reuters. Our five year impact factor is 1.407, which puts us on that measure at 92 out of 173 journals in the JCR.

*Journal rankings*

Linked to this, the journal rankings produced by the Association of Business Schools in the UK has been updated. An ambition for global domination is perhaps reflected in its grandiose new title - ‘The International Guide to Academic Journal Quality[[1]](#endnote-1).’ The new ABS Guide has upgraded *Leadership* from a 1 to a 2. These rankings reproduce the scoring system for individual papers used in the UK’s Research Excellence Framework (REF), and range from a 1 to a 4.

There is, of course, a growing cottage industry, across disciplines, that is critical of how impact factors and journal rankings are used. Impact factors are skewed by the high citation of a few articles, to such an extent that a journal’s impact factor tells us less than nothing about the quality of individual papers (Lozano et al, 2012; Colquhoun, 2003; 2007). Journal rankings are probably even worse (Adler and Harzing, 2009; Tourish, 2011; Mingers and Willmott, 2013). Tourish and Willmott (2015: 39) focus their ire on the ABS Guide, suggesting that it is ‘a panoptic gaze that directs attention away from what is important (e.g. ideas), and towards the vacuous (e.g. Impact Factors), underpinned by the managerialist assumption that unless academic work can be rated, graded and listed it might as well not exist.’ (I couldn’t have put it better myself). Such lists falsely equate place of publication with the quality of the papers that are published. This journal is an excellent exemplar. Mingers et al (2009) provided a thoughtful analysis of the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) results in the UK – the precursor to the more recent REF exercise. In our case, this showed two things. Firstly, 14 papers from the journal where submitted to the 2008 RAE, a high number considering that the journal only began publication in 2005. *Leadership* at that stage was graded ‘N’ for ‘new’ in the then version of the ABS Guide. It was thus not formally graded, in consequence of not yet having an Impact Factor. Despite this, the analysis by Mingers et al suggested that all 14 of these papers obtained a 3 in the RAE.

While we have no strictly comparative data for the RAE’s replacement, the Research Excellence Framework (REF), a sample of 1000 outputs has compared what they were awarded in the REF with the ABS rankings of the journals concerned. This showed that, for example, a paper in an ABS 4 journal had a 39% chance of being graded 4 by the REF panel, a roughly similar chance of a 3 and a 20% chance of a 2. Papers published in an ABS 3 journal had a 53% of a 3 in the REF – but also a 14% chance of a 4 and a 27% chance of a 2. On the other hand, papers in ABS 2 ranked journals had a 30% chance of a 3. Whatever the strengths and weaknesses of the REF exercise it is abundantly clear from this that the panel did not sub-contract the job of evaluation to the authors of the ABS Guide, and presumably will not do so in REF 2020 either. There is no reason to imagine that journal ranking systems used elsewhere in the world are any more accurate than the ABS Guide at guessing the scores papers will obtain in whatever research assessment exercises are run in those countries.

Despite these reservations, we need to recognise that, unfortunately, impact factors and rankings often shape perceptions and behaviour. Increasingly, pressure is applied to academics to publish only in journals that have ‘good’ impact factors or thrive in ranking systems. Doctoral students, particularly at ‘leading’ business schools and particularly in North America, are also conscripted into this mind-set (Prasad, 2015). This is iniquitous and wholly misguided. The use of impact factors and journal rankings as a proxy measure for the quality of individual articles is intellectually vacuous, harmful to our publication practices and empirically false. But given that many of us labour under such constraints, in many countries, I hope that the progress of the journal on these metrics will encourage our readers to continue submitting their best work to us. In suggesting this, it also seems timely to reflect on what makes *Leadership* distinctive, and on how our editorial policies are geared at maintaining its distinctiveness as our most important priority.

*The critical ethos of Leadership*

There is no better starting place than the first editorial penned by my illustrious predecessors, the founding editors of this journal, David Collinson and Keith Grint. They identified several aims for the new journal that included facilitating new ways of thinking about leadership. They wrote that: ‘The journal will be particularly concerned to publish articles that go well beyond currently available approaches to develop more nuanced and complex models that, for example, recognise the ‘embeddedness’ of leadership practice in the economic, technological and social relations of organizations and society, or that challenge the conventions of leadership research by exploring its existence beyond individual office holders or heroic charismatics’ (Collinson and Grint, 2005: 7).

This was a recognition that critical perspectives were unduly marginalised in mainstream work, to the point whereby their profile in leadership studies was almost non-existent. Despite a growing interest in Critical Leadership Studies (CLS), this remains largely the case. This is both mad, and maddening. By definition critical work engages with the mainstream since the mainstream is the focus of its critique. But most mainstream publications simply ignore critical work, thereby curtailing academic debate. The same sterile preoccupations dominate the literature, in which the identification of ever more mediating processes and moderating factors takes precedence over interrogating fundamental assumptions (Van Knippenberg and Sitkin, 2013). Researchers seem content to ask smaller and smaller questions about fewer and fewer issues of genuine significance, producing statements of the blindingly obvious, the completely irrelevant or the palpably absurd.

This journal aspires to something different. I encourage contributors to bear this in mind when submitting their papers. It was never the intention to create a ghetto of critical leadership literature. But we do insist that the critical literature is at least engaged with, even if it is ultimately discounted. Despite this, we routinely receive papers that approach established leadership theories with undue reverence, and ignore the criticisms offered of them – much of which has appeared in this journal. Such papers are desk rejected. Note: they are not rejected because they accept dominant theories. They are rejected because they do not engage with the critical literature on the subject.

Papers are desk rejected for two other main reasons. Some proceed along the following lines: ‘While the effects of leader height on follower perceptions of effectiveness have been widely studied, the issue has not been explored in either Ruritania or Freedonia. This gap is addressed in the present paper.’ The article then offers a comparative study between Ruritania and Freedonia, before concluding that ‘in line with previous research’ there is indeed a positive correlation between leader height and follower perceptions of effectiveness. There is no attempt to indicate why we might ever have imagined otherwise, or should now see leadership theory and practice in a fresh light. These papers fall into the category of ‘true, but trivial.’ Others select a well-known leader, describe his or her career, and offer either lavish praise or annihilating criticism. They conclude that the case study offers ‘lessons’ for leadership practice. There is no attempt to engage with leadership theory and therefore to offer truly generalizable ideas. These papers are also desk rejected.

I believe that this orientation can help us to address yet another problem in the field – its unrelenting triviality. This problem is not confined to leadership studies. Arguably, it infects the broad range of management and organization studies (Alvesson and Gabriel, 2013). For example, Dunne et al (2008) surveyed the content of a sample of management journals. They found little engagement with globally important issues, including the relationship between business and war, or workplace exploitation, the environment and collective representation in the workplace. More recently, Wilkinson and Durden (2015) have noted what they describe as ‘stagnation’ in accounting research, due to its ongoing fetishization of positivist methodologies and functionalist perspectives, preoccupations institutionalised by a deference to supposedly leading US journals. Are leadership studies that different?

*Asking important questions: what we look for in submissions*

Unfortunately, I would suggest not. For example, there have been pitifully few analyses of the role of leadership in the banking crisis, or serious reflection on how leadership theories may have contributed to it by legitimising destructive leadership behaviours. Exceptions include Kerr and Robinson (2011) – in this journal. The wider field seems to share this indifference. At the time of writing, I know of only one article in an *Academy of Management* journal that attempts to deal substantively with the biggest economic crisis since the 1930s, one that has impoverished millions, threatened the Eurozone and revived the supposedly dormant prospect of sovereign debt default (i.e. Henisz, 2011). There have been none with the keywords ‘banking crisis’ or ‘financial crisis’ in their title or abstract in either *Administrative Science Quarterly* or *Organization Science*. Frankly, the neglect of this issue in what purport to be our ‘leading’ journals is a disgrace.

I invite contributors to this journal to be different. Alvesson and Sandberg (2011) have persuasively critiqued the dominant ‘gap spotting’ approach to research, urging researchers instead to problematize core assumptions in the field in order to generate more interesting research questions. There are many opportunities to do so, and not just in relation to banking. Collinson and Grint (2005: 6) affirmed the view that leadership is ‘a critical element of all forms of organization, formal and informal, business and public, civilian and military, historical and contemporary, the arts as well as the sciences, ‘for profit’, ‘not for profit’, and voluntary.’ This gives us a large canvas on which to work. None of us were born with a burning desire to write only for research assessment purposes, or perversely obsessed with the trivial. Rather, most of us are interested in ideas, and in making a difference. I invite us to reflect these ambitions more fully in our work by asking challenging questions about important issues. Collectively, we can raise our sights to produce high quality work, and new innovative ideas on leadership theories and practices. If we fail to do so, perhaps our field does not deserve to exist.

*The quality of our writing*

Lastly, I close what I suppose can be viewed either as an appeal or a rant by also decrying the formulaic and turgid manner in which the academy has generally encouraged us to write. I see no good reason why it is necessary to be unreadable in order to be publishable. Yet much, and perhaps most, writing in our field is appalling (Grey and Sinclair, 2006). It is often not ‘writing’ at all. Rather, it is a form of ‘anti-writing’, like a concert performed by musicians with tin ears and whose instruments are permanently out of tune. George Orwell, in an essay originally published in 1946 that anticipated many of the themes from *1984*, wrote that ‘When there is a gap between one’s real and one’s declared aims, one turns as it were instinctively to long words and exhausted idioms, like a cuttlefish squirting out ink’ (Orwell, 1970: 167). In academia, it seems that when we have nothing much to say we attempt to distract attention from that sad fact by saying it as pretentiously and at as much length as possible.

Consider this extract from the abstract of a paper published recently in *Administrative Science Quarterly*: ‘…this paper illuminates how organizational fortunes influence individual performance over time, examining how the economic situation of an organization leaves a lasting imprint on new employees and how that imprint affects subsequent job performance. The core hypothesis… is that the more similar the initially experienced level of organizational munificence is to the level of munificence in a subsequent period, the higher an individual’s job performance. The relationship between what I call “imprint-environment fit” and performance is contingent on the individual’s career stage when entering the organization and the influence of secondhand imprinting resulting from the social transmission of others’ imprints’ (Tilcsik, 2014: 639). Not quite nonsense but not quite English either, this kind of thing is far too common. What I think it means is that successful organizations can afford to treat their employees well, and that when they do so consistently job performance improves. It also helps that, since new employees meet others who already happy, their mood rubs off on the new employee. Who would have thought it? Truly, an empty tin often makes the loudest noise.

As a result, few of us open journals expecting to enjoy the experience. Rather, we anticipate the imminent laceration of our aesthetic senses. The review process generally purges papers of irony, humour, plain speaking, emotion and metaphor. Readers have even learned to endure the end result without the sleep inducing benefits of anaesthesia. Many such papers read as though they were generated by a computer rather than written by a human being. Come to think of it, in the case of some heavily quantitative/ functionalist papers, and their qualitative/ critical rivals that cut and paste obligatory sets of references, this might not be so far from the truth.

This process is facilitated by ever lengthening citation lists. In excess, these choke the life out of articles and smother ideas. It is not uncommon to find papers that now have over 120 references. These sometimes commandeer up to one-third of the total space of published articles – rather more, if you take into account the space devoted to citation within the main body of the articles as well as their bibliography. I hereby declare war on superfluous citations. Nancy Harding’s recent contribution to *Leadership* is a model of economy on this front (Harding, 2014). The article is intellectually alive, makes a significant contribution, and is a pleasure to read. It also contains only twenty one references. While this might be a long battle, I strongly encourage authors to cite only what is necessary, instead of what they think is expected. Most papers would benefit from a good pruning of their reference lists. I am happy to help, but welcome authors (and reviewers) themselves taking the initiative.

Why do we write? Is it only to secure an academic appointment, earn promotion, and satisfy the audit processes to which Universities are increasingly being subject? It may well be all or some of these things, to different degrees at different times. But if that is all that drives us it represents a dreadful impoverishment of intellectual ambition and a degradation of academic life. Publication, surely, should mainly be about having interesting ideas, writing well, addressing real world problems and making a difference. In urging all of us to bear this in mind we can reaffirm the critical ethos that animated the founding of this journal, and ensure that it lives up to its promise.

**REFERENCES**

Adler, N., and Harzing, A. (2009) When knowledge wins: Transcending the sense and nonsense of academic rankings, *Academy of Management Learning & Education,* 8, 72-95.

Alvesson, M., and Gabriel, Y. (2013) Beyond formulaic research: In praise of greater diversity in organizational research and publications, *Academy of Management Learning & Education,* 12, 245-263.

Alvesson, M., and Sandberg, J. (2011) Generating research questions through problematization, *Academy of Management Review*, 36, 247-271.

Collini, S. (2012) *What are Universities For*, London: Penguin.

Collinson, D., and Grint, K. (2005) Editorial: The Leadership Agenda, *Leadership,* 1, 5-9.

Colquhoun, D. (2007) How to get good science, *Physiology New,* 69, 12-14.

Colquhoun, D. (2003) Challenging the tyranny of impact factor, *Nature,* 423, 479.

Dunne, SW., Harney, S., and Parker, M. (2008) The responsibilities of management intellectuals: A survey, *Organization,* 15, 271-282.

Kerr, R., and Robinson, S. (2011) Leadership as an elite field: Scottish banking leaders and the crisis of 2007-2009, *Leadership,* 7, 151-173.

Lozano, G., Larivière, V., and Gingras, Y. (2012) The weakening relationship between the impact factor and papers’ citations in the digital age, *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*, 63, 2140–2145.

Grey, C., and Sinclair, A. (2006) Writing differently, *Organization,* 13, 443-453.

Harding, N. (2014) Reading leadership through Hegel’s master/slave dialectic: Towards a theory of the powerlessness of the powerful, *Leadership,* 10, 391-411.

Henisz, W. (2011) Leveraging the financial crisis to fulfil the promise of progressive management, *Academy of Management Learning & Education,* 10, 298-321.

Mingers, J., Watson, K., and Scaparra, P. (2009) Estimating business and management journal quality from the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise in the UK, *Kent Business School Working Paper No. 205.*

Mingers, J., and Willmott, H. (2013) Taylorizing business school research: On the one ‘best way’ performative effect of journal ranking lists, *Human Relations,* 66, 1051-173.

Orwell, G. (1970) Politics and the English language, In S. Orwell and I. Angus (Eds.) *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters, Vol. 4*, London: Penguin, pp.156-169.

Prasad, A. (2015) Liminal transgressions, or where should the critical academy go from here? Reimagining the future of doctoral education to engender research sustainability, *Critical Perspectives on Accounting,* 26, 108-116.

Tilcsik, A. (2014) Imprint-environment fit and performance: How organizational munificence at the time of hire affects subsequent job performance, *Administrative Science Quarterly,* 59, 639-668.

Tourish, D. (2011) Journal rankings, academic freedom and performativity: What is, or should be, the future of *Leadership? Leadership,* 7, 367–381.

Tourish, D., and Willmott, H. (2015) In defiance of folly: Journal rankings, mindless measures and the ABS Guide, *Critical Perspectives on Accounting,* 26, 36-47.

Van Knippenberg, D., and Sitkin, S. (2013) A critical assessment of charismatic-transformational leadership research: Back to the drawing board? *Academy of Management Annals,* 7, 1-60.

Wilkinson, B., and Durden, C. (2015) Inducing structural change in academic accounting research, *Critical Perspectives on Accounting,* 26, 23-36.

**ENDNOTES**

1. Though you would never know it from the ABS Guide, there are at least 22 competing journal ranking lists in circulation (see http://www.harzing.com/download/jql\_journal.pdf. Last accessed 16th February 2015). I am tempted to suggest that we need a ‘ranking of journal rankings lists.’ But, given what Collini (2012) has described as the ‘mania’ for assessment that has gripped the sector, I fear that this would only produce a clamour for a ‘ranking of rankings of journal rankings lists’, and so on indefinitely. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)